

Policy on the primary curriculum since 2010: The demise of the expert view

Mark Brundrett*

Liverpool John Moores University

This paper focuses on the review and subsequent revision of the primary curriculum that took place between 2010 and 2014. Three central contentions are made about the review process: (1) it ignored the need for dialogue and consensus among the various parties that make up the delicate and interlocking set of relationships in the English education system; (2) it at first purported to integrate the views of higher education and then ignored, marginalized, and dismissed them; and (3) despite claiming to be based on best practice in other 'jurisdictions', it failed to take account of alternative views about approaches to curriculum innovation and instead focused on a limited and instrumentalist view that was treated as being uncontestable.

Keywords: national curriculum review; curriculum review; curriculum innovation; instrumentalism

Introduction

The change to a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 after more than a decade of Labour administration meant that it was inevitable that new directions would be explored across all phases of education. One such area of change was the review and subsequent revision of the national curriculum set in train by Michael Gove, who was the Secretary of State for Education during much of the five years of the parliament. In this paper I shall focus in particular on the primary curriculum that emerged and argue that, despite much Sturm und Drang, the evidence appears to show that the revised national curriculum has been accepted by most teachers with little demur. However, I shall also posit that the way in which the revisions were introduced involved three major problems:

- it ignored the need for dialogue and consensus among the various parties that make up the delicate and interlocking set of relationships in the English education system
- it at first purported to integrate the views of higher education and then ignored, marginalized, and finally dismissed them
- despite claiming to be based on best practice in other 'jurisdictions', it failed to take account of alternative views about approaches to curriculum construction and instead focused on a limited and instrumentalist view that was treated as being uncontestable.

Centrally, I will argue that the opprobrium that was heaped upon academics working in the area of education during the period of the review was singular in nature and damaging in character. Further, I shall suggest that the approach to curriculum innovation adopted was one that was essentially *political* rather than collegial, consultative, or evidence-based.

* Corresponding author – email: M.Brundrett@ljmu.ac.uk

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The White Paper (2010) and the review of the national curriculum

The clearest statement of the ways in which primary education was likely to change under the aegis of the new government came with the publication of the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, in November 2010 (DfE, 2010). Although not quite as radical as the 1988 Education Act, which, alongside the 1944 Education Act, was one of the two most momentous education documents of the twentieth century, the agenda set out by the new government was extremely wide-ranging and promised to extend and embed many of the initiatives set in train under the administration of Margaret Thatcher two decades before (Brundrett, 2011). The amplitude of proposed change was dramatic, with sections of the paper covering matters ranging from teaching and leadership, through behaviour, curriculum, assessment and qualifications, a new schools system, accountability, school improvement, and school funding.

Most importantly for the discussion here, it was suggested that a new approach was needed to the national curriculum that specified a 'tighter, more rigorous, model of the knowledge which every child should expect to master in core subjects at every stage' (DfE, 2010: 10). The overall aim was stated to be to reduce prescription in order to allow schools to decide how to teach while retaining a focus on core subject knowledge. In January 2011 the government launched a review of the national curriculum in England that was given a remit to consider the content and structure of the national curriculum at both primary and secondary levels (DfE, 2011). The fact that there was also to be a review of testing at the end of Key Stage 2 held the potential for a reduction in the burdens on primary and middle schools but the decision to place greater emphasis on the systematic teaching of phonics (DfE, 2010: 11) was to be more contested. A statement of the aims of the review was placed online (DfE, 2011a) in which it was argued that the review would:

- replace the 'substandard' curriculum with one based on the best school systems in the world, providing a world-class resource for teachers and children
- consider what subjects should be compulsory at what age
- consider what children should be taught in the main subjects at what age.

Overall it was stated that the review would consider how to deliver rigorous, valid, and reliable assessments that promote attainment and progression and ensure that schools are properly accountable to pupils, parents, and the public for the achievement of every child (DfE, 2011). The national curriculum review was also to link to Lord Bew's review, to ensure the standards and expectations set for pupil attainment measured up to those of the highest performing jurisdictions in the world (DfE, 2011b).

