

Curriculum choice, flexibility and differentiation 14–19: the way forward or flawed prospectus?

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This article explores the policy and practice of choice, flexibility and differentiation within the 14–19 curriculum in England. After first locating these issues within contemporary curriculum policy it adopts a historical analysis tracing perspectives and practice since 1945. This narrative exposes complex oscillation in policy and practice in relation to curricular choice and differentiation, especially for 14–16 year olds. The paper ends by raising parallels between current and past policy and practice and suggests the need to engage in a more fundamental and informed curriculum dialogue in relation to choice, flexibility and differentiation.

Introduction

In this article we draw upon several recent research and evaluation studies to examine a key element of the current 14–19 reform process—the promotion of increased choice, flexibility and differentiation within the curriculum. 14–19 education policy in England is largely driven by the twin imperatives of promoting international economic competitiveness and achieving increased social inclusion. While there have been numerous policies and initiatives designed to drive forward this agenda, curriculum and qualifications change is at the heart of the policy reform and is seen as key to raising achievement and participation, increasing retention and progression, and promoting both economic competitiveness and social inclusion. The Government’s analysis is that a curriculum which offers greater choice, flexibility and diversity will motivate and engage a far higher proportion of 14–19 year olds to stay in the system, achieve within the system and progress to higher education, training or work at age 19.

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What is novel about our analysis is that these contemporary developments are placed firmly within a historical analysis which selectively surveys curriculum policy since 1945 and traces policy oscillation in relation to the 14–19 curriculum, with particular emphasis upon the degrees of choice and differentiation available to students. We focus strongly upon the 14–16 age range since it is during the last two years of compulsory education that choice and differentiation become particularly salient, with, as we shall show, intermittent but persistent fluctuations in policy and practice. In contrast, differentiation in curriculum and institutional provision combined with voluntary participation have been dominant and largely unquestioned features of 16–19 education and training. Thus the purposive, policy-led construction of a 14–19 phase from about the year 2000 has raised questions as to which of the different historical and contemporary approaches and perspectives available within the 14–16 and 16–19 sub-phases might be drawn upon in the making of this new phase (although this begs the question as to whether a phase can be ‘made’ in this way). Thus while our emphasis is necessarily upon 14–16, this has relevance for the ways in which 14–19 as a whole is conceived and implemented. This analysis raises important questions about the substance of curriculum reform, the policy process itself and the capacity for policy learning.

Recent curriculum policy proposals and initiatives

In its first term of office (1997–2001) New Labour’s education policy focused strongly on pre-school, primary and lower secondary education. Key initiatives here were the Sure Start programme for pre-school children and their families, the literacy and numeracy strategies in primary schools and the key stage three strategy for 11 to 14 year olds. The three strategies embodied the early New Labour focus on ‘standards not structures’. They also showed governmental determination to get the ‘basics’ of education right. We argue that there has been continuity in this respect between these earlier policies and some elements of the later focus on 14–19 education.

In its second term and into its third the Labour Government has focused with a vengeance on 14–19 education (and indeed has sought to substantially strengthen the concept of 14–19 as a distinct phase). This focus has been expressed through a stream of Green and White Papers, policy initiatives and programmes backed up with substantial funding. This period of policy-making has been well documented elsewhere (Hodgson & Spours, 2003; Lumby & Foskett, 2005) and will be only briefly sketched in relation to the theme of this article.

Towards the end of its first term the Labour Government had introduced its Curriculum 2000 reform. This attempt to change the advanced-level post-16 curriculum made chequered progress and the various crises which it engendered helped to shape the reform process which followed (Hodgson & Spours, 2003). In two consultation papers (Department for Education and Skills, DfES, 2002, 2003) the Government opened up exploration of the whole of the 14–19 phase. These papers promoted the idea of a curriculum which provided for breadth and balance while also enabling flexibility and choice which would better meet the needs of the economy and individuals. The curriculum debate was opened up even further with the appointment of the Working Group on 14–19 Reform (the

Tomlinson Group), which was charged with undertaking a fundamental review of curriculum and qualifications. The group was specifically asked to ‘examine and, where appropriate, make recommendations for a unified framework of qualifications for the 14–19 phase of education’ (DfES, 2004b, p. 91). This part of the brief, and the membership of the group, made it highly likely that Tomlinson would bring forward proposals for radical change. The final report laid out what it claimed was a clear vision for a unified framework of 14–19 curriculum and qualifications (DfES, 2004a). In this the report gave further voice to a view of what was needed, which had been strong in English education since the publication of an Institute for Public Policy Research paper (Finegold *et al.*, 1990) a decade and a half earlier, which had argued for what was termed a ‘British Baccalaureate’.

