FORUM
Volume 57, Number 2, 2015
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2015.57.2.197

FORUM

Gove's Curriculum and the GERM

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ABSTRACT This article examines the complex relationship between England's new National Curriculum and the neoliberal reform of education known as GERM. It explores contradictions between economic functionality and Gove's nostalgic traditionalism. It critiques the new curriculum as narrow, age-inappropriate, obsessed with abstract rules, and poorly focused on enquiry and problem-solving: though battery-farming young children, it is therefore unlikely to lead to the cognitive development tested by PISA. Written just before the UK general election, its messages remain important as guidance for action and resistance.

Pasi Sahlberg's (2011) construct of a 'Global Education Reform Movement' (GERM) has provided a powerful means of understanding the direction of travel for educational policy in many settings. Sahlberg focuses particularly on issues of governance, including accountability systems and marketisation; while noting the standardisation of curriculum and its increasing focus on 'core subjects' (literacy, maths and science), curriculum is not considered in any detail.

Furthermore, the relationship between the GERM and the wider policy framework of neoliberalism remains implicit. Also, the use of 'global' suggests some kind of uniformity, which can lead to fatalism, rather than perceiving diverse levels of force and resistance, and specific articulations of this trend. This short article seeks to remedy these shortcomings by sketching out a political analysis of former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove's curricular legacy. (A more extended argument can be found in Wrigley [2014], available online).

Perhaps the easiest way to understand neoliberalism is as an attempt to purify and concentrate capitalism so as to maximise profitability. Ideologically it relies on the myth of a heyday of industrial capital free from governmental constraints, forgetting that Victorian entrepreneurs were fumbling their way towards municipal service provision in their own self-interest. Neoliberal policy makers are, therefore, suspicious of any expenditure which may appear surplus to requirements, tending to see public spending as a burden; at the same time,

they have not been slow to see educational provision itself as a potential source of profit, whether directly in profit-making schools or indirectly through providing commercially services which used to be provided by local education authorities.

To the extent that public spending on education is permissible, it has to be justified in terms of what it affords to the profit-making economy. Increasingly schooling is framed as a mechanism for generating human resources, i.e. producing the next generation of workers (Ball, 2008). This entails maximising key skills, but also requires the production of a suitable mindset or attitude – a working class which is diligent but uncritical. This was indeed the ideal which underpinned the curriculum of mass schooling in late Victorian Britain: the 3 Rs along with socialisation into docile obedience and loyalty to Empire (Lawson & Silver, 1973; Simon, 1965). Of course there were many teachers who saw their role in broader educational terms.

Policy making and curriculum formation cannot, however, be derived in any pure way from the rationale I have outlined, but involve building on available traditions and norms, and weaving texts out of publicly acceptable discourses. Policy formation is also refracted through the individual and collective prejudices of leading politicians.

Curriculum policy is riddled with contradictions. Nevertheless, it is possible to see some pattern. Michael Apple (2000), in the US context and beyond, focuses on the contradiction but also complementarity between neoliberalism and neoconservatism. At one level, this is understandable in terms of the requirement for schools to produce workers who are both skilled and compliant. However, in the English context, it also involves a specific tension between economic functionalism and nostalgia for the golden age of the grammar school.

The National Curriculum: neoliberal and neoconservative pressures

This tension characterises different versions of National Curriculum since the 1988 Education Reform Act. The earliest version, under the direction of Kenneth Baker as Secretary of State for Education, represented simultaneously: (a) an ambitious modernisation (with over 50% of curricular time devoted to what we now call STEM subjects: double science for all, a strong emphasis on information and communications technology (ICT) and the new Design and Technology paradigm), and (b) an attempt to prevent other subjects affording opportunities for young people to develop a critical understanding of the world. (This process of exclusion was heavily contested; see Phillips [1998]; Cox [1995].) The first National Curriculum, then, faced both ways, depending simultaneously on values of *enterprise* and *heritage*. According to Stephen Ball (1993), the latter became prominent during John Major's government, resulting in a 'curriculum of the dead'.

The Blair years involved a more consistently neoliberal emphasis on economic functionality: in particular, a sharpening of demands for core competences (literacy, numeracy, ICT), and an early start to vocational preparation from age 14 for many 'non-academic' pupils. Other subjects went into decline, including history, European languages and the arts (which left the latter fighting to reassert its claims through arguments about 'creativity' in general and the commercial importance of the creative industries). Though lip-service was paid to 'citizenship' as an educational purpose which went beyond human capital, this remained undeveloped within a marginal niche as a half-subject rather than as a central curricular aim and theme.

The tensions between neoliberal and neoconservative tendencies became acute in Gove's curriculum reforms, though I would argue that, whenever a choice becomes necessary, the former trumps the latter. The result, however, is likely to prove deeply dysfunctional, because of the erroneous prejudices and (to use a Victorian term) hobbyhorses of Gove and sections of his party.

In the primary stage, it is a curriculum of just three subjects, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) core – or rather two and a half subjects given the neglect of spoken language. These are so overloaded that little time is left for other subjects, let alone interdisciplinary learning. Rather than a rounded primary curriculum, the result is a limited mock-Victorian elementary curriculum for the 'masses'.

