

Policy Paper

The politics of curriculum in schools

Dr Terry Wrigley

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Author



Dr Terry Wrigley

Terry Wrigley is Visiting Professor at Leeds Metropolitan University and editor of *Improving Schools* journal. His writings bring together knowledge of education policy, school improvement, social justice, curriculum, and teaching and learning.

Recent books include *Changing schools: Alternative ways to make a world of difference*, *Social justice re-examined: Dilemmas and solutions for the classroom teacher* and *Living on the edge: Rethinking poverty, class and schooling*. He is currently developing the website www.changingschools.org.uk as a resource to support campaigns for school change.

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Executive summary

This paper provides a review of curriculum change under successive governments, highlighting the damage caused by intensive ministerial control and the impact of political ideologies of neoliberal functionalism and neoconservative nostalgia. Under New Labour, the impact of neoliberalism involved restricting educational aims to economic competitiveness, to the neglect of other curricular purposes such as personal growth and democratic citizenship. Coalition policies have struggled to reconcile this drive with nostalgia for traditional versions of academic achievement.

The paper begins by considering how the conditions under which mass education was established in Britain in the late Victorian age continue to affect current practice, including the reflection of class division in the divide between public and private schools.

It draws on examples from the decades before Thatcherism to show how the emergence of a broader view of education occurred, though it was often obscured by politicians' and media caricatures of progressive education. This section includes a summary of the forms of support once provided by local education authorities and national agencies for curriculum and professional development.

International examples are provided to illustrate how English schools are being overtaken by systems which rely on improving teacher qualifications and professional collaboration, rather than surveillance and standardisation. This includes an outline of how Finland has reached excellent standards of education without cramming young children or demoralising teachers.

The drive to accelerate the formal learning of very young children, in nurseries and early primary, is seen as counterproductive since it overreaches child development, neglects learning through play, and replaces creative and engaged activity with rote learning and memorisation. The serious weaknesses of the new National Curriculum for primary schools are exposed.

Finally, the paper looks to the future by outlining some general principles for the renewal and enrichment of the English school curriculum. It argues that

policymakers should avoid shifting between a narrow functionalism and the restoration of mythical past glories in order to prepare young people for the scientific and ethical challenges of a complex and changing world. This will involve an emphasis on cognitive development and problem solving, critical literacy, creativity, and communication for a range of purposes and in different media. It will improve achievement for all by reducing teaching to the test and introducing more learning related to real situations and culminating in the satisfaction of a product, presentation or performance.

Introduction

A few years ago I heard a leading official from the Training and Development Agency¹ for Schools (TDA) refer in her lecture to the period '*before there were standards and before there was innovation*'. I asked her exactly when she thought that was. I had suspected it might be pre-1988 (the Education Reform Act which introduced the National Curriculum, SATs tests and Ofsted) but apparently standards and innovation began in 1997 (i.e. when New Labour extended state control from the curriculum itself to how it must be taught). Either of these responses would have been an extraordinary step in rewriting history. They are also somewhat ironic given repeated attempts by politicians and the media to present the 1960s-80s as a period of intensive but irresponsible experimentation, i.e. lots of innovation but no 'standards'.

Such political amnesia in high places underlines the importance of retracing the history of curriculum change since 1945, to map the road for future development. This account will also introduce some key concepts and models along the way, along with an explanation of the structures which supported thoughtful innovation. It focuses particularly on primary and secondary schools, but readers will quickly recognise parallels with other sectors, whether nursery, colleges, universities or lifelong learning. All of these have been subject in recent years to radical redefinition under the pressure of neoliberal economics and ideology. It is important to understand the politics behind curriculum change, including questioning the keywords in the dominant discourse. *Standards* and *innovation* are never neutral concepts.

Origins and legacy:

1870-1945²

The conditions under which mass education was established, under the 1870 Elementary Education Act, have an enduring effect which in part, distinguishes England from other European countries. Curriculum formation was built on class differences from the start, with a sharp divide between the basic literacy and numeracy skills taught in publicly funded elementary schools for the manual working class and a more extended mock-classical schooling in independent schools for those who could afford the fees. We also find a progressive alternative emerging in the form of European-style kindergartens. These origins continue to offer certain models and images which inform both policymakers and public opinion.

The state system was never intended to provide a broad or liberating curriculum. In the words of Robert Lowe, the politician largely responsible for compulsory schooling in Britain:

We do not profess to give these children an education that will raise them above their station and business in life... We are bound to make up our minds as to how much instruction that class requires, and is capable of receiving.³

Despite anxieties about economic competition from Germany, whose industrialisation was accelerated by its early introduction of universal schooling, the development of mass schooling across Britain was inhibited by a ruling class fear that it could increase the potential for social unrest. Schooling for the urban poor had to be economically functional whilst instilling a due sense of subordination. 'Capitalism needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what's really going on.'⁴

A curriculum of basic literacy and numeracy (the 3 Rs) was accompanied by socialisation as obedient and compliant workers and the inculcation of pride in the Empire. Schools were placed under strict control through the Payment By Results mechanism based on inspectors' visits to determine how many children were meeting required standards in tasks such as reading aloud, neat handwriting, correct spelling and mental arithmetic. There was no policy ambition beyond the efficient transmission of a limited skills set, and quality was seen in terms of accuracy in largely reproductive tasks rather than cognitive development or creativity.

From the start, however, many teachers resisted such narrowness and the way it was policed. This resistance was a core principle of the National Union of Elementary Teachers, founded in 1870 and which later became the NUT. Many teachers sought to exceed this narrow remit, including through 'object lessons' to introduce children to history, geography and science.

The only compulsory subjects in 1871 were reading, writing, arithmetic and (for girls) needlework and cutting out. After the demise of Payment By Results, additional minor subjects could include singing, recitation, drawing, geography, history, science and home economics. Geography and history provided a kind of political education: young people needed to see the British imperial possessions marked pink on the globe and gain a sense of national glory. In the early 20th Century, 'higher grade schools' provided vocational courses for some older pupils. Physical training, often as military-style drill, received a boost when Boer War recruitment revealed the poor physical state of the urban poor. Apart from raising the school leaving age to 14 after 1918, little changed in the elementary curriculum and the desperate underfunding and large classes continued to limit learning.

Though the number of grammar schools was increased in the early 20th Century⁵, largely to educate future elementary school teachers, the curriculum followed a traditional academic pattern, with little time left over after English, maths, science, French and Latin⁶. The School Certificate, introduced in 1917, required a pass in at least one subject from each of three groups: English / history / geography; languages; science and mathematics. Passing a subject from the fourth group of art, music, technical and commercial subjects was optional. This avoidance of aesthetic and practical subjects is easily recognisable in Michael Gove's invention of an 'English Baccalaureate'.

The most progressive development was for the youngest children. Continental philosophies and practices of kindergarten, based largely on Froebel, had considerable influence for many 4 to 7 year olds and was later to inspire a progressive curriculum for the whole primary age range.

1945 reforms

The historic parallel to Beveridge's health and welfare reforms was secondary education for all, including a change of school at age 11, but it was seriously undermined by segregating children into different schools, based on the myth that children were born with three kinds of brain. The Norwood Committee (1943) distinguished between:

the pupil who is interested in learning for its own sake... the pupil whose interests and abilities lie markedly in the field of applied science or applied art... [and finally the pupil who] deals more easily with concrete things than with ideas.⁷

On this basis, pupils were placed in grammar, technical and 'modern' schools according to their scores in the 11 Plus exam. (In many areas the division was binary, as not all local authorities established technical schools.) The hegemonic belief that intelligence was innate (i.e. genetically inherited), generic and essentially abstract was to control and limit the secondary education of most pupils for another 30 or so years, indeed to the present day in some parts of England. Unfortunately, the Labour Government of 1945 showed no sign of disagreement with this divisive ideology, and agreed civil servants' interpretation of the 1944 Act in such a way as to continue a divided system.⁸

Despite the rhetoric of 'separate but equal', the hierarchy of schools was never in doubt. Funding was seriously unequal, since the grammar schools benefited from extremely generous allocations attached to sixth formers. While the grammar school curriculum continued much as before, along the lines outlined above, the secondary modern curriculum was constrained by a belief that its pupils were innately limited in intellectual capacity, the earlier school leaving age (14, later 15) and the absence of a final qualification. At the same time, the lack of status of secondary modern schools did sometimes open up a space for teacher-led innovation in order to reach out to the learners.⁹ For example:

It was the elementary and modern schools, and not the grammar schools, that sought to meet the needs of their students by setting aside disciplinary structures and developing and teaching courses with such titles as gardening, nutrition, food science, hygiene, health education and human or social biology.¹⁰

The 11 Plus exams, on the basis of which grammar school places were awarded, also restricted the upper primary curriculum. Ironically, given that its 'general intelligence' paper was supposed to measure something fixed and innate, most final year classes spent a lot of time practising test papers to improve scores. Thus the majority of curriculum time was consumed by rapid and accurate processing in English and arithmetic and the artificial logic of 'intelligence' tests. This also led many primary schools to stream pupils by 'ability'.