Despite disingenuous claims by some in government to have accepted 90% of Tomlinson, the 14–19 White Paper (DfES, 2005a) which followed rejected the proposal for a unified curriculum and qualifications framework which lay at the heart of the Working Group proposals. The centrepiece of the White Paper was the development of 14, essentially vocational, lines of learning leading to specialised diplomas, which would run alongside existing academic qualifications. The White Paper promised a ‘more flexible and varied’ 14–19 phase (p. 92). The 14–19 Implementation Plan (DfES, 2005b) which followed the White Paper was intended to signal that the period of debate over the 14–19 curriculum was over and it was time for all participants in the policy process to shift to implementation mode. Subsequently, the overwhelming focus of policy-makers and practitioners has been on the process of developing the specialised diplomas.

The contemporary 14–19 curriculum policy context then is marked by continued government commitment to three relatively distinct ‘tracks’—the academic, the vocational and the occupational—although with some links and possibilities for learners to shift between them. There is sustained emphasis on the need for curricular diversity and choice for learners, with institutional collaboration seen as an essential means through which this can be brought about. Although there is some emphasis on ‘toughening up’ the academic track, overwhelming prominence is given to reinvigorating the general vocational track through the 14 specialist diplomas.

We return to this contemporary context later in the paper, but at this point we turn the clock back to examine earlier practices in upper secondary education which emphasised curricular diversity, flexibility and choice for learners. We will rehearse some of the criticisms of these practices and illustrate the ways in which the weaknesses came to be seen as greater than the strengths.

Curriculum choice, flexibility and differentiation: a historical narrative

In the period following the 1944 Education Act social and curricular differentiation in secondary education was reflected in the institutional separation of the tripartite (in reality almost always bipartite) system. The theory of tripartism rested upon the identification of ‘three types of mind’ by the 1943 Norwood Report, which explicitly linked this analysis to labour market destinations for the different ‘types of mind’ (McCulloch, 1998). This was reflected in the curricula provided in the three types of school. The academic curriculum remained entrenched in the grammar schools with their almost exclusive focus on

subjects. Those few technical schools which were brought into being failed to establish a coherent and distinctive curriculum (McCulloch, 1989). The secondary modern curriculum was highly contested and varied considerably between schools and over time, but one view of what it should be was captured in a speech by senior Conservative Quintin Hogg defending the schools against the proponents of comprehensive schools. For a visitor to a 'good' secondary modern school, Hogg asserted:

The pleasant noise of banging metal and sawing wood would greet their ears and a smell of cooking with rather expensive cooking equipment would come out of the front door to greet them. They would find that these boys and girls were getting an education tailor-made to their desires, their bents and their requirements. (quoted in McCulloch, 1998, p. 137)

However, during the 1950s and 1960s there was some degree of convergence in curriculum between the different types of school as secondary moderns (and technical schools where they existed) began to seek greater external accreditation for at least some of their courses and opposition grew to the rigid categorisation of minds asserted by Norwood.

It was, however, the development and growth of comprehensive schools which appeared to offer a real challenge to both the social and curricular differentiation of tripartism (though it should be noted that the selective bipartite system continued in several parts of England). In putting the case for comprehensive schools Labour Party leaders Gaitskell and Wilson both argued that the reform would provide 'grammar schools for all' (Chitty, 2002) and, by implication, a grammar school curriculum for all. As Chitty notes this was a useful slogan during the political battles for comprehensive education, but in the event bore little relationship to the reality of comprehensive schools. Indeed a competing curricular vision also animated the shift to comprehensivisation. This was of a highly diverse curriculum offering greater choice to students. Robin Pedley, a strong early advocate of comprehensive schools, cited approvingly an 18-form entry comprehensive school which exceeded in curricular diversity 'anything a normal grammar or modern school can offer' (Pedley, 1963, p. 90). A survey of London comprehensive schools by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) claimed that the diversity of courses in many schools was such that 'no two pupils need necessarily be following the same timetable' (quoted in Chitty, 2004, p. 137). Perhaps implicit in such a curricular vision was the valorisation of forms of knowledge and skill over and above those included in the grammar school curriculum, although usually this was not made explicit nor was it explained how such valorisation could be brought about.

