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The National Curriculum and its Effects

Edited by
Cedric Cullingford and Paul Oliver



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CEDRIC CULLINGFORD and PAUL OLIVER

University of Huddersfield, UK

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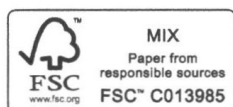
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THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM AND ITS EFFECTS

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Preface

It has been over ten years since the Education Reform Act. As its title implies, this was introduced as making a radical change to the education system. The battery of tests, the provision for opting out, and Local Financial Management, together with the concomitant League Tables and changes to Inspection, all gave evidence of principles that were at one moment founded on the concept of market forces, and at another on clear centralised control. The most central example of the latter was the National Curriculum which, for all the subsequent tinkering, has remained intact.

During the last ten years there have been many people who have doubted the wisdom of imposing a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, supported by tests, on the whole population. The doubts have centred on whether this 'de-professionalising' of teachers enhances or devalues standards, and on whether pupils are making better or worse progress. This book is based on seeking out the evidence that would suggest whether the experiment has been successful or not. It has explored empirical data, rather than opinion. It is, of course, difficult in such a complex human endeavour such as education to single out a particular variable, like the curriculum. Correlation, like the rise of exclusions and truancy, should not be mistaken for causes. Nevertheless there is a consistency in the findings that should give more than a pause for thought.

There is not only consistency but positive intellectual overlaps between the chapters. Any doubts they display about pupil standards, motivations and welfare are the result of a close and fair scrutiny of the evidence. The first three chapters give a theoretical as well as factual framework to the rest of the book, summarising evidence from the earliest debates to the more recent changes. The next three chapters from four to six explore pupils' experience and perceptions of the National Curriculum: what is it really like for them? Has the 'entitlement' of the curriculum enhanced their learning, or burdened them with fact?

Chapters seven and eight explore the relationship between the National Curriculum and the experience of disaffected pupils. The rise in exclusions is well documented, but can this be attributed to the results of the Education Reform Act? Chapter nine takes this look at the actual effects of the National Curriculum somewhat further through an analysis of literacy hours in particular. Chapters ten and eleven explore not only teachers' perceptions of the national curriculum but their experience of it.

Between the different chapters and the evidence that is presented there is a great deal of consistency. The respect for valid evidence means that the judgements and conclusions are not lightly made. If the National Curriculum delivered exactly what Kenneth Baker promised on its introduction then that should be a matter to be celebrated. If it has, in fact, the opposite effect to that intended, then that should be made known.

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1 Introduction: Can a Curriculum be National?

CEDRIC CULLINGFORD

Everyone has their own curriculum. As in a curriculum vitae it is like a loose fitting set of cultural clothes, an idiosyncratic texture of knowledge that is unique. There are as many hidden or overt curricula as there are people. The word curriculum is therefore a Humpty-Dumpty word: "When I use a word it means exactly what I want it to mean, neither more nor less". "The question is" says Alice, "whether one can use a word like that?" "The question is" replies Humpty-Dumpty, "who is to be master, that's all".

The great irony about such a lubricious term is that it has become redolent with its association of a firmly imposed, inflexible will. The National Curriculum as in the curricula imposed on communist countries rests on the supposition that there is a clear collective whole appropriate to everyone. The very concept of 'entitlement' is that all should feast at the same table. The 'broadness' and the 'balance' is all inclusive. All the tests must be 'standard'. That we meet with the collective experience of submitting to one agreed centralised plan, where, in the words of one child at the official opening of a new school building, 'all of us sang the National Curriculum'.

There are many layers of meaning attached to the curriculum from the personal to the collective. This is why there has always been debate about what kinds of knowledge are most appropriate. Since Plato the debates about what 'subjects' were appropriate were as much to do with politics and society, the way in which individuals not only saw the world but their places in it, as with fitness for purpose or different types of pleasure. The history of this debate is fascinating and could have been useful as a corrective to the rather superficial arguments that were developed since Mr Callaghan's much invoked 'Ruskin' speech that was taken as a starting point, as if nothing of the kind had been addressed before. Indeed the National Curriculum, in the way it is enshrined, is noteworthy for its eschewing of philosophical principles.

Debates about the curriculum have always been about underlying tensions, which are still with us. Some are to do with the distinctions

between knowledge and the acquisition of useful facts, since 'knowledge is power', and the need for 'manners', for the development of such understanding as improves the character and strengthens the morals. There is also a tension between the discipline of thinking - the word 'discipline' here chosen deliberately - and the practical application of knowledge. There are some subjects, associated with the academic, not only deemed to be useful for their own sake but empowering those who study them with such strength of thought that their critical skills can be applied to almost anything. Against this is placed the formidable amounts of practical knowledge and accumulated understanding on which we tend to rely, or trust, in surgeons and engineers.

