

***THE CURRICULUM IN SUCCESSFUL PRIMARY SCHOOLS:
A RESPONSE***

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Introduction

This report is welcome, important and heartening. It shows that a commitment to high standards in literacy and numeracy is in no way incompatible with a curriculum which is rich, broad and diverse. It shows that contrary to opinion in some quarters, the National Curriculum as currently conceived *is* manageable. It portrays our most successful primary schools standing out against the myopic and pessimistic belief that 'education, education, education' means merely 'basics, basics, basics' and being prepared to defend a version of primary education in which the arts and humanities also have an important place. And at a time when prevailing views of primary education tend towards the dismally utilitarian – if it's not a 'skill' then forget it – the report shows that teachers at the educational front line can hold to a more generous vision and, what is more, they can make it work.

The report draws on the work of only 31 schools. However, to those who may be inclined to quibble about sample size, I suggest that the report gains added authority by confirming many things which we already knew from earlier studies from OFSTED, QCA and independent research on effective school and curriculum management and leadership. To take just one example, there is considerable overlap between the OFSTED findings and those of a study which I myself undertook in 1997-8 in conjunction with LEAs and schools in Birmingham, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Warwickshire. That study had a different focus – the work of curriculum managers, coordinators or subject leaders, or a specific aspect of the wider theme of curriculum management dealt with by OFSTED – but it identified conditions for success (and failure) which are consistent with those in the OFSTED study (see appendix).¹

Yet there *are* only 31 schools here out of some 20,000, and this raises an obvious question: what, in terms of the criteria of this study, is the proportion nationally of 'successful', 'partly successful' and 'unsuccessful' schools? The sampling information is provided in paragraph 13 of the report, so we know that of the 3,508 primary schools inspected in 2000/01, just 89 schools at KS1 and 117 at KS2 met this study's criteria of excellent curriculum range and quality combined with high test scores in English and maths. Can we deduce from this that nationally a mere 6% of primary schools are 'successful' in these terms and 94% are not? Or is it less clear-cut than that, and is there – as one would expect – a continuum, with a substantial proportion of schools which coming close to those in the sample. It would be

¹ Alexander, R.J. (ed) (1998) *Time for Change: primary curriculum managers at work*, Warwick: CREPE and Oxford: NPC (available from Institute of Education, University of Warwick, or the National Primary Centre).

helpful if this could be clarified, since we are invited to consider ‘How can the best match the rest?’ and we need to know the scale of the challenge).

But having raised this necessary question, I’d also want to argue that 6% - if that’s what it is – is sufficient to demonstrate that excellence across the full primary curriculum is indeed achievable, even only 6% is sufficient, and I’d like to identify four constituencies who now need to sit up and take particular notice of the report’s findings and implications:

- those heads and teachers who believe that it is difficult or impossible to give children a rounded education at the same time as aiming for high standards in literacy and numeracy;
- those in the unions who have responded to teachers’ anxieties about curriculum manageability by lobbying government for an *educational* rather than a *managerial* solution to the problem - that is, cutting back the curriculum rather than improving the way the curriculum is managed;
- those ministers who have been happy enough to trot out the principles of curriculum ‘breadth’, ‘balance’ and ‘entitlement’ but in their actions have shown that this is mere rhetoric;
- the recently-established Primary Education Board chaired by Minister Cathy Ashton which at this very time is looking at these matters and has considered the utterly mistaken option of making the primary curriculum more ‘manageable’ by cutting back the arts and humanities.

To all these groups, and especially to the Ashton group, we should say, clearly and loudly: a broad, rich and diverse primary curriculum *is* not only possible but essential. The primary curriculum as currently conceived, is *not* inherently overloaded. The problem, when it happens – and clearly in many schools there is indeed a problem – is not the curriculum as such but the way it is planned, managed and delivered, and it’s therefore with curriculum planning, management and delivery that we should be concerned. Meanwhile, please protect absolutely the principle of breadth and balance. Do not compromise it one jot. Do not sacrifice children’s entitlement to a broad and balanced education on the altar of political expediency. The problem, I repeat, is not the curriculum, but what schools do with it.

This marks out my general position on this excellent document. Now to more specific matters. I’m not going to go through the report in detail. Instead I want to highlight four important areas of concern: the report has attended to two of them but in my view has given insufficient attention to the other two. The areas are:

- the relationship between curriculum breadth and balance and standards in literacy and numeracy;
- the co-ordinator and other curriculum-related roles, and wider issues of staffing and funding;
- the relationship between the successful delivery of high and consistent standards across the curriculum and the quality of teaching;
- the future of the primary curriculum.