In the event, as a substantial body of research made clear, the comprehensive school curriculum was strongly internally differentiated and valorised (e.g. Ball, 1981; Burgess, 1983; Benn & Chitty, 1996). Conceptions of 'alternative curricula' for the 'less able' were already current. Goodson (1988) argued that the 'triple alliance' of academic subjects, academic examinations and able pupils led to similar patterns of success and failure as in the tripartite system. McCulloch (1998, p. 146) concluded that:

The grammar school and the SMS [Secondary Modern School] were yoked together under a single label, but the resilient traditions of differentiation remained as active as ever, with the potential of renewing themselves in fresh and virulent forms.

1	2	3	4	5
French	History	Geography	Chemistry	Physics
Spanish	Typing	Chemistry	Physics	Biology
History	Technical Drawing	Biology	General Science	General Science
Geography	Metalwork	Typing	Economics	Art
	Engineering	Scripture	Social Studies	Typing
	Domestic Science	Art	Music	Accounts
	Needlework	Technical Drawing	Typing	
	Catering	Domestic Science	Accounts	
	Woodwork	Engineering		

The columns do not include the subjects which all pupils must study: English, Mathematics, Religious Education, Careers Education and Physical Education.

Figure 1. Subject pools for options in the fifth year in a large 11–18 comprehensive school (modified from Benn & Simon, 1970)

At a concrete level, Benn and Simon (1970) in their study of comprehensive schools showed how the ‘resilient traditions of differentiation’ were manifest in the fifth year (now year 11) options at one school (Figure 1):

The potential for differentiation by gender, ability and, indirectly but concretely, social class is obvious. Ethnographic studies of comprehensive schools showed how pupils were channelled into ‘appropriate courses’ in the last two years of compulsory education. In his study of Beachside Comprehensive, Ball showed how teachers held notions of what was ‘appropriate’ for individual pupils. He described the various formal and informal, subtle and not-so-subtle mechanisms which operated in the school to make sure the ‘right’ pupils ended up on the ‘right’ courses (Ball, 1981).

This brief account of some of the early practices of comprehensive schools will already have alerted readers to parallels with contemporary discourse. For Pedley’s ‘diversity’ substitute current emphasis on ‘choice and flexibility’; for ILEA’s ‘no two pupils need necessarily be following the same timetable’ substitute ‘personalised learning’; for Beachside teachers’ ‘appropriateness’ substitute ‘effective information, advice and guidance’. We will return to similarities and differences between historical and contemporary practices later in the paper but at this point we turn to some of the criticisms which were mounted against the internal curricular differentiation of the comprehensive schools since these critiques may also have relevance for contemporary practice.

There were three inter-related sources of criticism and alternative practice. One source was from within the Department of Education and Science (DES) and Her

Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). Official concern sprang from the period of the 'Great Debate' in 1976–79 when it became clear that local authorities, despite their legal responsibilities for the curriculum, had in many cases delegated this to the schools and had very little idea how the schools were discharging this responsibility. At a time when the British economy was struggling in the wake of the oil price hike of the 1970s and education generally was coming under the political spotlight, the lack of central regulation, or even influence, over the curriculum was always likely to come under pressure. Within official circles concern was also generated through HMI surveys of secondary schools which revealed what was considered to be poor practice in a substantial number of schools. In their 1979 survey HMI stated that the system for options and courses at 14–16 was:

almost always complex and frequently necessitates compromise on the part of both pupils and schools [...] it seems clear that the introduction of options in the fourth and fifth years leads to the abandonment of some important subjects for some pupils and to insufficient breadth in some individual pupils' programmes. (DES, 1979, p. 37)

At this time the concepts of 'breadth and balance' in curriculum began to gain currency as important criteria when judging curricula. The DES joined the Inspectorate in the criticism of internal differentiation where this led to loss of breadth and balance. In its 1983 statement on the 11–16 curriculum the Department stressed the crucial importance of guaranteeing all pupils a broad curriculum, which should not be 'overweighted' in any particular direction. DES stated that any curriculum which was overweighted was to be 'seriously questioned' and 'was in direct conflict with the entitlement curriculum envisaged here' (DES, 1983, p. 26). This statement was also significant for the prominence afforded to the concept of an 'entitlement curriculum'.

Criticism of existing practices and ideas for alternative approaches also came from academic curriculum theorists where ideas of a common-culture curriculum began to be given greater emphasis (Lawton, 1975). These sprang both from epistemological and sociological analyses. Epistemologically there was emphasis on identifiable forms and fields of knowledge, initiation into which was held to be essential for the development of an educated person (Hirst, 1965). Sociologically there was continued emphasis upon the selecting and differentiating role of formal education and an increased understanding of the role of curriculum in this process through the limiting of access to certain forms of privileged knowledge (Young, 1971).