This selection process also impacted on student identity, leading the majority to accept this judgement of mental inferiority. Far fewer children from manual-worker families secured grammar school places than in clerical or professional groups¹¹. It was also later revealed that the hurdle was raised higher for girls: more girls achieved good marks in the 11 Plus, but the pass mark was raised for them on the assumption that boys would mature later.

The traditionalist ethos and curriculum of the grammar schools were remote from the home and neighbourhood culture of manual worker families, frequently leading to demotivation and alienation. See, for example, Richard Hoggart's chapter 'Scholarship Boy' in *The Uses of Literacy*¹², or more expressively Tony Harrison's poetry collection *The School of Eloquence*¹³.

In the secondary modern schools, and particularly for boys, the ethos was often based on a brutal discipline - far from absent, indeed, in boys' grammar schools - but even in more humane environments¹⁴ the assumptions about pupils' limited abilities and destinations had a constraining effect on curriculum and pedagogies.

The growth of progressivism

Despite this unpromising structural arrangement, the decades after World War II saw the emergence of various progressive alternatives which began to flourish around the 1970s once comprehensive schools were well established, the school leaving age raised to 16 and the Certificate of Secondary Education introduced.

The democratic secondary school

There is still no coherent historical account of oppositional currents in the decades after 1945, though Michael Fielding and Peter Moss's *Radical Education and the Common School*¹⁵ has filled in some of the gap. This book focuses on St George-in-the-East in London's East End which began to extend democratic practices to students. Headteacher Alex Bloom (1945-55) founded a school 'without regimentation, without corporal punishment, without competition'¹⁶. Cooperative behaviour was not based on fear of punishment, but rather 'the child must feel that... he does count, that he is wanted, that he has a contribution to make to the common good'¹⁷.

Various forms of student-centred learning developed, including projects, 'centres of interest', and social studies approached individually, in small groups or as Form Studies. This led eventually to a practice known as School Study where a broad topic was collectively agreed by staff, and each class adopted an aspect as its own theme, dividing it further into group topics.

Students worked in self-chosen groups 'making their notes, building charts, paying their visits, while the teacher proceeded with them as co-adventurer, stimulating them and acting as their ever present help'.¹⁸

Versions of English

The most significant emergence of progressivism in secondary schools occurred in the subject English. In the dominant version of the subject, in line with grammar school traditionalism, the emphasis was on avoiding errors through a diet of detached technical exercises. Reading for understanding was simultaneously tested

and taught through the 'comprehension' passage. Opportunities for self-expression, engaged argument or reading for enjoyment were limited.

Alternatives began to emerge¹⁹. One group of teachers, within a Leavisite ideology, sought to renew popular sensitivity through lyric poetry, folk song and descriptive writing. David Holbrook, working in a Cambridgeshire village college – a community-oriented variant of secondary modern - developed what later became known as the Cambridge school of English teaching.

Holbrook was in fact the first writer to become widely known... who took the teaching of English with secondary modern children seriously. He was the first to say audibly in public that the subject might have more to offer than 'giving the basics' to less gifted children.²⁰

Holbrook emphasised writing as expression of personal feelings, with therapeutic potential. He refused to discount these children and insisted on their worth as individuals, though this was refracted through a Leavisite rural nostalgia: these young people were assumed to lack the 'wholesome' culture of their rural predecessors before the growth of mass media.

England needs the maturity of sensibility that folk culture once supplied – that which may be seen in the shape of our village, our old buildings, in folk-song, and in such works as the Authorized Version of the Bible, and Shakespeare's last plays, which had their roots in popular modes of speech and life.²¹

According to Holbrook, language had once been richer, more metaphorical; adolescents more restrained in their sexual mores; parents more able to grant their children 'succour' and develop 'human sympathy'; men had greater courage; community spirit was stronger, because the culture of rural England was more 'vital'.

A very different, urban progressivism emerged in London schools, with a socialist inflexion that was particularly explicit in the case of Harold Rosen, working first as a secondary English teacher and later teacher-educator. As head of department at Walworth Road, one of London's early 'all-ability' schools prior to full comprehensivisation, Rosen encouraged talk and personal writing about their local experience. This was the starting point for more public and impersonal forms of writing: students began to include evaluative comments and political judgements in their autobiographical or descriptive writing²². He defiantly rejected Bernstein's

claim that working class families were too caught up in their immediate surroundings to be capable of explicit public statement.²³

Rosen helped found the London Association of Teachers of English (LATE), leading later to the National Association (NATE). This network of teachers and teacher-educators found new ways of promoting language development and a broader educational capability. They encouraged exploratory learning in groups²⁴. They recognised the importance of respecting and building upon vernacular versions of English in speech, and were quick to understand that young people with family languages other than English had a cultural asset which schools should appreciate and develop rather than suppress. This new linguistic understanding, along with the growing recognition that language and literacy development take place across the curriculum, led to official recognition in the Bullock Report.²⁵

Other teachers sought to engage more explicitly with political perspectives. Chris Searle, despite being dismissed for publishing his students' poems *Stepney Words*²⁶, continued to use their neighbourhoods as a starting point for developing a social understanding, including the traces of an Imperial past and contemporary experiences of racism.²⁷

Supporting curriculum change

As explained earlier, these are only parts of the unwritten history of progressive counter-currents emerging after 1945 and which eventually received wider recognition and support around the 1970s. The rapid establishment of comprehensive schools created the opportunity and necessity to rethink curriculum norms. In preparation for the raising of the school leaving age to 16 (known as ROSLA) in 1972, the BBC broadcast staff development programmes to disseminate local innovations. Local authorities established Teachers Centres as both a social base and a welcoming venue for staff development, whether run by the LEA's advisors or self-organised by teachers. The Schools Council organised a wide range of innovative projects, based initially on pilot schools and then disseminated through training and publications. Examples included *Nuffield Biology*²⁸ which promoted a heuristic approach requiring learners to form hypotheses and evaluate alternative explanations; and the *Humanities Curriculum Project*²⁹ (popularly known as 'Stenhouse' after its director), a social studies programme which engaged learners in

open discussion prompted by contrasting texts about controversial issues. In their different ways, these projects began to transform the positions of teacher and learner.

The Plowden Report

The influence of European models of early education (Froebel, Montessori etc.) became more widespread, extending to the junior years. There was a widespread, though uneven, transformation in the 1950s and 1960s from the 3Rs and teaching by rote, to a broader, more creative and child-centred curriculum which raised standards both in terms of basic skills and children's knowledge of the world. Streaming ceased to be the norm in larger primary schools, and there was greater understanding of the need to counter the effects of poverty and deprivation. The Plowden Report (1967)³⁰ gave this official recognition and accelerated the development, though subsequent research showed that it was far from universal. Maurice Galton³¹, for example, observed that even where the furniture was rearranged from rows of desks to 4-6 pupils facing each other across a table, the learning activities often remained individual rather than collaborative. Even so, there was significant transformation in large numbers of primary schools, and certainly enough to panic the political Right who accused it of lack of rigour and 'lowering standards'.