The government suggested that 'to bring the curriculum to life', teachers need the space to create lessons that engage their pupils, and children need the time to develop their ability to understand, retain, and apply what they have learned. It was argued that it was for this reason that the new national curriculum would have a greater focus on subject content, outlining the essential knowledge and understanding that pupils should be expected to have (DfE, 2011).

The subsequent review took place in two phases and it was made clear that the core subjects of English, mathematics, and science would remain subjects within the national curriculum, with statutory programmes of study from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4. The first phase of the review therefore considered the essential knowledge (facts, concepts, principles, and fundamental operations) children need to be taught in order to progress and develop their understanding in these subjects, and drafted new programmes of study with a view to them being taught in maintained schools from September 2013. The second phase of the review, starting in early 2012, was designed to produce draft programmes of study for all other subjects in addition to English, mathematics, science, and physical education, which the government wished to be part of

the national curriculum in future, with a view to them being taught in maintained schools from September 2014.

What emerged was a curriculum with a strong focus on knowledge and a concomitant downgrading of the development of skills. The result is a curriculum for primary schools in England that has some significant similarities to the elementary tradition that emerged at the start of universal education, with its strong emphasis on basic literacy and numeracy and the acquisition of factual knowledge (Menter, 2013: 14). This sense of nineteenth-century values was reinforced by the continued role of Ofsted in monitoring performance, and heightened by the increased emphasis on outcomes in relation to national curriculum targets. However, the curriculum developments in England can be seen as part of a wider phenomenon of curriculum change both across anglophone education systems (Priestley and Sinnema, 2014: 50), driven by the desire to increase national competitiveness at a time of globalization (Yates and Young, 2010), and across much of Europe, either in an attempt to make learning more relevant to students or in order to further democratize education systems that were previously one element of repressive regimes (Dering *et al.*, 2005; Brundrett *et al.*, 2006). It is striking, though, that in most nations the changes put in place have involved a shift away from the prescriptive specification of content knowledge (Young, 2008; Priestley and Sinnema, 2014: 51). Moreover for some, the lack of clear aims and values for the revised English national curriculum, alongside the fact that the national curriculum is not compulsory for academies or free schools, means that, in the phrase of one of the most eminent commentators in the field, it is neither national nor a curriculum (Alexander, 2012).

The demise of the ‘expert view’

The review was supported by an advisory committee and expert panel made up of teachers, academics, and business representatives, which had a remit to guide the review and help frame recommendations. The panel was chaired by Tim Oates of Cambridge Assessment, and included a number of eminent scholars including Professor Mary James of the University of Cambridge; Professor Andrew Pollard of the University of Bristol and the Institute of Education, University of London; and Professor Dylan Wiliam of the Institute of Education, University of London. The panel sought out a wide range of viewpoints and took evidence from a range of relevant bodies and individuals. The subsequent report offered a number of key principles including:

- The new national curriculum should be developed in line with the principles of freedom, responsibility, and fairness – to raise standards for all children.
- Schools should be given greater freedom over the curriculum. The national curriculum should set out only the essential knowledge (facts, concepts, principles, and fundamental operations) that all children should acquire, and leave schools to design a wider school curriculum that best meets the needs of their pupils and to decide how to teach this most effectively.
- The content of the English national curriculum should compare favourably with curricula in the best performing jurisdictions, reflecting the best collective wisdom we have about how children learn and what they should know.
- The national curriculum should embody rigour and high standards and create coherence in what is taught in schools, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to acquire a core of knowledge in the key subject disciplines.
- The national curriculum should provide young people with the knowledge they need to move confidently and successfully through their education, taking into account

the needs of different groups, including the most able pupils and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

- It is important to distinguish between the national curriculum and the wider school curriculum (the whole curriculum as experienced by pupils in each school). There are a number of components of a broad and balanced school curriculum that should be developed on the basis of local or school-level decision-making, rather than prescribed national programmes of study. To facilitate this, the national curriculum should not absorb the overwhelming majority of teaching time in schools.
- The national curriculum should continue to be a statutory requirement for maintained schools but should also retain its importance as a national benchmark of excellence for all schools, providing parents with an understanding of what their child should be expected to know at every stage of their school career.