The third strand contributing to change came from within comprehensive schools themselves. A minority of schools began to reduce the degree of internal differentiation by expanding the core curriculum. This was sometimes accompanied by a shift to more mixed-ability teaching and seems to have been partly prompted by negative behavioural consequences of high levels of differentiation. What was perhaps common, although often implicit, within all three strands was an acknowledgement of the need to reappraise the curriculum with the growth of comprehensive schools and to move beyond the simple yoking together of the grammar and secondary modern curricula. In its strongest form this reappraisal amounted to a call for a comprehensive (common or core) curriculum for comprehensive schools.

A roughly contemporaneous, countervailing trend in curriculum to those described above concerned the development of a broader-based vocationalism. This had its origins

in the 16–19 phase but subsequently also influenced 14–16. The publication of *A Basis for Choice* (Further Education Unit, 1979) and subsequent work by the Further Education Unit (FEU) laid the basis for these developments which found expression in a range of broad vocational courses including the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education, the Diploma of Vocational Education and a range of Business & Technology Education Council courses. The focus on broad vocationalism, a range of associated employability and life skills and work-related learning was also promoted by the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI). TVEI had significant influence in the period 1983–87, provided an alternative to the academic curriculum and opportunities for locally based curriculum development. These developments at 14–16 were marginalised by the national curriculum after 1988, but many of the initiatives stimulated by the work of the FEU and subsequently taken on by TVEI and the vocational awarding bodies provided a basis for developments in the 1990s when choice and differentiation again became central to the 14–16 curriculum.

This, however, is to run ahead of our narrative and we need to return first to the critique of the high levels of optionality and differentiation described earlier in this section and the policies which flowed from this. Over the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s this culminated in the 1988 national curriculum. A highly significant staging point in this process was the introduction of the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) in 1986. This saw the abolition of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) and the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) school-leaving examinations and therefore an end to institutionalised differentiation in assessment regimes and approaches at age 16. Some examination boards had anticipated this by developing so-called 16+ exams designed to cater for the whole GCE/CSE ability range. Equally significant was the publication of GCSE National Criteria to which the new examinations had to conform. This marked a clear shift towards more centralised control over curricula and closer regulation of examination boards. Although teacher designed and assessed courses continued for a little while under GCSE, their days were numbered.

A detailed account of the political and educational processes which led to the national curriculum are beyond the scope of this article but two brief points of particular relevance to the contemporary curriculum can be made. First, in discussing the period leading up to the national curriculum several commentators (e.g. Chitty, 1989) make a distinction between the ‘professional’ curriculum organised around areas of experience advocated by HMI (DES, 1977) and the ‘bureaucratic’ curriculum based on traditional subjects favoured by the DES (DES/Welsh Office, 1980). It was the latter which won out and thus sustained the continued dominance of the subject-based curriculum which persists in contemporary practice (although see below for some extension of concern for skills, dispositions and cross-curricular elements).

Second, there was dispute between the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and her Secretary of State, Kenneth Baker, about the content and structure of the national curriculum. Thatcher wanted a curriculum which focused on the basics of English, mathematics and science reinforced through simple paper and pencil assessment techniques (*Times Educational Supplement*, 1990). Baker was adamantly opposed to this approach, arguing that it would devalue other subjects which he saw as essential components of the curriculum (Baker, 1993). Baker got his way on this. A distinction was made in the legislation between

'core' and 'foundation' subjects but Callaghan (2006) argues that this was offered as a sop to Thatcher and Baker never intended it to have substance. In 14–19 education this debate about the relative value of the basic, as compared to a more extensive, curriculum, has reverberated through the succeeding years with constant, although shifting, emphasis on the make-up, role and importance of what have been variously labelled basic skills, core skills, key skills and functional skills.

There is abundant academic description and analysis of the national curriculum and it is not necessary to reiterate this here. In the context of this article, however, it is worth registering the extraordinary shift which occurred from a virtually unregulated curriculum with, at 14–16, high levels of optionality and differentiation, to a comprehensive 10-subject, 10-level compulsory curriculum in which content and assessment criteria were specified in exhaustive detail and reinforced by an extensive assessment regime. This was from the sublime to the ridiculous, or vice versa.

It is noteworthy just how short a time the 'Baker model' of the 10-subject common curriculum was in the ascendancy with respect to 14–16 year olds. In its original formulation, the key stage four national curriculum barely survived until Baker's departure from the DES in July 1989 before it began to be dismantled. It is this dismantling and reconstruction and its implications for choice, flexibility and differentiation which are the subjects of the next part of our narrative.