A common practice was to rearrange part of the curriculum around a *theme* to bring greater coherence. Subject content and skills were related to themes such as Colour, Autumn or The Victorians. Though the relationship was sometimes contrived, or insufficient attention was given to progression, such integration frequently enhanced children's interest and engagement. *Project work* (sometimes *topic work*) involved children in independent research of a topic of personal interest deriving from the class's current learning. This enhanced the learner role and responsibility, though, if inadequately steered and monitored, it could lead to mere copying from reference books. These problems could be sorted out through supportive intervention, but the process was overtaken rapidly as Progressive Education per se came under intense attack³².

The significance of progressivism

Teachers were becoming increasingly conscious of the damage of ability labelling

and segregation. A more rounded understanding emerged of language and literacy, emphasising reading for enjoyment, though (contrary to media myth) reading schemes were rarely abandoned. Children were encouraged to write about their personal experiences and feelings; less use was made of decontextualised exercises of spelling, punctuation and grammar, and teachers found more embedded and sensitive ways to improve accuracy. Opponents claimed, however, that teachers had ceased to bother about accuracy. The most serious error of the progressive camp was a failure to explain new practices sufficiently to parents.

In summary, large numbers of primary and secondary school teachers sought to engage the active interest of children and young people, relate to their diverse experiences, strengthen opportunities for speaking and problem solving, and create a sense of achievement rather than inadequacy.

This entailed structural changes in assessment. Comprehensive schools removed the need for the 11 Plus which had labelled most children as failures. It led to demands for a school leaving certificate for all pupils, not only high achievers - initially the CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education) whose highest grade was recognised as an O-level. Across much of England, a consortium of GCE and CSE boards created joint exam papers, with pupils awarded both a GCE and CSE grade as a result: this finally led to the GCSE, established under a Conservative minister Keith Joseph in the late 1980s though it was initially assumed that around a third of pupils would be incapable of the new exam.

The ascendancy of progressivism was terminated during Margaret Thatcher's premiership, as will be explained later, but first a sideways step is needed to develop some theoretical clarification.

Curriculum, society and ideology

A selective tradition

To make sense of these struggles, a good starting point is to recognise that any curriculum is unavoidably a selection from the totality of knowledge, and that the process of selection is underpinned by political ideology. This section aims to examine some of the determining principles.

The form and power of a school curriculum, whether held together by an exam syllabus or professional tradition, and particularly when experienced as the National Curriculum, gives the impression of being somehow authoritative, neutral or fixed. It is often difficult for teachers confronted with an imposed curriculum to question its content, framework or emphases.

Raymond Williams pointed out that the curriculum can only ever be a selection from the wider culture. The tradition it is built on, however sacrosanct it appears, can only be a 'selective tradition'³³. His own work on English literature challenged not only the content - the list of officially worthwhile texts - but also the ways in which we are expected to study it and the questions which it seems legitimate to ask. By stepping outside these parameters and looking at history and culture along with literary texts, he noticed structural features which others didn't. For example:

Neighbours in Jane Austen are not the people actually living nearby; they are the people living a little less nearby who, in social recognition, can be visited. What she sees across the land is a network of propertied houses and families, and through the holes of this tightly drawn mesh most actual people are simply not seen. To be face-to-face in this world is already to belong to a class.³⁴

The curriculum often omits and excludes in socially prejudiced ways, as Bertold Brecht succinctly points out in his comment on how history is often presented to young people:

Questions from a Worker who Reads

... Caesar beat the Gauls. Philip of Spain wept when his armada sank.
Did he not even have a cook with him? Was he the only one to cry? ³⁵

A curriculum can marginalise particular groups in terms of social level, gender or race, whether through omission or stereotyping, including presenting them as helpless victims or denying them voice and agency.

The 'selection' can be difficult to challenge: it is an ideological selection dressed up as a technical one. An early example of such a challenge from below came when 19th Century socialists spoke back to the industrialists' offer of 'useful knowledge' (i.e. technically useful for production) by demanding 'really useful knowledge... concerning our conditions in life... and how to get out of our present troubles'³⁶. The 'useful knowledge' proposed by the factory owners and their allies was indeed more relevant than the traditional classics-based curriculum of elite schools and universities, but did not satisfy the working class's need for political understanding.

The process is not always conscious manipulation, nor is the result always logical or coherent: sometimes individuals are simply pursuing what they assume to be common sense. At other times, as is well documented for National Curriculum English and History, there is clear evidence of political interference. In either case, it is essential to challenge the apparent innocence of a curriculum, understanding that the way education relates to society is a form of power:

Educational principles are social principles. Our views of education, and hence of schooling, have their justification in views of society and the proper role of education for participation in the life and work of society.³⁷

A common assumption is that only the privileged should receive a broad academic, scientific and cultural education, while the majority are given 'the basics' plus some vocational training. At some point a common curriculum splits into two or more tracks, whether at age 11, 14 or 16, depending on economic and political circumstances. The division appeared to have settled at 16 until the New Labour government, through its Education and Inspections Act (2006), introduced a radical divide at age 14 (more later). Under cover of a '14-19 Curriculum' bringing greater coherence, the world of business secured power over the final two years of compulsory schooling.

The term *vocational* is itself deeply ideological. It is clearly not used in the same sense as when we speak of a priest's or teacher's sense of vocation, nor do we tend

to classify Law, Medicine or Architecture as vocational degrees. Vocational is not a neutral term denoting preparation for employment but suggests work of a less exalted and more routine kind. In curricular terms, 'vocational' is counterposed to 'academic'.

This has roots in an English aristocratic disdain for the practical, and is not a universal feature of modern capitalism. In most European countries all young people pursue a broad common curriculum to the age of 16 with a choice between academic and vocational studies only occurring in 'upper secondary', i.e. post-16. In Norway it is often more difficult to obtain a place on vocational courses than general academic ones; the vocational students spend a third of each week on general academic studies (Norwegian, English, maths, science, physical education and citizenship) and can transfer across into preparation for university.

There is also no logical reason why vocational courses should not include critical social understanding. Professionals training in the hairdressing and beauty industry could, for instance, look at gender issues; future plumbers might benefit from a broader environmental understanding.

Orientation

A useful term here, borrowed from Stephen Kemmis and his colleagues, is *orientation*³⁸. In fact both a *traditional academic* curriculum and a vocational one share the same conservative orientation: they see education as preparation for future roles in an already existing social order, even though the roles are different.

An academic curriculum provides a broader and more general preparation, but both involve socialisation for roles in a hierarchically ordered world. For both, there is considerable certainty about 'what is worth knowing' based on 'time-honoured beliefs' but 'revived and reinterpreted for the modern world.'

For some this will be skilled or semi-skilled labour requiring well-known and defined competences: for others, it will be managerial or professional, requiring higher levels of general education and abstract, universalised thinking.³⁸

By contrast, progressive education is often conceived 'as a preparation for life rather than work'³⁹ which aims to develop the 'whole person'. The words 'rather than' are

revealing, since for most people there is no real alternative to working for a wage and it is difficult to conceive of any education system which does not include among its aims the ability to contribute to one's own or society's economic sustenance. Kemmis and colleagues highlight this shortcoming by referring to a *liberal-progressive* orientation.

This orientation is not as conservative as the vocationalist and traditional academic ones, in the sense of fitting young people into the social hierarchy as it currently exists, and views society as 'open to (and needing) reconstruction'. However it is based on a moralism which has only a vague sense of real social conflicts. It has the limitations of liberal humanism as described here by Eagleton:

Liberal humanism is a suburban moral ideology, limited in practice to largely interpersonal matters. It is stronger on adultery than on armaments, and its valuable concern with freedom, democracy and individual rights are simply not concrete enough. ⁴⁰

Kemmis and colleagues outline a third orientation which they call *socially-critical*. A socially-critical curriculum is far more conscious of political power and social divisions, and the need for young people to engage in movements for social change. It also regards school knowledge itself as problematic. The school curriculum thus loses its aura of authority, and the principles behind the selective tradition are uncovered.⁴¹

Though these 'ideal types' are a helpful tool for analysing the curriculum, in reality the distinction between liberal-progressive and socially-critical is more blurred. Few teachers practise pure versions of one or the other, and often we find socially-critical practices emerging out of less radical forms of progressive practice. The examples of Harold Rosen and Chris Searle have already been mentioned. Another is the emergence of more overt anti-racist pedagogies from early attempts at a multicultural curriculum. Crucially, the Conservative reaction which grew during the 1980s saw no difference, regarding all forms of progressive pedagogy as a challenge to social order.