(DfE, 2011c: 6)

In addition, the main points of the recommendations included the suggestions that all existing national curriculum subjects should remain statutory but schools should be left to decide how to teach citizenship, design and technology, and ICT; knowledge should be set out by Key Stage, perhaps with the exception of mathematics, which might follow a year-by-year structure; oral language should feature strongly; national curriculum levels should be replaced with more precise attainment targets; and all pupils should understand the key components of a body of knowledge before they move on to the next stage when they are 'ready to progress' (DfE, 2011c: 47). However, the greatest single change that the panel suggested was that Key Stage 2 should be divided into two, resulting in a revised structure of Key Stage 1 from ages 5 to 7; Key Stage 2 from 7 to 11; Key Stage 3 from 11 to 13; and Key Stage 4 from 13 to 16. Such a change would have been fundamental because it would have split the 'junior' element of English education in half, but it would have rationalized the system by offering the potential for a better transition to the more subject-based secondary curriculum in the latter stages of primary schooling. It might also have made the position of the remaining first and middle schools – which most commonly cater for children between the ages of 5 and 9 and 9 and 13 respectively – less anomalous, because they would each address the needs of two identifiable Key Stages of education rather than spanning boundaries, as has been the case since the inception of the Key Stage system over twenty years ago (Brundrett, 2012a).

These recommendations appear to have had comparatively little influence on the final outcome of the review: freedom, responsibility, and fairness do not seem to feature as key aspects of the revised curriculum; it would be hard to argue that schools have been given greater control over the curriculum; far more than the 'essential knowledge' is set out in the revised documentation; and the bold suggestion of splitting Key Stage 2 was not mentioned in the final proposals and has subsequently disappeared without trace. Yet it was the lack of any statement of underlying values or principles for the new curriculum and the sheer level of detail and prescription in the documents that seemed to be most challenging for teachers and commentators. With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that the proposals appear to have received, at best, a very muted reception from the teaching profession. For instance, a poll of primary teachers in 2012 revealed that only 13 per cent thought that if the draft proposals came into force they would actually help in teaching, while 39 per cent thought they would actively hinder teaching, and 30 per cent thought that they would make no difference (TES, 2012: 9). Fuel was thrown on the fire when it emerged that two of the expert panel, Professors Mary James and Andrew Pollard, had tendered their resignations in a letter to the Secretary of State for Education dated 10 October 2011. The letter is now available on the British Educational Research website, among

others that relate to this topic (BERA, 2012). In this letter Professors James and Pollard stated their belief that some of the directions within the proposals ‘fly in the face of evidence in the UK and internationally and, in our judgement, cannot be justified educationally’. When two of the most distinguished academics in the field, who are world-renowned scholars employed at prestigious institutions, resign from the committee set up to advise on the development of the new curriculum, it is not only an embarrassment, it also raises questions about what has emerged and the process by which decisions were reached (Brundrett, 2012a).

Pollard later pointed out a number of areas of concern about the direction of travel of the curriculum proposals that had emerged by the critical month of October 2011, which included:

1. the perceived lack of commitment to clear educational aims in the proposals
2. the fact that the Department for Education (DfE) had conducted an exercise in international comparison and consultation with subject experts in English, mathematics, and science leading to the production of draft programmes of study, which had been replaced by texts produced by others; a process that had bypassed the expert panel
3. a reduction in curricular breadth because it appeared that the status of music and art might be downgraded
4. constraint on the curriculum caused by the fact that it appeared that the curriculum would be specified year on year
5. the lack of focus on oral language development
6. potential problems over transition caused by the lack of consideration given to continuity of curricular and other learning experiences of pupils
7. the speed with which the review had taken place, which gave rise to concerns about the pace and legitimacy of the reforms.

(Brundrett, 2012a)

Yet perhaps the most significant thing about the debacle of the expert panel is simply the way in which their views were first sought, then dismissed, and finally derided. Unhappily, this was not to be the end of the censure directed at those from higher education who held views about the curriculum that differed from the Secretary of State. Indeed, the opprobrium that Michael Gove directed at those scholars who might seek to critique the proposed changes to the national curriculum was brought into stark focus when, in March 2013, a group of 100 senior academics in English universities wrote an open letter to the Secretary of State for Education, published in the *Independent* newspaper, stating that they wished to warn of ‘the dangers posed by the new National Curriculum which could severely erode educational standards’ because the proposed curriculum ‘consists of endless lists of spellings, facts and rules’ that ‘will not develop children’s ability to think, including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity’ (*Independent*, 2013).