The ministerial obsession with PISA – and, as for the USA, it is doubtless a source of shame that a great imperial power should be seen to do so badly – has led to stringent targets being set early. Ironically this acceleration is likely to prove counterproductive, as was highlighted by the 100 academics (2013) 'Too Much Too Soon' letter:

> We are writing to warn of the dangers posed by Michael Gove's new National Curriculum which could severely erode educational standards.
>
> The proposed curriculum consists of endless lists of spellings, facts and rules. This mountain of data will not develop children's ability to think, including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity.
>
> Much of it demands too much too young. This will put pressure on teachers to rely on rote learning without understanding. Inappropriate demands will lead to failure and demoralisation …
>
> Mr Gove has clearly misunderstood England's decline in PISA international tests. Schools in high-achieving Finland, Massachusetts and Alberta emphasise cognitive development, critical understanding and creativity, not rote learning.

Gove's promise to slim down curriculum content materialised only in the non-core subjects, but was by no means neutral or straightforward. Important curricular knowledge, for example in geography, became a desiccated list of facts (regressing to a 'name the continents and oceans' approach), with scant consideration of engagement with either children's interests or 'big world' issues. The arts and physical education lost their exploratory nature, even with young children, and cultural diversity was cast aside. The engagement with ICT as powerful tools for learning and knowledge construction was abandoned in favour of the supposed need to teach children how to program. Gove's attempt to impose a Glorious Heritage version of British (or rather English and imperial) history had to be abandoned when ridiculed even by those from whom he had expected support – notably, and most publicly, by Simon Schama (2013). This retreat is one example of neoliberalism trumping neoconservativism.

Schama's challenge was particularly significant, and of a kind which government loyalists were unable to grasp or engage with. Whereas Conservative ideology prefers to see the world as fixed, and change as perilous, Schama was defending a view of history as complex and controversial:

> It's exactly because history is, by definition, a bone of contention ... that the arguments it generates resist national self-congratulation. So that inquiry is not the uncritical genealogy of the Wonderfulness of Us, but it is, indispensably, an understanding of the identity of us. The endurance of British history's rich and rowdy discord is, in fact, the antidote to civic complacency, the condition of the irreverent freedom that's our special boast ... (Schama 2013)

There is some irony here given Michael Gove's well-known enthusiasm for Hirsch's version of 'knowledge curriculum' (as if progressive teachers have no interest in knowledge!) Hirsch has been much criticised in the USA for his selection of knowledge reflecting the dominant Euro-American culture of white upper-class males. A similar criticism clearly also applies to the English version devised by CoreknowledgeUK. We should be careful not to suggest that poorer and minority ethnic students do not deserve high-status knowledge, but it should not distort and eclipse less hegemonic forms of cultural and technical knowledge. Given the limited space left over for non-core subjects in the Gove curriculum, many children will experience a rich knowledge and culture only as crumbs that drop down from the rich man's table: while fee-paying schools and private tutors teach cello and French horn, many state school pupils will merely learn how to label the outline shapes on a worksheet.

Another extraordinary feature of the new curriculum, and one which is difficult to theorise, is the level of abstraction. Rather than develop generalisations from similar patterns encountered in observations or activities, there is a clear preference for first explaining the rules – and here 'rules' has a double meaning of regularities and regulations. Thus children are expected to manipulate fractions without the foundational process of relating symbols to objects; they are provided with complex spelling rules, even when the rule only

applies to a few cases, for example: 'If the root word ends with -ic, -ally is added rather than just -ly except in the word publicly'. The explanations are frequently so complex that few children will be able to follow them, and certainly not before they have already developed the desired competence in real language use: it would be much more realistic to engage learners in practice and intervene when they are ready.

Gilbert Ryle (1949), in *The Concept of Mind*, characterises this mistaken view of the relationship between symbols or rules and activity as follows:

> The chef must recite his recipes to himself before he can cook according to them; the hero must lend his inner ear to some appropriate moral imperative before swimming out to save the drowning man; the chess-player must run over in his head all the relevant rules and tactical maxims of the game before he can make correct and skilful moves ... Certainly we often do not only reflect before we act but reflect in order to act properly. The chess-player may require some time in which to plan his moves before he makes them. Yet the general assertion that all intelligent performance requires to be prefaced by the consideration of appropriate propositions rings unplausibly ... *Efficient practice precedes the theory of it.* (pp. 31-32, emphasis added)

So, rather than introducing the rules at critical moments of activity, they are delivered prior or external to it. This does not appear likely to develop a problematising and problem-solving approach, but rather stifles processes of hypothesising, theorising and theory-testing while engendering a mindset of obedience to authority in all things.

The most contentious example is early literacy. Here the interweaving processes which constitute reading – an engaged orientation towards books as pleasurable and informative, enjoying sound patterns such as rhyme, identification with characters, a sense of syntactic possibilities to aid prediction, sight recognition of irregular words, phonemic awareness and phonic correspondences – are deliberately broken asunder in favour of 'phonics first, fast and only'. Children's author Mike Rosen (2012) satirises this perfectly:

> We at Ruth Miskin Academy are pioneering Miskin Kick Score Incorporated where in the first year you play Un-Football, by playing without the ball.