Pedagogy, assessment and accountability

It is also important to be aware of how teaching methods and forms of assessment can distort the curriculum. Progressive and critical orientations have been undermined as much by demands for particular teaching methods as by the explicit content in National Curriculum documents. Transmission methods, assumptions of learner passivity and uncritical memorisation can distort even a radical curriculum. The relentless demands of high-stakes assessment lead to particular forms of evaluation of teachers and schools. The result is that schools teach only what can easily be measured.

Turning the clock back

For decades, education ministers had avoided any direct involvement in the curriculum, regarding this as the territory of teachers and local education authorities. Public examinations at 16 and 18 seemed a sufficient guarantee of content and quality. The idea that the curriculum was a 'secret garden' was shaken by Prime Minister James Callaghan, who, in the wake of economic downturn, used his Ruskin College lecture (1976) to denounce the 'new informal methods of teaching', arguing instead for a 'core curriculum and basic knowledge'. Schools had to become more cost effective, necessitating tighter quality control.⁴²

All this appeared under the pretext of parental concerns, the need to raise expectations for working-class pupils and for education to serve the needs of business more efficiently – familiar tropes in the decades that followed:

I am concerned on my journeys to find complaints from industry that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job that is required... There seems to be a need for more technological bias in science teaching that will lead towards practical applications in industry rather than towards academic studies... Is there not a case for a professional review of the mathematics needed by industry at different levels?⁴³

The claim that schools were letting down the economy was the beginning of a neoliberal logic which has continued to dominate policy: it is rarely considered that the reverse may be more true, namely that capitalism has no idea what to do with large numbers of well-qualified young people provided by the education system.

The serious assault began with Margaret Thatcher's premiership. Accusations about the supposed sloppiness of modern teaching methods intensified, and this was even seen as a threat to the social fabric. In 1985 Norman Tebbit suggested that the abandonment of grammar-teaching in schools had contributed to the breakdown of law and order.

If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people can turn up filthy and nobody takes any notice of them at school – just as well as turning up clean – all those things tend to cause people to

have no standards at all, and once you lose your standards then there's no imperative to stay out of crime. ⁴⁴

In the Tory imagination, *grammar* came to signify both accurate Standard English and the lamented grammar schools, and *standards* merged academic performance with public order.

The recurrent New Right demand was for schools to return to the supposed rigours of disembedded knowledge and skills, since all attempts to relate learning to the life of the child or their society were seen as deficient. A 'discourse of derision' was in crescendo⁴⁶. In 1987, Margaret Thatcher informed her party conference:

Children who need to count and multiply are being taught antiracist Mathematics, whatever that may be. Children who need to be able to express themselves in clear English are being taught political slogans. Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay. ⁴⁷

It was through such rhetorical gestures as much as any legislation that the battle against progressive or critical curriculum was pursued.

In addition to English, history was an inevitable target. The legacy of the *School History Project* came under attack, and repeated calls were made to remove critical interpretation: school history should be concerned with 'the transmission of an established view of the past'⁴⁸. In 1991 education minister Kenneth Clarke issued his notorious decree that school history should stop 20 years before the present day⁴⁹.

The Inner London Education Authority became a particular target and was finally abolished in 1990. Covering the most deprived areas of London, the ILEA had provided a quality of support that was the envy of teachers elsewhere, including curriculum centres for each specialism where teachers not only attended courses but could collaborate actively in curriculum design and even have their ideas and resources published. Great strides were taken to promote anti-sexism and anti-racism, though, as was later admitted, class and poverty tended to slip off the agenda⁵⁰. Contrary to Conservative accusations that it was slack on 'standards', its well qualified inspectorate worked to highlight and disseminate the best practice⁵¹. The words of Peter Mortimore

show the kinds of curriculum support provided by ILEA, but many other LEAs pursued similar intentions on a smaller scale.

Pupils and students in inner London performed in examinations much like their urban counterparts elsewhere, but had access to an unrivalled array of resources and experiences.

Educational television, pioneering computer services, well-stocked libraries, splendid playing fields and outdoor centres (plus climbing bases in Scotland and Wales), tickets to the ballet, opera and theatre, and free instrument teaching in schools and at Saturday centres were all available. The London Schools Symphony Orchestra, under the young Simon Rattle, demonstrated the extraordinary levels that could be attained by inner-city pupils. Facilities for pupils with special educational needs were outstanding.

Much of Ilea's strength stemmed from its interest in innovation. With its economy of scale, the authority was able to develop a range of ideas, many of which were later adopted by authorities all over the UK.⁵²

The National Curriculum: enterprise and heritage

This drive to eliminate progressivism culminated in the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), which changed the managerial relationship between schools and education authorities, toughened up inspection, and mandated a National Curriculum and its associated national tests. Furthermore, the extensive powers it delegated to successive Secretaries of State for Education made it easy for them to bring about sweeping changes in line with their particular philosophies of education and nostalgic memories of their own schooldays. This has created a situation characterised by rapid, contradictory and often ill-conceived curriculum changes.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher introduced the plan for a National Curriculum in grand style in her speech to Conservative Party Conference in 1987, following the caricature of progressivism quoted earlier. She had first intended it to focus on 'basic subjects', i.e. 'essential skills: reading, writing, spelling, grammar, arithmetic' and 'basic science and technology'. There is considerable irony in the moral panic about 'standards', since, as Bethan Marshall shows, this has been a recurrent complaint since at least 1912, when a headteacher wrote to *The Times* complaining that 'Reading Standards are falling behind because parents no longer read to their children and too much time is spent listening to the gramophone'.⁵³

The Prime Minister gave ground to her Secretary of State Kenneth Baker in his desire to define a complete curriculum from age 5 to 16. In theory, schools could add something of their own, but the statutory content was so extensive that such freedom was only nominal. The National Curriculum was designed to be rigidly subject-based from the age of 5, based more or less on the subject list determined for state secondary schools in 1904.⁵⁴

A hand-picked 'working group' was set up for each subject, ostensibly bringing together education professionals with public figures in each field such as scientists and historians. In reality hardly any members were teachers currently working in state schools. The enthusiasm in the working groups instantly overloaded the new curriculum: the history content alone could have filled half a school timetable. Even though ministers selected the group chairs, this did not avoid subsequent direct interference if outcomes were unwelcome.

Overall the National Curriculum pushed in two directions, reflecting the old tension between increasing economic efficiency and ensuring that future workers remained suitably subservient. This reflects Michael Apple's US analysis⁵⁵ of how neoliberalism and neoconservatism complement each other, or as Phillips explains Thatcherism:

New Right ideology consisted of 'enterprise and heritage' (Corner and Harvey, 1991), as well as 'choice and control' (Lawton, 1989b), a mixture of neo-liberal market individualism and neo-conservative emphasis upon authority, discipline, hierarchy, the nation and strong government (Levitas, 1986; Whitty, 1989).⁵⁶

The National Curriculum gave a boost to mathematics, science, design technology and information technology (later known as the STEM subjects), occupying more than half the timetable. This modernisation included double science, which everyone had to study to age 16 unless taking GCSE in three separate sciences. This overcame a significant gender inequality, since girls had traditionally avoided physics and chemistry in favour of biology.

The subjects which could particularly relate to socio-political understanding, particularly history, geography and English, were regarded as dangerous, and opportunities for critical or engaged thinking were carefully avoided. There was no place in the curriculum for a study of contemporary society, which had to wait until the later insertion of 'Citizenship', allocated only a half-subject GCSE.