Sadly, Michael Gove’s response was to suggest that these were ‘bad academics’ and that their intervention showed that teacher education needed to be moved into schools even more rapidly, presumably so that such people would no longer have a role in the development of those who aspired to work in schools (or a role of any kind). As I noted at the time (Brundrett, 2013), while Gove had a right to disagree with the position taken by such academics only time would tell whether his vision of the future of education was better than theirs and, whichever analysis subsequently proved correct, it seemed otiose in the extreme that such a discussion of alternative futures, presumably on the basis of genuinely held beliefs, should descend into bitterness and scorn when what was needed was constructive dialogue and consensus.

Competing views of the curriculum – the need for social justice and a more ecological view

It is important to note that there is a significant group of academic commentators who have themselves expressed concern about the dangers of downgrading the importance of knowledge in the curriculum. Most notable among these are the ‘social realists’ who point out the dangers of what they term ‘technical-instrumentalist’ curricula (Moore and Young, 2001; Biesta, 2011; Ecclestone, 2013). This critique has two main dimensions (Priestley and Sinnema, 2014: 51–2): firstly, concerns about the shift from the specification of disciplinary knowledge to an emphasis on generic skills and competencies (Phillips and Ochs, 2003); secondly, a weakening of the relationship between knowledge and academic disciplines because of the erosion of the distinction between academic knowledge and subject knowledge (Young and Muller, 2010). There are, of course, powerful counterarguments to such conceptions, including the seminal work of Apple, who has warned of the potentially repressive nature of curricula that are externally defined (Apple, 2004), and the highly influential work of learning theorists such as Slavin, who makes it clear that a national curriculum is difficult to integrate with the constructivist theories of learning that he supports (Slavin, 2014).

The crucial thing here, however, is not the nature of the debate but the fact that there is little, if any, evidence that the Secretary of State drew on such complex theorizing in making his decision to enhance the role of knowledge in the English curriculum. On the contrary, the government approach to curriculum reform refused to acknowledge that there was any legitimate alternative to what they proposed and rejected the notion of dialogue and debate. Indeed, we now know that Michael Gove and the Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb, who had sought to promulgate the reform of the curriculum, based their approach on a fundamental commitment that ‘knowledge is the basic building block for a successful life’, a conception and commitment derived, largely, from the work of the influential US cultural theorist E.D. Hirsch (Gibb, 2010).

Despite the fact that the role of this apparently key, indeed possibly seminal, influence has become public knowledge, the origins and nature of Hirsch’s work have remained underexamined. It is now part of the mythology of his work that, during the 1970s, Hirsch formulated the idea that a student’s possession of relevant background knowledge was one of the keys to their ability to understand a text and therefore a key determinant in their success or failure at school. This ‘discovery’ is said to be bound up in Hirsch’s own experience of teaching students of different backgrounds. He noted that students at the high-status University of Virginia, where he was a member of the faculty, were able to understand a passage in a book relating to the history of the US Civil War while students at the comparatively low-status Richmond Community College, just down the road from the university, struggled with the same material, because, he felt, they lacked a basic knowledge of the salient facts of US history. This and other similar experiences led Hirsch to formulate the concept of *cultural literacy*, which has come to be one of the most influential ideas in American education of recent decades. The main idea is that reading comprehension is not just about the decoding of words but also about having a strong background knowledge of general culture. This in turn has led Hirsch to argue that schools should teach a curriculum that is rich in historical and cultural knowledge (Hirsch, 1988).