At one level this was provoked by what Duncan Graham, chairman and chief executive of the National Curriculum Council, dubbed 'the nightmare of key stage 4' (the curriculum for 14–16 year olds) (Graham & Tytler, 1992). In essence this was the problem of fitting a quart, that is, the 10 subjects, into a pint pot (the available time) while leaving time for other activities, for example, a second modern foreign language, business studies, classics, work experience, personal development activities. All sorts of novel solutions were suggested—modular courses, half GCSE courses, combined courses, courses which fulfilled national curriculum requirements but not those of GCSE, opportunities for pupils to drop subjects once they reached national curriculum level eight.

Beneath these technical difficulties, however, there were also principled arguments against a national curriculum of 10 subjects and that greater choice and flexibility was needed for 14–16 year olds. Graham and Tytler (1992, p. 88) summarised the argument:

The other solution [to the nightmare of key stage 4] was simply to say that at 14 children could, with certain exceptions, choose what they wanted to study. I believed then and believe now that this would be turning our backs on the benefits of the national curriculum. A country whose state education service had been bedevilled by patchiness and a lack of entitlement had at last got itself a national curriculum which it should hang on to at all costs while finding compromises within it. The national curriculum would ensure that all children would have a core of subjects up to 16 to which they could later add.

While the policy debate ebbed back and forth in 1989 and 1990 and Secretary of State McGregor prevaricated, the Graham and Tytler view ultimately lost out (Callaghan, 2006). The die was finally cast in January 1991 when McGregor's successor Kenneth Clarke announced at the North of England Education Conference that only English, Mathematics and Science would have to be taken to full GCSE level, Modern Foreign Languages and Design & Technology could be taken as short courses, pupils could choose either History

or Geography or some combination of the two, and Music and Art would become optional. Thus after less than three years and without ever working fully through for 14 to 16 year olds, the national curriculum version of a broad, common curriculum was effectively dead. Choice, flexibility and differentiation were back on the agenda.

In the next part of our narrative we highlight three themes running through the reconstruction of the 14–16 curriculum which has taken place since the first half of the 1990s and which has given rise to the contemporary practices described in the following section.

The first of these themes concerns the retreat from national curriculum subjects. This is summarised below:

- Introduction of short courses in Design & Technology, Geography, History, Information Technology, Modern Foreign Languages and Physical Education, 1996.
- Opportunities to disapply Science, Modern Foreign Languages and Design & Technology for some students, 1998.
- Arts, Design & Technology, the Humanities and Modern Foreign Languages become entitlement subjects and areas, 2004.
- Ending of disapplication for Science, 2006.

In essence, these changes mean that Baker's vision of a 10-subject national curriculum for all students to age 16 has disappeared. Students can cease the study of Art, Music, Design & Technology, History, Geography and Modern Foreign Languages at age 14. Currently the only mandatory 'traditional' subjects are English, Mathematics and Science.

In considering what has happened to the subjects of the national curriculum over the period since the early 1990s it is instructive to briefly examine some examples:

Technology was the one new subject to appear in the 1988 national curriculum, having been strongly developed through TVEI. It was then split into Design & Technology and ICT (Information and Communications Technology). These two components have subsequently fared somewhat differently, with ICT establishing itself as a mandatory core skill. Design & Technology, in contrast, has gradually lost status as a foundation subject. Dispensations were given so that its requirements could be fulfilled through a short course, then increasing numbers of students were allowed to disapply (i.e. not take the subject) and finally it became an 'entitlement' subject, meaning it has to be offered in some form to all students but they do not have to take it. The position of Design & Technology therefore within the 14–16 curriculum is not substantially different to that of the Craft, Design & Technology courses offered in many schools prior to 1988, except possibly in specialist technology schools (see below). Around 55% of 16 year olds took a GCSE in a Design & Technology subject in 2006.

Modern Foreign Languages which, primarily through French and its Latin roots, had traditionally been associated with grammar schools and then more able pupils in comprehensive schools, had modernised its curriculum with the advent of GCSE's communicative language teaching approach. Following concerted lobbying for 'languages for all', it then found itself amongst the foundation subjects of the national curriculum. The challenge of teaching a modern or community language to all pupils aged 14–16, for the first time in many schools, was however relatively short lived as Modern Foreign Languages became one of the first subjects, along with Design & Technology, to be targeted for short course

provision. Like Design & Technology it followed a trajectory from the short course through disapplication to entitlement status. By 2006 only around 55% of 16 year olds took a GCSE in a Modern Foreign Language and 'languages for all' had been relegated to an aspiration rather than a reality.