The particular tensions for each subject are expertly presented in chapters of John White (ed) *Rethinking the school curriculum: values, aims and purposes*, and entire books have been devoted to History⁵⁷ and English⁵⁸. Phillips argues that neo-conservative ideology in History can be 'summarized under the headings of *authority, hierarchy and nation*' (my italics) but this applies more widely, to various degrees, across the humanities. Remarkably, Brian Cox, a former Black Paper editor and assumed to be a safe pair of hands as chair of the English working group, spoke back to his political sponsors in defence of a broader vision for the subject.

Because of the overload, Ron Dearing was commissioned to undertake an urgent review. According to Dearing, a primary teacher might have to judge pupils against a total of 1,000 National Curriculum 'statements of attainment' in a single year. His report (1994)⁵⁹ provided some relief to teachers who were drowning in assessment

requirements, but it was the humanities and arts which were pruned: the KS4 requirement to study history and geography, and art and music, was reduced to a choice of one out of each pair. Nevertheless the pressure on lower primary teachers remained acute: the statutory requirement to report attainment levels in every subject, and multiple strands in some, inevitably distracted from their traditional focus on teaching children to read.

These technical difficulties were not the only tension. When Thatcher was replaced by Major, the 'cultural restorationist' influence came to dominate over the 'modernisers'. As Stephen Ball explained in his lucid paper *Education, Majorism and 'the Curriculum of the Dead'*⁶⁰, there was a shift of emphasis as New Right traditionalists, fighting for values of national heritage and social cohesion, confronted modernisers among Science, Maths and vocational specialists. Ball's analysis particularly focuses on music, geography and history showing how a traditional corpus of knowledge or canon was re-emphasised, and the curriculum was disconnected from learners' identities and experience. In practical terms this had some bizarre consequences. In music, even performance came under attack:

For the restorationists music is not a putting together of sounds to create effect or a shared activity, it is not a matter of creativity but rather a lonely appreciation, a fossilised tradition, a mental abstraction divorced from the here and now and from the possibility of engagement... This is the curriculum as museum. ⁶¹

The Geography curriculum 'appears to aim at a repositioning of the UK in some mythical golden age of empire'⁶². In History, cultural restorationism was dominant from the start: at the 1988 Conservative Party Conference Baker promised that children would learn the key events of British history including 'the spread of Britain's influence for good throughout the world'⁶³. In his paper, Stephen Ball also demonstrates how a simplistic traditionalist mode of assessment supplanted the professional advice of the TGAT Report, pointing out how New Right restorationism was able to feed the neoliberal market mechanisms of interschool competition, mistrust of teachers, and so on.

For primary schools, Kenneth Clarke triggered a media attack against Plowden and all it stood for. 'Child centred' developmentalism was replaced by the discourse of 'effectiveness' and a return to traditional transmission methods. In this discursive

configuration, anti-intellectualism was combined with nostalgia, and the old order was restored both in the classroom and in the world which it is intended to reproduce.

The Victorian schoolroom and the grammar school are the lost objects of desire, standing for a time when education was simple, when learning meant doing and knowing what you were told by your teacher. Kenneth Clarke's classroom has desks in rows, the children silent, the teacher 'at the front', chalk in hand, dispensing knowledge. This powerful image of 'the teacher' and of 'teaching' makes perfect sense to parents in ways that new teaching methods and new teacher-student relationships do not... Of course, this is not what traditional classrooms were actually like most of the time for most people.... Thus, 'traditional education' (and traditional values) here are a pastiche; a policy simulacrum – the identical copy for which no original has ever existed... This is an education of deference, to the teacher, to the past, to the nation, and to your 'elders and betters' – the traditional values of Victorian middle-class childhood. ⁶⁴

All this now resonates, once again, in the policies and rhetoric of Michael Gove.

Global competition and the neoliberal curriculum

Education policies in the past 20 years have been variations on a theme, showing only a different balance between a functionalist vocational orientation and a neo-conservative insistence on traditional knowledge. New Labour's entry into government saw a shift towards the former. According to Blair, in the context of globalisation, politicians could have little impact on the economy other than to make Britain an attractive place to invest. 'Education is our best economic policy'⁶⁵. The logical consequence was policies which at least created the impression of a well-qualified workforce, marked by relentless improvements in test and exam statistics.

Standardised teaching

The 1988 Education Reform Act had been launched with a promise that, although politicians would determine what should be taught, teachers would remain in charge of how to teach it - or rather, in the new jargon, how to *deliver* it. Such was the determination to drive through world-beating 'effective' schools that this was quickly breached by Labour ministers. After hasty and incomplete piloting, new ways of teaching literacy and numeracy in primary schools were imposed in the form of the Literacy Hour and Numeracy Hour (later superseded by an even more restrictive dogmatism about synthetic phonics). They were not exactly compulsory but woe betide anyone who chose a different approach, unless they could shelter behind excellent test scores: those opting for alternatives were warned at the outset that they would be 'interrogated' (Stannard 1999)⁶⁶.

The literacy hour separated English from the rest of the primary curriculum, curtailing opportunities for learning through reading and writing. The hour was divided into four sections, with most of the time devoted to whole-class instruction. This was 'interactive' only in a limited sense, encouraging a pseudodialogue dominated by teacher questions⁶⁷.

At the same time there were widespread efforts to reinterpret and subvert these attempts at standardisation, at classroom and school level. Eventually the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were replaced by the more flexible and diverse Primary and Key Stage 3 National Strategies, with an increasing emphasis on thinking skills, problem solving, creativity and the construction of understanding.

Exaggerating improvement

Initially the number of children reaching the target level seemed to increase, but there were problems below the surface. Education minister David Blunkett had promised to resign if 80 percent of 11-year-olds didn't reach level 4. In order to achieve a rise in 1999, the tests were simplified: the criteria were changed and fewer questions involved interpretation or reading between the lines as opposed to simple factual recognition, making it easier to classify struggling readers as having reached level 4. The texts themselves also became less demanding⁶⁸. Of course this is difficult to pull off twice, and embarrassingly test statistics hit a plateau. Finally, ministers saw fit to abandon their own strategy and introduce an even more limited one, a dogmatic insistence on the systematic and discrete teaching of synthetic phonics⁶⁹. This was despite there being no research evidence to show it would improve understanding, as opposed to pronouncing the words correctly.

To create an impression of rapidly improving outcomes, as well as rewarding the adoption of work-related courses, flawed equivalences were invented between GCSEs and other qualifications. In particular, each GNVQ Intermediate would count not just as equivalent in quality to an A*-C grade at GCSE, but in quantitative terms would equate to four subjects-worth of GCSE⁷⁰. This enabled schools to claim that students who had achieved a C in English and Maths plus a single GNVQ had the equivalent of five A*-C grades. The scam was particularly widely used by the new Academies to create the illusion of their superior performance⁷¹. To the government's embarrassment, England's position in the PISA international tests was simultaneously going downhill. Playing the 'equivalents' game did not even lead to curriculum innovation, since most GNVQ entries were not new subjects but subjects available in GCSE, especially Science, Computing and Business.

Curriculum narrowing

The years of Labour Government saw an increasing emphasis on vocational training in secondary schools, reflecting an overwhelming neoliberal orientation. Finally, in 2006, the curriculum for 14-16 year olds was divided into two, re-establishing aspects of the old grammar school versus secondary modern divide⁷². Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) was in effect divided into two separate tracks. For the more academic,

the 1980s version of a broad and balanced curriculum was reiterated, including the entitlement to a social subject (history or geography), a creative arts subject (now including media), a language, and a branch of design and technology. For the 'less academic', all these entitlements were jettisoned and replaced by an extended vocational course.

It should be understood that there was nothing new in 14-16 year olds following a vocational course, often in a nearby college, as part of a broad curriculum. In the school where I taught in in the early 1970s, large numbers of 14-16 year olds studied childcare and car mechanics on site, or bricklaying and hairdressing at the local college. In those days, however, nobody suggested that these same pupils should not also choose drama, geography or a language.

Pupils were now required to make firm decisions to embark on vocational courses from age 14, narrowing their future pathways. Even English and maths could be replaced by functional literacy and numeracy. Ironically the careers to which these were supposed to lead were becoming increasingly elusive.