Because there is no research to show that such a dogmatic approach aids comprehension as opposed to merely saying words out loud, the 'phonics check' has been introduced to justify precisely such abilities of decontextualised phonic decoding (or, more bluntly, 'barking at print').

Assessment is particularly problematic in the case of English, from school entry to GCSE. The spoken language is consistently neglected. Metalanguage is privileged over language in use, from the new baseline tests in Reception to the

grammar test in Year 6, with rules which scarcely assist speaking or writing, are age-inappropriate and often simply ridiculous.

The question must be asked: what purpose is such assessment intended to serve? Indeed, this question is further complicated by the maintenance of a high-stakes evaluation system which can close schools for making less progress than elsewhere, while simultaneously abolishing levels and introducing six incommensurate versions of the baseline test. Perhaps the lack of correspondence between what is tested and meaningful pupil performance (i.e. test validity) is not the issue, rather the need to constantly speed up the treadmill.

At all stages, the level of performance has been notched up, but not in terms of cognitive complexity or meaningful competences and performance – rather in more artificial forms, such that large numbers of children are being set up to fail. The process is ruthless and strident, with its own high stakes for identity formation. Parents are to be told their children have failed the so-called 'phonics check', and children made to resit until they pass. Children with low scores in Key Stage 2 Standard Assessment Tasks will be made to repeat them, however much this distorts their curriculum. The production of failing identities in this way has significance, perhaps, in terms of an expectation that this generation of students will face large-scale unemployment: they must learn to blame themselves rather than employers or the economic system if they fail in life. Raising the hurdle also makes it easier to set entire schools up for failure and consequent academisation, rather as a predator chases alongside the herd awaiting a chance to pick off the weakest.

Finding a Way Forward

Gove's toxic legacy will clearly not be demolished voluntarily by a new government. Indeed, Labour's pre-election manifesto, while making positive proposals in some fields (improving qualifications for early education staff; new vocational pathways), completely fails to engage with the dysfunctional curriculum which Gove has bequeathed. I am convinced, however, that struggles will arise from the grass roots, and with strong union support.

Finding a way out of this mess will not be easy. The curriculum has suffered too long from excessive ministerial control and rhetorical appeals about the need to raise 'standards'. It has swayed back and forth between neoconservative nostalgia and neoliberal utilitarianism. Achievement for the academically more successful has been driven by the pressure to collect the most A*s, regardless of what is being learnt, while the 'less able' are judged incapable of anything more than a desiccated version of 'basic skills' and an early preparation for routine, low-paid jobs. With the possible exception of physical health, there is little focus on personal well-being, and any thought of personal identity or engaged citizenship has flown out the window.

So what will it take? The following outlines some general directions and key principles.

Wider Educational Aims

It is difficult to imagine any future society in which education does not play a part in preparing young people to earn a living or contribute to our collective economic welfare. However, all young people need and deserve a broad foundation including core skills, scientific and social understanding, abilities of problem-solving and critical interpretation, ethical and aesthetic judgement, and creative activity of many kinds.

To become active and critical citizens of a complex and troubled world, characterised by unprecedented global mobility and economic polarisation, they will need to engage individually or collectively with issues of environmental sustainability, poverty, migration and war. Any new curriculum fit for a democratic society will need to foreground critical thinking, especially in relation to modern media and genres. This is not simply a matter of acquiring some technical skills of analysis, but is about fostering a questioning attitude and learning to read texts and ideas 'against the grain' from one's own and other perspectives. This will require a far broader conception of 'the basics', involving critical literacy, multimedia, rapidly changing ICTs, media production, speaking and writing in a range of genres and for a variety of audiences. It will also require the ability to engage positively with cultural diversity.

We must also pay heed to personal development, the development of young people as caring and independent individuals. Gert Biesta (2010) presents a thoughtful, if apolitical, framework for discussing curricular aims with his categories of qualification, socialisation and subjectification (pp. 19ff.).

Entitlement Combined with Flexibility

A balance needs to be struck between a common entitlement for all young people, and sufficient openness and adaptability in the light of local circumstances and pupils' interests.

Social justice is achieved through recognition as well as fair distribution. It is no use simply demanding that all children must acquire identical knowledge. Successful teaching requires reaching out to young people in all their diversity, helping them develop an understanding of their world and experiences, drawing on vernacular knowledge in the local community, and building bridges to high-status knowledge.

Age-Appropriate Learning

A century of research into children developing knowledge has taught us how much this depends on their personal engagement with the realities they experience, and reflection on that experience mediated by language and other cultural tools. This involves shifting fluently between different levels of concrete experience and abstract representation (simulations, algebra, maps, narrative,

explanation, etc.), applying ideas and skills from the past, collaborating with others, and stepping back to evaluate and re-plan the learning process.

This cannot be acquired through rote learning, memorisation and behaviourist conditioning. Social constructivist processes cannot outreach a child's development. Treating young children like battery hens merely results in alienation, demoralisation and the superficial accumulation of inert data.

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