Still in crying need of an overhaul

Patrick Yarker

After the Review: Reimagining curriculum and assessment

Edited by Jane Coles, with Dave Barter, John Bolt, Ian Duckett and James Whiting, Manifesto Press Co-operative 2026
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The 'national' curriculum has never been national. Private schools don't have to adhere to it, and academies and free schools must do so only from 2028, 40 years after it was first introduced. Even so, by legislating to control the curriculum, Margaret Thatcher's government significantly curtailed the power of state school teachers individually and collectively to shape the content of what they teach; a giant step on the journey to reconfigure teaching as a technical practice rather than a relational one. Teachers are expected to deliver the national curriculum but may not devise it.

This exclusionary logic characterised the working of the Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) panel, chaired by Professor Becky Francis. The Labour government established the CAR in 2024 to fulfil a manifesto commitment. Its Final Report appeared in November 2025. *After the Review* is a compendium of critical ripostes which the Socialist Educational Association has published in book form as part of its series *Re-imagining Education*. In his contribution to the book, Dave Barter notes that the CAR panel contained no trade union representative, no teacher from a non-academised school and no representative from a subject specialist organisation. Such voices have not always been prevented from participating in committees which review education policy. The panel invited written evidence from individual teachers and organisations, but there's a world of difference between making a case on paper and arguing it as a member of the decision-taking group. One reason why, as Dave Barter writes, education unions should consider affiliating to the Labour Party, the better to pursue what is in the interest of their members.

During the fierce dispute before its inception at the end of the 1980s, a powerful argument presented the national curriculum (NC) as an entitlement. Its scope and coherence would ensure young people had access to all content deemed necessary according to a broad consensus of opinion. They would neither miss out on important regions of knowledge nor find themselves traversing the same terrain over and over.

Entitlement has a different ring to it these days. But Professor Francis wields the old notion at once in her foreword to the Final Report: 'The importance of our national curriculum cannot be overstated. It is an entitlement to the most important knowledge

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that we expect children and young people to learn, both for their benefit and for the benefit of the nation'.

To my ears this claim is framed so as to brook no demurral. For better rhetorical advantage, the 'we' who 'expect' (and who have presumably determined what knowledge is to qualify as 'most important') goes undefined. Does the pronoun refer to the review panel's membership – the subject of the next paragraph – or to the national collective Professor Francis feels entitled to mobilise in her first sentence ('our national curriculum', not 'the') and which she cites at the close of her second? In the next paragraph, the review panel's 'we' hope to ensure three things: a curriculum fit for the future, which 'addresses' (curious word) 'rich knowledge and skills', even as it 'encourages a love of learning'. The order of items in this list is telling.

Alongside curriculum, the review panel considered matters of assessment. For them this comprises only the assessment system, i.e. testing. The price paid to ensure the Thatcherite Conservative Party did not scupper in Parliament the safe passage of their own education secretary's bill enshrining the national curriculum, a 'nationalised curriculum' as many right-wing critics termed it, was the imposition on schools of a framework of national tests. 'We' pupils, students, teachers, parents and carers have endured the dire consequences of this ever since. The NC's much-vaunted entitlement to knowledge has been vitiated by the tyranny of the high-stakes testing regime. When results are what matters, as they do above all else in England's state system, preparation for baseline tests, phonics checks, times tables checks, SATs (standard assessment tests) and 'knowledge-rich' GCSEs remorselessly purloin what young people are entitled to in terms of broader content and the chance to help shape educational processes.

Forty years wandering the stony wastes of high-stakes testing has somewhat discouraged a love of learning in schools. Nonetheless, the review panel favours more tests. Its members urge schools to take up the optional Key Stage 1 SATs. They propose 'diagnostic assessments' in English and maths for year 8. This stance alone should render their report unacceptable. The government hopes to inflict its own reading test on year 8 students, but has not sanctioned the two additional tests proposed by the CAR panel.

In the face of growing disengagement from school on the part of thousands of young people, and with no end to the recruitment and retention crisis among teachers, the report appears complacent and out of touch. Its recommendations fall far short of what it needed.

Underwhelmed

Eighteen concise essays provide the bulk of the material in *After the Review*, but the book opens by presenting what the CAR panel seems to have been deaf to: grounded

insights from practitioners. Teachers from primary level through to university make plain how Gove's curriculum has fostered shallow learning, alienated young people, sapped morale and damagingly constrained practice.

The essays that follow cover a range of educational concerns and subject-specialisms from Key Stages 1 through 5, and share a view of the curriculum as a space for young people to develop in educationally beneficial ways by engaging or being inducted in what the philosopher R. S. Peters called 'worthwhile activities'. Such a view, progressive and attentive to the learner's personhood, asks an enduring question of those for whom the curriculum is chiefly a device for transmitting authorised content.