Thus, the school curriculum came to be dominated by literacy and numeracy, increasingly framed as generic employment skills, with more specific preparation for work from age 14. Apart from ICT - the poster boy of New Labour modernisation – policymakers showed little interest in the rest of the curriculum and inevitably there followed a serious decline in the number taking languages, history or geography. Even creative subjects such as music suffered a kind of reverse alchemy; the gold of enjoyment, composition and performance was converted into the base metal of assessed tasks in events management under the new qualifications.

This is not to say that there was no movement at all in other directions. Citizenship, accredited only as a half-GCSE, was introduced, though this scarcely offered a serious opportunity to understand contemporary society. The 2000 version of the National Curriculum at last included a substantial statement of educational aims. Overall however, curriculum policy under New Labour was characterised by neoliberal modernisation with little apparent concern about using curriculum to hold society together, let alone promote social engagement and critical analysis. Perhaps it was assumed that the social order, seen as meritocracy, would be sufficiently protected by increasing the performance pressure on young people and making sure

they were too busy pursuing qualifications and careers to question the social order.

Under fives

One of the most contradictory areas of change was in the early years. This saw the laudable extension of provision under Labour, including the entitlement to 12.5 hours a week of free nursery education for 3 and 4 year olds; but simultaneously an attempt to formalise early learning and make it more like school. Whilst many aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage were developmentally sound, the Statutory Guidance required that, from September 2008, all providers, whatever their educational philosophy, must 'deliver' and assess according to 69 'goals'. This espousal of an objectives-based curriculum had the potential to undermine play-based learning, and substitute instruction for the more experiential and collaborative ways in which young children develop language and understanding. The attempt to impose formal instruction was to continue under the next government⁷³.

Shock and Awe

Michael Gove's arrival as Secretary of State clearly signalled a swing towards neo-conservative curriculum policy. His first restorationist gesture was to dispatch copies of the Authorised Version of the Bible into all schools. It was possible to sympathise with some of his early moves as correctives, in particular his denunciation of 'gaming', namely the exploitation of spurious 'equivalents' to GCSE. This was a clear example of the numbers-driven market system undermining professional decisions about the broad curriculum appropriate to each student at Key Stage 4. Gove was also justified in expressing concern about the marginalisation of History under the pressure to jump the 5 A*-C hurdle by any means⁷⁴.

Yet something much more disturbing was at work here, namely a full-scale assault on anything which did not match his very narrow sense of 'knowledge'.

Timeless knowledge

In a public lecture, Gove pronounced:

It was an automatic assumption of my predecessors in Cabinet office that the education they had enjoyed, the culture they had benefitted from, the literature they had read, the history they had grown up learning, were all worth knowing. They thought that the case was almost so self-evident it scarcely needed to be made. To know who Pericles was, why he was important, why acquaintance with his actions, thoughts and words matters, didn't need to be explained or justified. It was the mark of an educated person.⁷⁵

It does not take great expertise in discourse analysis to trace here the self-assurance of an elite who believe their own tradition is beyond question, or the exclusivity of the minority who define themselves alone as educated. As John Yandell expressed it:

This wallowing in nostalgia for the simple values of a bygone age is pretty remarkable in itself. To argue that what was good enough for Gladstone is good enough for the youth of today – that knowledge of Pericles should occupy the same space in the curriculum now as then – fails to take account of the fact that the world has moved on since 1879.⁷⁶

Imperial values

This return to a 'curriculum of the dead' was nowhere as evident as in his proposal for National Curriculum History. Here Gove clearly overreached himself: even his hand-picked advisers rounded on him, including, most eloquently, Simon Schama, who called it 'insulting and offensive' to teachers and remarked that the syllabus was like '*1066 and All That*, but without the jokes'⁷⁷. Less than three years earlier Gove had selected Schama as his special adviser, but now Schama was ridiculing the content overload: 'vroom, there was Disraeli, - vroom – there was Gladstone... the French Revolution, maybe if it's lucky, gets a drive-by ten minutes at this rate'. He described as 'Gradgrindian' cramming children with so many facts, and ridiculed the arbitrary selection of detail. Schama explicitly challenged the re-emergence of the New Right 'glorious heritage' version of English history, and Gove's attempt to remove controversy from its study:

There is a glory to British history, but the glory to British history is argument, dissent – the freedom to dispute. It's not an endless massage of self-congratulation.

He was particularly outraged by the offensiveness and insensitivity of the new National Curriculum's glorification of Empire:

Clive of India... Robert Clive was a sociopathic corrupt thug whose business in India was essentially to enrich himself and his co-soldiers and traders as quickly and outrageously as possible.

In the end, Gove had to back down and sacrifice his tendentious version of History. Significantly, neo-liberalism trumped neo-conservatism. The real political priority was located elsewhere, in the assumed economic functionality of English, Maths and Science, as indicated by the absurdly detailed prescription in these core subjects alongside the tokenistic treatment of everything else.⁷⁸

Raising standards?

The prevalence of neoliberal goals over nostalgic neo-conservatism is also demonstrated by the fact that academies and free schools were exempted from this new curriculum. Having constructed an unmanageable and archaic curriculum, Gove

provided schools with strong motivation to escape it via academy conversion. Furthermore, he was, arguably, setting up primary schools to fail by demanding the impossible so that they could be closed and handed over to academy chains.

The powers conferred upon Secretaries of State by the 1988 Act were exploited to the extreme. The key academic advisers for English, Maths and Science resigned in despair at Gove's failure to listen. In March 2013 a letter signed by a hundred Education academics was reported on the front page of major national newspapers under the heading *Too Much Too Young*⁷⁹. This highlighted the excessive demands placed on very young children, but also the impact on pedagogy:

We are writing to warn of the dangers posed by Michael Gove's new National Curriculum which could severely erode educational standards.

The proposed curriculum consists of endless lists of spellings, facts and rules. This mountain of data will not develop children's ability to think, including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity.

Much of it demands too much too young. This will put pressure on teachers to rely on rote learning without understanding. Inappropriate demands will lead to failure and demoralisation.

The learner is largely ignored. Little account is taken of children's potential interests and capacities, or that young children need to relate abstract ideas to their experience, lives and activity.

Gove had repeatedly used declining PISA results⁸⁰ to justify steps to 'raise standards', but the letter warned that this new curriculum would be counterproductive:

Mr Gove has clearly misunderstood England's decline in PISA international tests. Schools in high-achieving Finland, Massachusetts and Alberta emphasise cognitive development, critical understanding and creativity, not rote learning.

The Secretary of State's response was a rant in the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday against 'bad academics' who were 'enemies of promise' and indeed 'Marxists hell-bent on destroying our schools.'

A Pied Piper curriculum

When it was established that requirements were pitched one or two years younger than in Finland or Singapore, the Department for Education simply shrugged this off with more ‘high expectations’ rhetoric. This suggests a failure to understand that children need time to develop. Gove had produced a Pied Piper curriculum which was stealing childhood⁸¹. This was neoliberalism at its most extreme: five-year-olds regarded as nothing more than ‘human capital’.

The economic functionality of the new curriculum is highly questionable. Not only does it leave little time for problem-solving or creativity, its demands are archaic: overwhelming stress is placed on correct spelling at a ridiculously early age (Tuesday and Wednesday at the age of five, possession and business at seven), yet this aspect of writing is rapidly becoming an IT-supported function.

The concern to protect children was shared by the *Too Much Too Soon* campaign later in the year⁸². However the formalisation or ‘school-ification’ of nurseries continued through attempts to worsen the adult-child ratio, and Ofsted’s attempts to focus inspection on ‘preparation for school’. The emphasis was on teaching more things, with little understanding of how young children develop and learn.

Neo-conservatism or old Calvinism?

The creative arts had been re-emphasised under New Labour in neoliberal terms, not for their cultural value or as personal creativity but to service the culture and media industries. Even this was not understood by the Coalition Government’s policymakers. The English Baccalaureate demanded A*-C grades in a raft of traditional academic subjects (English, maths, science, foreign language, and history or geography) but without art, music or drama, let alone media studies.

