
Fighting Gove's Nightmare Vision for Primary Education

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ABSTRACT This article examines the new National Curriculum for primary schools that has been recently announced by the Secretary of State for Education. The article discusses some of the implications of that curriculum for children and teachers and ends with ideas for how we can effectively campaign against it.

I am a practising classroom teacher trying, as many of us do, to navigate the minefield of striving to teach in the ways considered best by the vast majority of educational professionals, within the context of what I believe is an ever-worsening curriculum that encourages the very worst of teaching practices. I will endeavour to make this article as dispassionate as possible but I hope the reader will forgive me if, at times, my writing hints towards the upset I feel at what I see as the destruction of the relationship between teacher and pupil that the current government is attempting to thrust upon the profession. Whether it be through the introduction of performance-related pay for teachers, or the imposition of a new Gradgrind curriculum dubbed the 'pub quiz' curriculum by many teachers who are opposed to the rote learning of facts rather than the provision of quality educational experiences for children, the current government seems intent on wrecking the life chances of many of the children in our schools.

A Narrow Curriculum

For many years now, teachers have bemoaned the squeezing of subjects other than those deemed 'core subjects'. The right of children to a broad and balanced curriculum has long been undermined by an education system that tests English and maths in Year Six, and where the results of those tests determine whether a school succeeds or fails. We all know the picture: a Year Six class where children do little other than SATs preparation from September

onwards. It is not only in Year Six where testing has a detrimental impact. The insistence that all children must make two National Curriculum sub-levels of progress each year in order to make the necessary Level Four in Year Six impacts throughout the primary years. With many schools now setting teachers' performance objectives against such levels, the pressure to narrow the curriculum to English and maths is further increased.

The new Primary Curriculum makes even less reference to any other subjects than English and maths. From the lists of spellings that must be learnt each year, to the poetry that will be recited from memory, to the phonics testing, it will no longer be a case that other subjects will be underemphasised; rather, there will be little time, if any, for any other subjects to be taught at all. For children, this is of course disastrous as the many interests and talents they have as individuals are routinely ignored and a message sent to them that unless they can excel in this new system, they have little or nothing to offer. For those teachers who take pride and pleasure in watching a child bloom in all their individuality, this prospect is beyond heartbreaking. To me, what makes this situation even more obscene is that those who are setting this curriculum send their own children to schools where music, art, sports, the humanities and more form an integral part of the school curriculum. You only have to look up the music provision of Eton to be assured that I am right about this point. The new curriculum tells children a simple message: 'the richness of a broad education is just not for you'.

As if all of this was not bad enough, things are about to get even worse for us. With the introduction of full-blown performance-related pay, teachers will not only be encouraged to narrow the curriculum but will also be placed in the position that if children don't make the required progress, the teachers themselves will pay a financial penalty. In many a staffroom, teachers are discussing the obscenity of a child's progress being linked to whether their teacher is able to pay their mortgage or not.

Bad Pedagogy

The new curriculum is based on the worst kind of transition-belt model of learning. You would be hard pushed to find a single educational professional who agreed with an 'empty vessel' model where children need only to be filled with the relevant facts and knowledge. In my mind, almost all of teacher training is concerned with breaking this idea and opening students' minds to the existence of a whole multitude of pedagogical theories. The new curriculum, however, links to programmes of study with word lists and facts for children to make their way through each year. The clear thinking behind it is that rote learning is good learning – an idea that any teacher worth their salt knows is utter rubbish.

Gove insists that this type of learning is about introducing greater rigour. Here is what he has to say:

It was an automatic assumption of my predecessors in cabinet office that the education they had enjoyed, the culture that they had benefited from, the literature that they had read, the history that they had grown up learning, were all worth knowing. They thought that the case was almost so self evident that it scarcely needed to be made. To know who Pericles was, why he was so important, why acquaintance with his thoughts and words mattered, didn't have to be explained and justified. It was the sign of an educated person and to aspire to be educated was the most noble of ambitions. (Quoted by John Yandel, in *Education for Liberation*, Spring 2013)

This sums up the view of learning held by Gove and his like. In his world, you don't have to explain why something is important and worth knowing, you should just accept that it is. The kind of world where, in response to asking a question, children are given the answer 'because it is'.