Hirsch’s most influential work, *Cultural Literacy: What every American needs to know*, was published in 1987. Following the great success of that text Hirsch created the Core Knowledge Foundation and published *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* in 1988. Subsequently, books based on Hirsch’s ideas have become something of a publishing phenomenon, with texts in the Core Knowledge Series focusing on the content knowledge that should be taught to each particular elementary grade level. Hirsch’s more recent works, such as *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them* (1996), *The Knowledge Deficit* (2006), and *The Making of Americans: Democracy*

and our schools (2009), expand and extend the case that schools should prepare citizens for participation in society by teaching a core curriculum that is rich in knowledge. This is, of course, in opposition to much of the progressive approach to the curriculum that was developed by major, and now often excoriated, figures in US education such as John Dewey.

Hirsch is known to be a liberal but it is not surprising that his work in education has been attacked as both conservative and reactionary. This is a response that is given all the more impetus by the books in his Core Knowledge Series, which are famous for being full of key facts that it is expected that children should learn. This gives rise to the idea that his approach is one that depends on rote learning and that ignores the variety of other approaches to pedagogy that have become popular in educational theory. However, we can perhaps see why the simplicity of Hirsch's ideas is appealing to those in the US and England who are concerned about the development of a cohesive society and critical of what they see as 'declining standards' in schools (Brundrett, 2012b).

The promotion of the work of Hirsch by many on the right of educational politics in England has echoes of the way in which an earlier generation of Conservative politicians drew on the work of another literary critic with wide cultural ambitions – the Cambridge academic F.R. Leavis, whose ideas supported notions of cultural hierarchies and academic elites and operated within a tradition that was bourgeois, humanist, and Arnoldian (Wolfreys, 2006: 59) in its appeal for a culture that is 'based on the best that is thought and known in the World' (Leavis, 1943: 141). In a society that is concerned about cultural decline and the lack of a sense of 'Britishness' the learning of key facts about 'our island history' has a great appeal, especially because there are many who consider the previous attempt at creating a 'citizenship' curriculum to have been something of a failure.

It is crucial to note that the work of Hirsch is based not on empirical models but on personal and anecdotal experience. For some in the United States educational and, more importantly, political community the knowledge-rich, fact-based approach to the curriculum is an answer to what are perceived to be declining standards in education. Such approaches have had staunch supporters in England who see a contemporary crisis in education based on three key issues: a loss of faith in the importance of knowledge in pedagogy; a perceived 'philistinism' based on anti-elitist doctrines that are believed to exist in schools and higher education institutions; and the 'infantalization' of children, which institutionalizes praise at the expense of rigour (Furedi, 2007: 9–11). However, others who take an opposing view believe that the adoption of Hirsch's ideas in the US may be located within the response to a fundamentally manufactured and fraudulent crisis in America's public schools that has been promulgated by neoconservative and neo-liberal theorists (Berliner and Biddle, 1995). For many in the educational community in England a similar apologue has been told about the failure of local authority-controlled schools in order to justify the changes in the English education system since the advent of the 1988 Education Act and the subsequent movement towards the 'privatization' of education, most notably evident in the academies and free schools initiatives that were so cherished by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat administration in 2010–15. Of course, such a critique does not in itself invalidate the theories that Hirsch promulgates but it does reveal that one of the most important influences on the review of the English national curriculum that commenced in 2011 was but one approach to curriculum among many competing viewpoints.

One example of such an alternative vision is provided by the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR), which was launched in October 2006 as a fully independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England, and has continued to develop its work since publishing its report. The scope of the Review, which was led by Professor Robin Alexander and supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, made it the most comprehensive enquiry into

English primary education since the Plowden Report of 1967. The Review's final report was published in October 2009 (Alexander *et al.*, 2009) and came to a total of 608 pages of text, alongside which *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys* (Alexander, 2009) revealed the sheer range of evidence on which the report was based. The Review has subsequently broadened its remit and now operates as the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, working with networks of schools and higher education institutions across England.