Certainties

It is important to take from Schama’s outspoken protest some lessons concerning not just history but the curriculum as a whole. Schama had condemned the diminishing numbers studying the subject from age 14, in competition with ‘more exam-friendly utilitarian options’, and spoken of the importance of a chronological

perspective. He had also presented inspirational evidence of expert teachers sharing a real enthusiasm and sophisticated understanding with pupils in areas of deprivation. However – and this is what Gove proved unable to grasp – he was fighting for a view of history as *complex and controversial*.

It's exactly because history is, by definition, a bone of contention... that the arguments it generates resist national self-congratulation. So that inquiry is not the uncritical genealogy of the Wonderfulness of Us, but it is, indispensably, an understanding of the identity of us. The endurance of British history's rich and rowdy discord is, in fact, the antidote to civic complacency, the condition of the irreverent freedom that's our special boast... The founding masterpiece of European history, Thucydides's Peloponnesian Wars, was written by a veteran for whom the discipline was sceptical or not worth the writing: an attack on Athenian hubris precisely to demonstrate what was, and what was not, worth fighting for in defence of the democratic polis. ⁸³

Gove's new curriculum undermines critical preparation for democratic citizenship and lacks any sense of the need to involve young people in active debate or inquiry or challenge. Knowledge is something to be served up on a plate, delivered, transmitted, or, in Freire's metaphor, education as 'banking'. All sense of process has disappeared by packing excessive content into each school year and imposing concepts which need to be hard won onto younger and younger children. (Science is the exception, largely because the influential STEM lobby pressed the Department for Education to involve the Association for Science Education. Even in this subject, teachers will need to shortcut the good methodological advice to race through the content in the time available.) The ultimate irony of Gove's PISA envy is that PISA tests require intellectual process: problem-solving and application of knowledge rather than the regurgitation of a series of facts.

This avoidance of uncertainty is interesting ideologically. It is clearly part of a Conservative ideology which prefers to see the world as fixed and change as perilous. It is also present in forms of religious fundamentalism, specifically in Gove's case a trace of pre-Enlightenment Calvinism whereby truth comes down verbatim from on high. It reflects older grammar school pedagogies, or more precisely those practices as remembered later in life. Finally, as the next section shows, a particular view of knowledge or epistemology is at work.

Mind before matter

One frequent presumption of Gove's new curriculum is teaching through explicit rules. The explicit assumption is that teachers should announce a rule of grammar, spelling, calculation or nature prior to the learner engaging in any activity. Nothing is learnt mainly through participation in a situation or activity, with the teacher providing some guidance part-way through the process. This goes against the social constructivist theory whereby children's engagement with reality is 'mediated' by language and other cultural tools, so that the language, symbols or maps provide a kind of lens or framework to guide perception or activity.

Philosopher Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* characterised this mistaken view of the relationship between symbols and activity as follows:

The chef must recite his recipes to himself before he can cook according to them; the hero must lend his inner ear to some appropriate moral imperative before swimming out to save the drowning man; the chess-player must run over in his head all the relevant rules and tactical maxims of the game before he can make correct and skilful moves... Certainly we often do not only reflect before we act but reflect in order to act properly. The chess-player may require some time in which to plan his moves before he makes them. Yet the general assertion that all intelligent performance requires to be prefaced by the consideration of appropriate propositions rings unplausibly... Efficient practice precedes the theory of it.⁸⁴

This Cartesian divorce of knowledge from activity and experience is evident in various subjects, but most acutely in literacy. Here we find children expected to spell words accurately which are not in their vocabulary (e.g. merriment and quantity in Year 2, interrelated and outrageous in Year 3), and learn endless rules which require a complex logic to apply (eg 'If the root word ends with -ic, -ally is added rather than just -ly except in the word publicly.') Sometimes the explanation is so complex that few children will be able to follow it: much more realistic to engage learners in practice and intervene when they are ready.

The new curriculum notoriously involves the divorce of phonic decoding from meaning-making and enjoyment of books. Children's author Mike Rosen satirises this, along with the new pseudo-word test at the end of Year 1:

We at Ruth Miskin Academy are pioneering Miskin Kick Score Incorporated where in the first year you play Un-Football, by playing without the ball. ⁸⁵

Setting the hurdles high

Finally, it is important to question the Government's insistence that, at every stage, the hurdles must be set high. This is presented as promotion of high standards, or a remedy of some unproven grade inflation. Elitism is doubtless a factor – the belief that only a minority can or should succeed – but something more might be at stake. After years of politicians seeking to maximise the exam passes, Gove seems intent on reducing the numbers attaining particular qualifications. This shows up not just in the National Curriculum, but in changes to the GCSE and its grading system, removal of the Education Maintenance Allowance and the trebling of university fees. Mike Rosen's blunt explanation may be the key:

Capitalism can no longer see a way to employ all the clever well qualified people. In their terms, schools are producing too many students at 18 who are performing well enough to go to university and do a degree, so barriers are put in their way. Exams must be made harder, grants are taken away and fees charged, universities must shed so-called useless courses. ⁸⁶

Finding a way out

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

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

Orientations and aims

It is difficult to imagine any future society in which education does not play a part in preparing young people to earn a living or contribute to our collective economic welfare. This does not mean however conscripting young people into a race to collect the highest grades, or for those deemed 'less academic' or 'less able', an early start to specialist training for work. All young people need a broad foundation including core skills, scientific and social understanding, abilities of problem-solving and critical interpretation, ethical and aesthetic judgement, and creative activity of many kinds.

To become active and critical citizens of a complex and troubled world, characterised by unprecedented global mobility and economic division, they will need to engage individually or collectively with issues of environmental sustainability, poverty, migration and war. Any new curriculum designed for a democratic society will need to foreground critical thinking, especially in relationship to modern media and genres. This is not simply a matter of acquiring some technical skills of analysis, but about fostering a questioning attitude and learning to read texts and ideas 'against the grain' from one's own and other perspectives.

This will require a far broader conception of 'the basics', involving critical literacy, multimedia, rapidly changing ICTs, media production, speaking and writing in a range

of genres and for a variety of audiences. It will also require the ability to engage on a personal level with cultural diversity and emotional stress.

Accountability and assessment

Future national policy needs to be based more on trusting and supporting teachers than on threats and surveillance. It will need a very different sense of the ways in which teachers relate to parents and the wider community: *responsibility*, not *accountability*, as Fred Inglis has expressed it.

‘Accountability’ is, after all, not the same thing as responsibility, still less as duty. It is a pistol loaded with blame to be fired at the heads of those who cannot answer charges. The pistol is fired in public. Its lesson is that wounds shall be visibly inscribed on reputation.⁸⁷

Current notions of accountability were designed to promote competition among schools and individuals. They lead to superficial learning for short-term assessment and grading, rather than intellectual engagement and enduring cognitive development. Learners need formative feedback, and also the satisfaction when learning activities lead to a shared product, presentation or performance. Their parents need to know how to help and support, not just their children’s place in the pecking order. It is counterproductive to design education around competition for PISA; paradoxically, a high ranking is more likely to result from in-depth learning and co-operation than testing and competition.

An essential step is to replace Ofsted with a more enlightened and supportive form of evaluation, based on providing external support for school self-evaluation and (as with pre-Ofsted HMI) praising and disseminating good practice and successful innovation.

There is a role for final summative assessment, but this should balance written examinations with more authentic forms of assessment as exemplified by the Queensland experiment with ‘rich tasks’.

Age-appropriate learning

A century of research into children developing knowledge has taught us how much

this depends on their personal engagement with the realities they experience, and reflection on that experience mediated by language and other cultural tools. This involves shifting fluently between different levels of concrete experience and abstract representation (simulations, algebra, maps, narrative, explanation, etc.), applying ideas and skills from the past, collaborating with others, and stepping back to evaluate and re-plan the learning process. There are serious limitations to what can be acquired through rote learning, memorisation and behaviourist conditioning.

These social constructivist processes cannot outreach a child's development. Treating young children like battery hens results in alienation, demoralisation and the superficial accumulation of data.