What little good the CAR report contains is acknowledged by Gary Snapper, a trustee of the National Association for the Teaching of English. He welcomes the report insofar as it:

> Recognises the importance of teacher autonomy; restates the crucial role of SEND provision, as well as diversity and inclusion more broadly; and seeks to ameliorate some of the worst excesses of the current assessment system; and restores the idea of a curriculum that reflects modernity by taking seriously aspects such as social relevance, oracy, digital and media literacy, and environmental sustainability. (p87)

For the most part, contributors are at best underwhelmed by the report's recommendations. Many castigate its failure to challenge the high-stakes testing regime. John Bolt and Ian Duckett are quick to highlight the report's conservatism and timidity, and to indicate where it should have gone further to meet its moment.

Cogency, and a commitment to improving the current situation, hallmark the contributions. Tony Eaude criticises the failure of the review to 'build on the success of the Early Years Foundation Stage – and recommend extending early years up to age 7 or 8' (p25). He cites the submerged radical tradition in primary teaching, and in particular the work of the Cambridge primary review, when calling on teachers to see themselves as curriculum makers and to keep trying to 'ensure that the curriculum-as-taught is holistic and enjoyable' (p28). Senior leaders and school governors should support teachers whose practice values oracy, the arts and relational pedagogy.

A number of contributions speak to (and from) specific subject areas, including English, maths, history, Black history, climate education and citizenship. James Whiting is scathing about the DfE's fixation with a particular kind of phonics teaching. He notes that young people in the Republic of Ireland and in Canada, where synthetic phonics is one part of a mixed approach, score better in reading (as per PISA, Programme for International Student Assessment data) than British 15-year-olds (p32). The importance of creativity across all learning, not simply in arts subjects, is argued by Jane Coles and Maggie Pitfield. They urge the benefits of 'creative ways of teaching, learning, thinking, whatever the subject' (p39) and set against the review panel's delivery model

of teaching the more profound and emancipatory view that teaching should be seen as 'an intellectually creative practice' (p39). They speak of the 'deadening load on learners' (p41) which Gove's knowledge-rich approach imposes, and note the review's blindness to joy as an enabler of learning.

Hilary Povey's nuanced critique also values her subject, maths, for its intrinsic creativity. Creative and co-agentic maths teaching helps confirm for pupils and students the necessary sense of 'trust in oneself as an author of knowledge' and as someone who can 'challenge, critique and decide' (p85). Povey deprecates the review's support for 'ability' grouping. She challenges its valorisation of instant factual recall, and advocates a much wider range of forms of assessment.

In their essay, Paty Paliokoska and Victoria Barmsey argue for stronger SEND leadership in schools to combat the fragmented realisation in practice of the current curriculum. Lack of such leadership helps sustain the tension between mainstream and specialist SEND provision. Richard Reiser outlines the history of disabled children in school, sketches the political repositioning of disability in education and wider society, and urges continuing struggle for full inclusion via the removal of social barriers. He is uncompromising on the disabling nature of the current testing regime.

In a second contribution, James Whiting criticises overspecialisation at A Level, and the defunding of International Baccalaureate and BTEC: 'a much richer post-16 offer than A Level' (pp75-6). Martin Allen weighs up the proposed 'V' Levels (which Whiting has little time for) and notes that, unlike the current T Levels, they won't require a commitment to an occupational specialisation. The various vocational pathways currently established have, he says, become gateways to work but not to university (p80). Only 'major changes to the labour market' (p81) including greater financial incentives and clear legal requirements on employers, will allow a regenerated apprenticeship system to flourish.

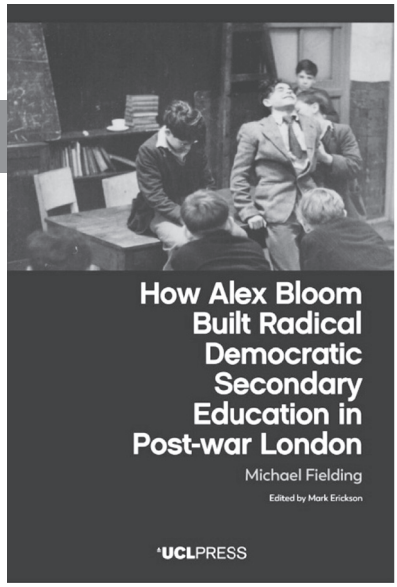
In the final essay, Diane Reay describes the review as an exercise in refreshing rather than overhauling a stale and tired system (p105). What the system needs above all 'is investment in its infrastructure, its staff … its students … [and in] trust, well-being, expertise' (p105). She draws attention to the low level of UK welfare spending as a percentage of GDP when compared with many European countries (p106), and sketches the impact of this impoverishment on working-class children. Current spending should be directed away from the increasingly costly assessment system and an overbearing Ofsted inspectorate. Reay concludes by making a more general case for managing and controlling markets rather than appeasing them. She would impose a requirement to assess the social costs of government policies, such as the costs of increased inequality and mental ill-health, in order to reveal what the current approach to spending contrives to keep hidden.

After the Review is a handbook of useful information and vital arguments to resource

those campaigning to give the curriculum the overhaul it so sorely needs. It will support teachers in their struggle for more freedom in determining what to teach and how to teach it, so that the experience of school can encompass more of what matters to young people, and become more enjoyable and successful for them. Priced at less than a tenner a copy, every staffroom should have one.

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