As a surviving core subject *Science* has followed a different path. It was not compulsory from age 14 in many comprehensive schools (see Figure 1 which also illustrates the differentiated forms of *Science* which were offered—the three separate sciences, general science and domestic science). Indeed it could be argued that while 'General Science' courses existed (mainly for the 'less able') prior to 1988 it was largely the national curriculum which prompted the invention of 'Science' as a leading school subject. Following 1988, although the separate sciences survived as minority pursuits and some students took single science courses, dominant provision took the form of a double award 'balanced' science course. These changes, however, failed to make an impact on what is seen as a long-standing crisis for science education and society more generally—the inadequate numbers going on to study *Science* post-16 and in higher education. Consequently there has been continuing change in science curriculum provision with a shift back to greater differentiation. From September 2006 provision comprises a wide variety of courses including general, applied and twenty-first century science and separate study of biology, chemistry and physics. There is a statutory entitlement to science study leading to two GCSEs and the Government is anxious that at least 80% of students will continue to do this amount of science. Thus notions of choice, flexibility and differentiation which have come to animate the 14–16 curriculum are closely mirrored within a science curriculum which aims to cater for: (a) those who are likely to complete their science education at age 16 and for whom scientific literacy is the main aim and (b) those who may wish to continue to study some form of science post-16 and possibly into higher education who need additional more specialised knowledge.

The second theme of the changes in the 14–16 curriculum is the focus on basic (or core or key or functional) skills. There has been policy oscillation in relation to these. Three skills have been emphasised throughout—communication, numeracy and ICT, although different approaches have been advocated for their teaching, at some times favouring integration with other subjects, while at others stand-alone or bolt-on approaches have been preferred. The focus on these skills largely springs from the same remedial concerns with poor reading, writing and number skills as those which prompted the literacy, numeracy and key stage 3 strategies. This emphasis recalls Thatcher's position during her disagreement with Baker in 1987–88. The recent decision to include the percentages of students achieving five A*–C GCSE grades, including English and Mathematics, in the school performance tables further reinforces the importance attached to basic skills within the 14–16 curriculum. Students will also need to achieve at least grade Cs in English and Mathematics, together with at least three other grade Cs, to be awarded the 'General Diploma' proposed in the 14–19 Education and Skills White Paper (DfES, 2005a). Alongside the three basic skills there has also been a rhetorical commitment to develop the so-called wider key skills. These are currently entitled: Working with Others; Improving own Learning and Performance; Problem Solving. However, despite the alleged importance of these wider skills, especially to employers, they lack status and visibility within the curriculum.

There is no evidence that the certified possession of these wider skills has currency with employers or higher education institutions and many schools ignore them.

The third theme focuses upon the elements which have been added to the 14–16 curriculum over the last decade. These are:

- Statutory sex education, 1994.
- Statutory citizenship education, 2002.
- Statutory work-related learning, 2004.

In addition, there has been increased emphasis upon information, advice and guidance; individual action planning; enterprise; healthy eating and the three wider key skills referred to above. In some ways applying a thematic analysis to these developments invests their introduction with unjustified tidiness and coherence, whereas they have actually developed through a process of accretion as policy-makers responded to particular problems and 'moral panics'. However, underlying these changes it is possible to identify a moralisation of the curriculum and an implicit vision of the successful, individualised learner as a healthy-eating, sexually responsible, active and yet moderate citizen with positive attitudes towards work and enterprise and who is an informed, reflective and wise choice-maker.

This third set of changes are of less significance at school level than might at first appear. Several elements are frequently bundled together as part of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) programmes, while others are notionally cross-curricular. Inspection reports show that provision and practice are patchy in many schools (Office for Standards in Education, 2006), while a long history of research has shown the difficulty of establishing cross-curricular elements in the subject-dominated secondary school curriculum (Whitty *et al.*, 1994). Thus, despite policy emphasis on the development of desirable personal skills and dispositions, in practice subjects as distinct entities, largely driven by internal disciplinary, cognitive imperatives, remain dominant.

Curriculum choice, flexibility and differentiation: contemporary provision and practice

Having traced the complex, tortured history of curriculum choice, flexibility and differentiation over the period since 1944 we now turn to examine contemporary provision and practice. We draw here upon some of our recent research on schools participating in 14–19 Pathfinders (Higham *et al.*, 2004; Higham & Yeomans, 2005, 2006) and in the Vocational Specialist Schools programme. Before referring to practice in individual schools it is worth summarising the current 14–16 curriculum requirements in England.

The following are compulsory: English; Mathematics; Science; ICT; physical education; citizenship; religious education; sex education; careers education and work-related learning. In addition the arts, Design & Technology, the humanities and Modern Foreign Languages are entitlement areas.