[The curriculum is not just a matter of facts. It involves skills which are transferable and personal development.] There are some who suggest that it does not matter which subject is studied as long as it is done with adequate depth and conviction. There are, for example, some private institutions in the United States whose curriculum consists of nothing more or less than a selection of one hundred books, its own 'Great Tradition'. The curriculum in the broadest sense is inclusive and unavoidable. The moment it is subject to control and choice it tends to be exclusive. Nearly all formal curricula, again from Plato onwards, tend to be for some kind of 'elite', however that is defined. Most of the debates about the curriculum are about exclusion; how many people are capable of entering the inner sanctum of T.S. Eliot's cultural aristocracy, or S.T. Coleridge's 'Clerisy'.

One of the tensions about the curriculum is the extent to which it should be 'relevant' to the modern world, or should be above such immediacy. Trilling (1966) lamented the "unargued assumption ... that the true purpose of all study is to lead the young person to be at home in, and in control of, the modern world" (p.4), long before the idea of a 'core' curriculum was thought of. Bantock (1980) makes a distinction between the banal 'truth' of physical actuality and the higher truth of moral and aesthetic spheres, "in touch with the historical nature of their consciousness, which has hitherto largely been ignored" (p.137).

Technical and vocational education have never gained that intellectual prestige accorded to the academic. This is a conclusion which is reached in many different parts of the world. A sense that the most able or gifted are those who aspire to that which is least useful is an atavistic instinct which runs deep even in anti-intellectual cultures like the British. Advanced levels are the natural standard entrance requirements to prestigious universities;

vocational qualifications tend to be associated with those who are, how shall we put it, less 'fitted' in that direction. Even in subjects like accountancy, useful, practical and lucrative, where one would have assumed that prior knowledge required at university would make for well qualified entrants to the profession, there are latent academic snobberies. The large accountancy firms in the City of London recruit at least three quarters of their staff from the ancient universities, who continue to eschew such mundanely practical subjects. To have read classics remains respectable.

Such distinctions in prestige have long been with us. There is a resistance to new subjects, such as rural studies or environmental studies, even in schools (Goodson, 1982). This is not just a result of clinging to the familiar, or even of despising the potentially utilitarian. It is a result of a sense of the curriculum as something that can be controlled and be imposed. The complexities of real practice mean that there can never be a sense of the coherent whole. As Schoen (1987) so often pointed out, the contamination of actual problems can lead to deeper reflection about practice, but it often develops into the protection of established academic hegemonies.

This idea of a perfect curriculum in terms of coherence, theory and testable outcomes is not only deep-seated in the National Curriculum, but closely linked to the assumption of traditional values and beliefs. One of the results of the lack of philosophical debate about the National Curriculum is that many traditional assumptions are left unexamined. Whether it is for better or worse, the State's curriculum is not geared towards inclusiveness, towards addressing the needs of the deprived or disadvantaged. Nor does it deal with either new ways of studying or new ways of being assessed. The very idea of league tables and of set targets would anyway undermine genuine notions of 'inclusiveness' as opposed to 'entitlement'. There is something both traditional and elitist in the National Curriculum.

Goodson (1994) compares the secondary regulations of 1904 with the National Curriculum and concludes that the curriculum remains a process of social privatising. He sees it as a form of social control, with subjects of high status resisting new intrusions. As in the 1970s and 80s subjects that are new, like environmental studies, social studies or political education, are rejected or marginalised against the established core. Perhaps they are too technical, or too subversive. The given curriculum in its traditional monumentality prevails.

It could be argued that the National Curriculum is properly elitist and divisive in its intentions, for all the desire for uniformity. Those who do not meet the standards can always be 'disapplied' either formally or psychologically. But the purpose of the National Curriculum has rarely been debated. There are different models for the curriculum (Ahier and Ross, 1995). There are those which see the curriculum as a form of cultural transmission, passing on a received body of knowledge - the 'academic'. The curriculum can be alternatively understood as a means of developing social, economic and technically desirable skills - a utilitarian approach. Or the curriculum can be a means of developing social understanding of the world, including inculcating values and good behaviour. The National Curriculum is an uneasy turning away from all three. It could easily have been thought of as a troubled combination, but any concern with personal social education or with citizenship, or with high levels of communication and information technology are marginal.

Those who witnessed and commented on the introduction of the National Curriculum all point out that it was never really thought through. When one compares the way in which some countries approach the curriculum with the 1988 Educational Reform Act, we see some interesting contrasts. The Act has perhaps half-a-page on the purpose of the curriculum, and one thousand pages on the content. Other countries put all their energies into debating the tensions between the needs of society and those of the individual, and then have perhaps one page on the content. This is one result of what all who were involved saw as indecent haste.

It is ironic that after a number of years in which the curriculum was subject to contemporary debate, with a number of pamphlets produced by HMI and focus groups, long before the idea became a political mantra led by one Secretary of State, the actual National Curriculum was introduced in a great deal of hurry. This is a result of the politics involved. The Education Reform Act was a symbol of the will of politicians. It signaled the desire to interfere with the education system in a way unprecedented for at least one hundred years, since the imposition of payment by results. This use of education as a sign of political will set up in the Education Reform Act has been continued ever since (Hunter, 1997). Humpty-Dumpty's rhetorical question about who is to be master has a more sardonic ring.

The haste behind the reforms was apparent to all involved. Even at the time some of the results of political interference were anticipated and warned against (Graham and Tytler, 1993). There are many inadvertent