Gove wants an education system where it isn't good enough to understand literature – to enjoy it, to express opinions, to desire to learn more or to love literature. He doesn't want to give the educational tools to children that enable them to take knowledge into their own hands. Instead, Gove wants a system that says that you are educated if you can quote chunks of Iliad by rote. This is a system where the mark of good learning is the ability of a child to reel off a sonnet or recite a Shakespeare soliloquy. Here, it doesn't matter if you love the piece of literature or if you hate it, it just matters that you can memorise it and recite it on demand.

The real children whom we teach are invisible in the government's new plans. For example, the idea that all children should reach the 'expected level' each year takes no account of the differences between children. Special Educational Needs (SEN) are barely mentioned. In the new curriculum and there is nothing about the sort of provision that should be made to help children who are finding things difficult. This fits totally with the government's cuts agenda and is also symptomatic of a governmental culture of blaming teachers for educational underachievement. For children who speak English as an additional language, the undervaluing of anything other than supposed 'British culture' will lead to alienation and disaffection for many.

A Curriculum with Failure at its Heart

Children can flourish only in an atmosphere of trust. They must be free to make mistakes and to take risks in order to meet their full potential. They cannot develop as good learners in an atmosphere where there is a constant fear of failure. Yet it is this fear that is now being driven into heart of the education system by Gove's new curriculum. Take the phonics test, dished out to children at the end of Year One, asking them to distinguish between real and fake words. This is a pass-or-fail test, with parents being informed as to whether or not their child has reached the golden pass mark. For a Year One child to be

told that they have failed is surely the cruellest government initiative of recent years. It is completely anti-educational to build extra insecurity into the very early stages of reading. To give children in the formative phases of their lives a pass or fail in reading in the way that is currently taking place in our schools will destroy children's confidence when learning to read. Ultimately, more will fail at it than ever before. The message to the children we teach will be clear: you are a failure. I believe we are being dealt a curriculum that tells children little other than to know their place.

Of course, phonics has always been part of leaning to read, but for many children, whole-word recognition or using the pictures or constant repetition of the same loved book will be more effective strategies. The insistence that phonics is the only way to learn to read again ignores the differences and individuality of children, asking them instead to fit a mould set by the government.

A Straitjacket for Teachers

Many teachers will continue to strive to teach in the ways they know are best. The sad truth, however, is that good teaching is becoming harder and harder in a system ever more prescribed and ever more policed by Ofsted, which focuses little on a school's strengths but instead only upon data. The stories come from school after school: 'they came with an agenda'; 'they had already made up their minds about how we would be graded'. Of course, the thing that is most starkly missing in an Ofsted inspection is any real understanding by the inspectors of the learning process.

A couple of anecdotal examples may help to illustrate the problem. An Ofsted inspector criticised a fantastically talented art teacher for the lack of 'rapid and sustained progress' made by the children in the fifteen minutes that the inspector was in the classroom. Other than the insult to an excellent teacher who I am sure could have shown the inspector a thing or two about how to teach art, the inspector demonstrated a complete lack of understanding about the processes involved in the teaching and learning of art. Surely children need time to look, to think, to draw or paint or sculpt and then to look and think again. Surely good artistic development takes time and thought - the kind of time and thought that nobody could ever measure in fifteen minutes or even an hour. Children make progress over time. The Ofsted inspector can never see the journey that a teacher takes a child on in the brief and hostile, judgemental moments that they spend in a classroom. Many teachers have heard the now-infamous story of the inspector who criticised a library lesson because the children were 'just reading'.

Fighting for an Alternative

We desperately need to campaign to put children back at the heart of education. We need a school curriculum that starts with the child – their age, their

experiences, their interests and existing knowledge. We have to shout about the central importance of play as the way that children make sense of the world.

We are in urgent need of an alternative model of school accountability where schools are encouraged to support each other and to cooperate with each other in order to improve. I believe that there are alternatives to the current nightmare and that we can and must sing them from the rooftops. However, if we are to realise those alternatives, we will have to put up a fight. We will need to campaign, to take the message to parents and the wider community. We will need to battle against performance-related pay, against SATs and the phonics test and against the undermining of democracy in education through the academies and free schools programme. If we can resist Gove's nightmare vision and at the same time put forward our own, we could have everything to gain. There are some excellent examples of that alternative being put forward. I am coordinator of the Charter for Primary Education, the text of which is reprinted in this journal. However, the Charter is not the finished article, and there are many others who are also campaigning with similar aims. I believe we need to join together and fight to win.

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