In practice, schools provide compulsory GCSE courses in English, Mathematics and Science for almost all students, although with optional arrangements within Science. Most of the other compulsory elements are rolled up into PSHE programmes and/or taught across the curriculum. This organisation of the curriculum typically provides for students to choose

between four and six subjects from a range of options which must include the entitlement areas. It is the operation of these options systems which is the focus of this section.

In order to illustrate this we focus mainly upon an example from one school which in many ways exemplifies current official thinking around the 14–16 curriculum. The school was part of a strong partnership through which it was able to offer students choice from 40 optional subjects. These included the traditionally academic (e.g. History, French, Music), the broadly vocational (e.g. Applied Science, Health and Social Care, Leisure and Tourism) and the occupational (e.g. Beauty Therapy, Painting and Decorating, Motor Vehicle Engineering). These options were available at the host school, at neighbouring schools, at the local college and local training providers. These collaborative arrangements were well organised with substantial timetable coordination between partners, established partnership-wide liaison and communication mechanisms, and effective transport arrangements. A range of qualifications was available including GCSEs, Applied GCSEs and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Thus the school was able to offer its students wide choice of what they learned, how they learned, where they learned and how they were assessed. Clearly, this could be seen as an operationalisation of Pedley's support for a diverse curriculum, greatly strengthened through collaborative arrangements which extended choice beyond what could be exercised within a single institution.

However, in the way in which the school operated its options process choice receded and a purposeful differentiating process came to the fore. The school options booklet stated:

During the next few weeks you and your family will be asked to come into school to discuss your academic choices for next year. We currently offer three 'routes' in school which all offer the opportunity to follow college courses. The route that you will follow will be decided after your interview in school and will be based upon prior attainment and assessment criteria.

Three routes were identified:

Option Route A: NVQ + 2 GCSE options;

Option Route B: Applied GCSE + 3 GCSE options;

Option Route C: Double Science GCSE and French GCSE + 3 GCSE options.

It was made clear that certain options (colour coded as such) were only expected to be chosen within certain routes. Thus the three routes could legitimately be labelled occupational, vocational and academic and although this school had not done so, others have used these or similar labels. The school also offered a fourth route, although this was not advertised and was by 'invitation only', which provided an entirely out-of-school curriculum involving employer and training provider placements and some basic skills learning. 'Invitations' to participate in this route were issued to frequent truants, those on the brink of permanent exclusion and so on.

In our recent research we have found many schools developing these route-based or pathway-based approaches to curriculum provision and, although the numbers of pathways and their titles vary, the fundamental differentiating functions are similar. In several schools students were allocated to pathways prior to the options process and then issued with options forms which contained choices only operative within their allocated pathway.

They could request choices available within other pathways—although they obviously needed to know that such choices were available. Other schools, while not formally allocating students to distinct pathways, had increased the range of options on offer and there was evidence of informal channelling of different groups of students towards different courses. A shift to greater choice and differentiation is clearly evident and is predictable given the policy trajectory described above and the generally positive response this has elicited in schools (see below).

One interesting, partly countervailing trend to the reduction of compulsory subjects and the increase in optional subjects is provided by the growth of specialist schools (West *et al.*, 2000; Yeomans *et al.*, 2000; Office for Standards in Education, 2001). Common practice in such schools has been to make their specialism compulsory for all 14 to 16 year olds. Since over 80% of schools are now specialist this marks a potentially significant increase in compulsion. Some schools are now gaining second and even third specialisms. One school we visited had recently become a specialist vocational school and already had a language specialism. Here, all students were required to take both a modern foreign language and a vocational course. Three points can be made about this countervailing tendency. First, not all schools with two or three specialisms require all students to take all of them. For example, in most of the specialist vocational schools we visited not all students have been required to take a vocational course. Second, specialisms themselves are open to interpretation, thus what counts as ‘technology’, ‘business and enterprise’ or ‘vocational’ or other specialisms is by no means clear. Third, differentiation may operate within the specialisms themselves, for example between broadly vocational and occupational courses within the vocational specialist schools.

Whither curriculum choice, flexibility and differentiation?

In some ways the preceding narrative can be read as a sort of Tory version of history—‘there is nothing new under the sun’, as compared to a Whiggish version—‘things can only get better’. Of course, there *are* new things under the sun, things *can* get better and historical parallels are never exact. Nor should the revisiting and readdressing of issues attended to years or decades before be seen as a weakness in the policy process. Many such issues are enduring and value laden and therefore have no right or wrong answers waiting to be revealed if only the correct policy processes are enacted.