A second approach to curriculum change that has much to commend it encompasses a broader view of curriculum development that envisions the curriculum in schools as only one element of a more ecological view of the ways in which the state can enhance social justice. This draws on the influential model developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which suggests that rather than focusing on single 'presenting problems' we should consider an 'ecological systems theory' that sees the child as interacting with a series of 'systems', which together form an 'ecology' that shapes outcomes. These systems include the family, the school, the neighbourhood, and the wider social and cultural context in which these are located. The links between these different systems may influence the child directly or have an indirect influence as one system interacts with another. In a report entitled *Developing Children's Zones for England* (Save the Children, 2013), produced at the time the curriculum review was being undertaken, the report's authors considered the evidence base for special children's 'zones' in England and argued that for generations England has struggled with how to help the most disadvantaged children in the system. For this reason the report argued that there were good reasons to believe that English children's zones could have a significant impact on outcomes that were likely to be greater than those that could be achieved through uncoordinated single-issue interventions. This is a radically different conception to the knowledge-rich approach that emerged from the review (Brundrett, 2014a).

The Cambridge Primary Review model and the ecological view of the curriculum are but two in a very wide range of alternative visions of the curriculum that stand in contrast to the knowledge-based approach on which the Coalition Government focuses, and we should note that many nations, including those with very high-performing schools, operate curricula that are very different to the one that has emerged for English schools. Indeed, as noted earlier, it is an irony that as England has focused ever more strongly on a knowledge-centred curriculum, other jurisdictions have during the same period moved away from such approaches. Here we may cite the experience of New Zealand, a number of Asian nations, and more locally, the development in Scotland of the 'Curriculum for Excellence', which, in contrast to the English experience, emerged out of a wide-ranging consultation exercise in 2002 known as the 'National Debate on Education'.

Conclusion

The review of the national curriculum, which commenced in 2011, having been prefigured in the 2010 White Paper, may be seen as part of a broader experiment in English education that seeks to address a perceived crisis in standards in schools that has been part of the *Weltanschauung* of governments of all hues since the 1970s. This view posits certain key propositions, including notions such as the need to focus on knowledge rather than skills in the curriculum. Many of the key policy ideas are translated from similar perspectives in the United States where they have been tested but by no means proved efficacious, even in terms of the limited aspirations that they promote, such as increasing achievement in national tests. Nonetheless, the revised curriculum has been implemented by teachers in schools with surprisingly little protest, an ataraxy quite possibly born out of exhaustion from multiple and overlapping processes of innovation and

change. Only time will tell whether this experiment will enhance or impair the life chances of young pupils and students.

Whatever the merits or demerits of the changes to the national curriculum, if we ask ‘what has the Conservative–Liberal Democrat administration since 2010 done for us?’, it is clear that it has further marginalized the role of universities and academic researchers in education in schools in a way that would be almost unthinkable in most other advanced nations. This is another example of a wider phenomenon that has been evident in British society since the Second World War, which has been the gradual waning of academic influence on society as a whole and on government policy in particular, famously characterized by Halsey as ‘the decline of donnish dominion’ (Halsey, 1992). However, the way in which the views of academics engaged in educational research was ultimately dismissed and derided went beyond the mere relegation of the role of academic expertise in national decision-making and has undermined the subject of education as a field of academic study in England. This, combined with other policies outlined in the 2010 White Paper, such as the extension of school-based approaches to teacher education, has threatened to destabilize education departments in higher education institutions to a point where their existence is threatened.

The combative style of Michael Gove, including his relationship with academics in the field of education, may well have been one factor in his final demise as Secretary of State for Education but the proximate causation came when he was required to attend a debate in the House of Commons related to the allegation that he had reallocated £400 million from the targeted basic needs programme to fill what the opposition spokesman, Tristram Hunt, termed a ‘black hole in the free school programme’ (Hansard, 2014). Hunt also alleged that National Audit Office data showed that more than two thirds of the places created by the free school programme had been created outside areas of high and severe primary need (Hansard 2014; Brundrett, 2014b). Although Gove gave a typically robust response to these allegations, on 15 July 2014 he was replaced by Nicky Morgan, whose style was perceived to be more emollient. However, there has been little, if any, indication that policy on the curriculum or the wider management of the English education system will change.

Notes on the contributor

Mark Brundrett taught in secondary, middle, and primary schools and was a headteacher before entering higher education. He has subsequently held posts including Director of the International MBA at the University of Leicester, Professor of Education at the University of Hull, and Senior Research Consultant at the University of Manchester. He is currently Professor of Education at Liverpool John Moores University. He is also editor of *Education 3–13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*.

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