Entitlement combined with flexibility

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

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

Learning without limits

Old assumptions continue of an inherited, measurable and fixed intelligence. Despite the fact that Cyril Burt's research was discredited decades ago, myths of fixed intelligence continue to have a profound impact on education practice. One of the forms this takes is the division of children from the age of five into 'ability groups', without questioning what differences of prior experience create the impression of differences of 'ability'. Inevitably such divisions reproduce social hierarchies, and limit achievement through lower expectations and a limited curriculum (known in the USA as 'pedagogies of poverty'). This sits oddly, of course, with constant government demands to raise expectations and attempts to blame teachers for the impact of poverty. The way forward is not to apportion blame or increase pressure

but to enrich experience, bridge between everyday and high-status academic knowledge, and combine timely help with weak literacy skills with an interesting and challenging curriculum.⁸⁸

Support and development

New forms of professional development will be necessary to support teachers in a more open environment. We can learn lessons from the past (local authority teachers' centres, advisers and curriculum projects; national projects and teacher networks; collaboration with professional associations such as NATE and ASE)⁸⁹ and forge new relationships, including support from university departments and other specialist practitioners as exemplified by *Creative Partnerships*.

Schools which aspire towards greater innovation should be encouraged and recognised, with support and evaluation from universities. The notion of 'beacon schools' needs reviving. However, the pressure to produce improved attainment within two or three years, which has marred and shipwrecked many projects in recent decades, must be avoided.

The benefit from teachers collaborating to plan new curriculum units and teacher activities cannot be overemphasised. These are more thoughtfully designed and can be used time and again if successful. Teacher-research produces new insights and refines practice. Masters degrees should provide access to new knowledge and alternative practices, as well as the incentive to apply them practically.

Some lessons from elsewhere

A further source of support, in this struggle for a richer vision, comes from other education systems whose teachers have not been subject to the same pressures of surveillance. We can find in some places a richer repertoire of teaching methods, including what I have elsewhere referred to as 'open architectures'. These pedagogies use a loose or flexible structure which both maintains coherence – a learning community – and gives individuals and groups greater scope for autonomy. A characteristic feature is that key skills (research, statistical interpretation, sociological surveys, online publication) are applied to rich contexts and problems, and that learning generally leads to a visible product, performance or presentation.

Examples include, among others, project method, storyline, collective versions of design and technology, video production, citizens' theatre, online or live simulations, and locally based investigations. Although more difficult to 'measure', such pedagogical forms are more likely to lead to high achievement in terms of the various aims of education, whether a preparation to contribute to the economy and social wellbeing, personal and cultural development, or democratic global citizenship.

Finally, to convince the sceptics, it is worth noting the following key features of Finland's national curriculum, as a demonstration that 'world-class schools' do not depend on an educational straitjacket:

1. an enlightened set of aims, emphasising democracy, environmental sustainability, multiculturalism, community and self-esteem
2. an open view of culture – education is not only a means of 'transferring cultural tradition from one generation to the next... it is also the mission of basic education to create new culture, revitalize ways of thinking and acting, and develop the pupil's ability to evaluate critically'
3. formal schooling starting two years later than in England, around the age of 7, until which point children learn informally in kindergarten, and those speaking other languages at home being expected to learn Finnish more gradually
4. a gradual division into subjects, so that history is introduced in grade 5, and environmental and natural studies dividing up gradually, to become geography and separate sciences in grade 7 (the equivalent age to England's Y7 and Y9);
5. cross-curricular themes are emphasised from the start
6. no national testing until age 19
7. a curriculum well matched to age and stage of development, in terms of interests and cognitive development
8. full recognition of modern media and genres
9. an emphasis on problem-solving, interpretation, creativity and experience.⁹⁰

Conclusion: a curriculum for the future

The process has begun of envisaging an alternative to the existing 'common sense' of standardisation and punitive state control of curriculum, teaching and learning. Working from different platforms, groups of teachers, parents and academics have presented what is adding up to a very powerful critique of both New Labour neoliberal functionalism and the New Right restorationism of Coalition policy. This discussion covers the aims of education, the limitations of high-stakes surveillance and target setting, the damage caused by a premature start to formal learning, the need for in-depth thinking rather than rote learning, the relationship between abstract ideas and experience, and so on. An illuminating example is the Primary Charter; this began modestly as a suggestion from the floor during a local conference called by a London NUT division, gained the support of national unions, and is being rolled out through regional conferences. The Charter presents an inspiring but realistic vision, as a set of core principles, for the re-creation of a welcoming and engaging primary education rather than the Goveian hybrid of Victorian elementary school and mediocre prep school.

The draft Labour Party policy for education, in preparation for their election manifesto, provides an important opening for change by shifting the locus of quality control from national to local. Unfortunately it divides the population into two halves, to follow an 'academic' or 'vocational' curriculum from 16 and perhaps 14, thus removing once again the entitlement of the 'vocational' students to a broad and balanced curriculum (as in the 2006 Act), and leaving academic A-level studies unreformed. Unfortunately the draft policy lacks any in-depth thinking about educational purpose, other than to reiterate neoliberal functionalism and a crude academic-vocational division. It lacks the historical perspective, critical social understanding and curriculum analysis needed to offer a deep enough foundation for renewal on the basis of professional-public dialogue.

Lurking in the background of any discussion of educational futures is the global PISA evaluation⁹¹. A critical perspective on curriculum does not hide from the knowledge which the PISA evaluations have brought, though it must avoid policy being driven by knee-jerk responses to numerical data and league-table positions. England's policy makers should draw from the Finnish example an understanding that global excellence does not depend on battery-farming children, and that powerful cognitive

development and problem-solving abilities are perfectly compatible with a humane respect for children's own pace of development. Sadly the predominant response from policy makers amounts to reinforcing surveillance and control, selection, competition and privatisation; they should remember the old advice that when you're in a hole, the worst thing you can do is keep on digging.

Building a new National Curriculum requires first of all the removal of all the ill-measured and premature targets which Gove and his advisers have designed to pitch large numbers of primary schools into Ofsted failure and subsequent academisation. Secondly, as a collaborative process coordinated by a national forum representing all the major interest groups – not a cabal of ministerial appointees – a consensus can be built around a broad statement of entitlement, rather than the attempt to define every detail of knowledge and skill and dictate when they must be acquired. This degree of openness is necessary if we are to enable teachers to connect once more with learners, and help a new generation to draw on our scientific and cultural heritage to build their own understanding of the world they experience and inhabit, and for which they will soon become responsible.

Notes and References

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⁷⁸ A systematic critique of the final version is available as a powerpoint with speakers' notes, The new National Curriculum – damaging children and education, on the Primary Charter website, <http://primarycharter.wordpress.com> under Resources.

⁷⁹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-gove-will-bury-pupils-in-facts-and-rules-8540741.html> The letter was featured as the Independent's main front page article on 19 March 2013 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/100-academics-savage-education-secretary-michael-gove-for-conveyor-belt-curriculum-for-schools-8541262.html> and on the Telegraph's front page on the same day.

⁸⁰ The academic debate about England's PISA results remains unresolved. The starting point is a decline from 8th position (2000) to 23rd (2012) in reading, from 9th to 27th in maths, and from 4th to 16th in science. John Jerrim has argued that the decline is smaller, since the 2000 sample was too small and the results therefore unreliable. It is also important to recognise that new countries and states have entered since 2000, pushing England down the table. PISA has also shamed itself in

2012 by failing to acknowledge that Shanghai (the new gold medal winner) excludes the children of migrant workers – roughly half the child population – not just from PISA but from education itself beyond age 14. However none of these arguments contradict the fact that, in 2012, England's literacy and maths results remain uninspiring, despite two decades of relentlessly 'driving up standards', and that most of the countries scoring significantly lower are less developed European, Asian and Latin American countries along with the USA and Sweden which have embraced a similar marketised school system.

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The Centre for Labour and Social Studies (Class) is a new think tank established in 2012 to act as a centre for left debate and discussion. Originating in the labour movement, Class works with a broad coalition of supporters, academics and experts to develop and advance alternative policies for today.



128 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8TN
Email: info@classonline.org.uk
Phone: 020 7611 2569
Website: www.classonline.org.uk

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