Specifically, choice and compulsion, balance and breadth, commonality and differentiation in relation to the 14–19 curriculum are matters around which there can be legitimate debate and disagreement and about which, it seems to us, there neither will be nor should be a permanent settlement. Looking at the sweep of the narrative however, there does seem much support for McCulloch’s identification of the ‘resilient traditions of differentiation’, certainly in upper secondary education and training. It is worth noting that this tradition has long been dominant in post-compulsory education where even the most restrained attempts to introduce some elements of commonality have tended to give rise to the paradox of the marginal core (Barnes *et al.*, 1989). One consequence of the deliberate construction of a 14–19 phase may be a leaching of the dominant features of the post-16 system—its voluntarism and institutional and curricular diversity and differentiation—into

the 14–16 sub-phase. In retrospect, the brief period in which a comprehensive, common 14–16 curriculum held sway (and this was largely in policy rather than practice) may well be seen as a historical aberration.

In considering the past, present and future of curriculum choice, flexibility and differentiation it is also crucial to recognise that while our account has emphasised central policy-making, local policy-makers and practitioners have at various points intervened powerfully into the policy process. Three examples can be drawn from the preceding narrative. First, as attested to by much research, the growth of the comprehensive school movement was as much a product of local developments with strong participation from councillors, officials, teachers and parents as it was of national Labour Party policy. Second, the shift to greater curriculum commonality in the 1970s and 1980s, which eventually gave rise to the national curriculum, was at least partly a reflection of policy and practice in some local authorities and comprehensive schools. Third, and most significant for our argument in this paper, the reconstruction of the curriculum over the last 15 years described above has been vigorously pursued within schools. In 2001–02 we conducted research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in which we asked a range of policy-makers and participants to reflect on two decades of curriculum change (Higham *et al.*, 2002). The overwhelming view of practitioners (mainly head teachers and other senior staff) was that the 10-subject national curriculum had been a mistake, not only in its detail but in compelling a substantial number of students to take subjects which did not motivate or interest them. There was widespread welcome for the relaxation of the curriculum and many calls for this to go further. Other examples of this support for greater choice and differentiation included: schools exploiting the disapplication regulations for Modern Foreign Languages, Design & Technology and Science, originally intended to apply to very few students, to disapply more and more students; schools ‘anticipating’ the entitlement status of subjects, especially Modern Foreign Languages, so that the 2004 change in official regulations to a large extent only regularised what had already happened in many schools; the alacrity with which many schools have participated in the Increased Flexibility and 14–19 Pathfinders programmes, which opened up access to a much wider range of off-site courses for students. In short, any claim that increased choice and differentiation has been imposed from the centre on reluctant schools is not sustainable. There has been broad convergence in policy analysis and solutions between policy-makers and practitioners and in promoting choice, flexibility and differentiation the Government has been pushing at an open door as far as most schools are concerned.

However, while most schools have welcomed the opportunities which the policy shifts have opened up, the ways in which they take up these opportunities will vary in form and extent. Thus, from a learner perspective, a distinction must be made between theoretical and actual choice. Actual choice will be restricted by: (a) the provision which is available within a school and locality (assuming that choices external to a school are made available); (b) the ways in which choices are construed by the learners in terms of their ‘horizons for action’ (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) and ‘imagined futures’ (Ball *et al.*, 1999); and (c) the responses, or perceived responses, of key stakeholders such as higher education institutions and employers to the available choices.

For the future it appears that choice and differentiation will continue to be central to the 14–19 phase, with the specialised diplomas intended to offer a reinvigorated vocational pathway, clearly distinct from the academic and occupational tracks. The implementation of the diplomas in a range of local circumstances will provide grist for future research into the ways in which choice and differentiation play out within 14–19 education and training.

While eschewing neat historical parallels, however, it does seem as if the central criticisms which were raised concerning the high levels of differentiation in the post-comprehensive 1970s and early 1980s still have relevance for contemporary practice. It is instructive, for example, to apply the HMI and DES critiques at that time to the ways in which differentiating practices are currently operating. Are the benefits of such differentiation seen to outweigh the costs? Have the issues which they identified been overcome? Or are they no longer relevant or important? A range of answers could be given to these questions and others but what is evident is that there is an attenuated and emaciated curriculum dialogue around such questions. This is reflected, for example, in the rather shallow insouciance with which some policy-makers and practitioners promote initiatives, such as the specialised diplomas and personalised learning, which bear directly upon some of the fundamental issues we have explored in this paper. More reflective policy and practice, imbued with a stronger sense of policy learning (Raffe & Spours, 2007), might mean that questions are better debated without in any way pre-empting the answers.

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