Breadth, balance and standards in literacy and numeracy

The OFSTED report shows not just that the 31 schools achieved high standards in *all* subjects, including (para 15) 'standards which were well above average in English and mathematics', but that curriculum breadth and consistency actually contributed to the latter, because (p 7) 'pupils applied the knowledge and skills learned in one subject to others thus reinforcing their learning and increasing their understanding and confidence.'

One reason why I get impatient with those who think that the way to raise standards in the basics is by cutting back the rest of the curriculum – my main reason of course is that it sells children short – is that this essential symbiosis between the basics and the rest has been common knowledge for a quarter of a century. The 1978 HMI primary survey found that the schools who performed best in the basics invariably did so in the context of a broad curriculum encompassing work in the arts and humanities which was well planned and taught, so that standards in the basics were matched by consistency and coherence overall. That survey also found that there was a clear correlation between standards and teachers' subject knowledge, and *that* finding led to the development of the curriculum co-ordinator/subject leader role and indeed to the whole idea of whole-school curriculum management.

Ten years later we had a national curriculum, and within a short space of time curriculum overload and manageability became a major cause for anxiety. Those who remember the 17 attainment targets for science and the 14 for maths in the Mark I national curriculum will no doubt argue that the overload claim – on that occasion at any rate – was well merited, though even then there were schools which, like the 31 in the 2002 OFSTED report, made it work. Yet the overload claims led to Dearing and to a simplification of the national curriculum, though strictly within the original 1988 framework of ten foundation subjects of which three were designated the 'core'.

This Mark II national curriculum was introduced in 1995. But three years later it was complicated by the addition of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, which were developed not by the agencies with statutory responsibility for the National Curriculum, SCAA and its successor QCA, but by entirely separate outfits answerable directly to ministers – direct curriculum rule, if you like, from Westminster. This ensured that the strategies were simply bolted onto the existing curriculum rather than developed to have that symbiotic relationship which the 1978 HMI survey had shown was so important.

So, almost inevitably, within a few months of the strategies' implementation the overload/manageability problem claims re-surfaced, for – as with National Curriculum Mark I – nobody had bothered to examine the logistical and educational implications of the strategies for the rest of the curriculum. This time, however, the political stakes were higher, for the Secretary of State had linked his own ministerial survival to the 2002 literacy and numeracy targets. There were two consequences of this political gesture. The first was that the government prevented the 1997-9 review of the national curriculum from being as radical as it needed to be, insisting to QCA that nothing must be allowed to rock the targets boat. The other was that there were those close to government who went even further, arguing that the targets would be achieved, and the overload perceptions would be addressed, only if the rest of the curriculum were drastically cut back. After much behind-the-scenes lobbying, the result was the 1998 'flexibility' compromise whereby schools were expected to honour the requirement to teach all the non-core subjects but were required only to 'have regard to' the programmes of study, deciding for themselves how much – or how little – of them to include. The result, as the evidence from OFSTED, QCA and the OISE

evaluations of NLNS has depressingly revealed, is that for a generation of children the statutory entitlement to breadth and balance has been a lottery and in many cases a sham. In the 31 schools featured in this report, and others like them, children have received their entitlement, and, by all accounts, in generous measure. Elsewhere, they have not.

Meanwhile, almost unnoticed – certainly it wasn't publicised by DfEE/DfES – there appeared another OFSTED report confirming yet again the independence of the basics and the rest of the curriculum. In 1996 OFSTED was asked by DfEE to examine the relationship between the 1996 KS2 SAT results and curriculum breadth. The question DfEE asked was 'Had schools which did well in the 1996 tests done so at the expense of curriculum breadth and diversity?'

The main finding of the report, published in 1997, was almost identical to the HMI finding of 1978. This time, however, OFSTED reported on the downside as well:

Schools which did well in the tests also provided a broad and balanced curriculum ... On average, schools awarded a high grade for curriculum balance and breadth score well in the tests *and those awarded lower grades score less well* [my italics]. This trend persists across all schools analysed, regardless of their context.²

Now, in 2002, that relationship is confirmed yet again. Isn't it therefore time that everyone finally accepted that curriculum breadth, balance and consistency – and *genuine* breadth and balance rather than the tokenism which has occurred in many schools during the past two or three years – should be treated as absolutely non-negotiable?

The co-ordinator and other curriculum-related roles, staffing and funding

The OFSTED 2002 report says a lot about heads, class teachers and indeed teaching assistants, but rather less than perhaps it should have about subject leaders (or 'co-ordinators' as the report calls them, thus reverting to the 1978 term after toying over the years with 'consultant', 'adviser', 'subject leader' and 'curriculum manager'). This omission is a pity, for earlier studies tended to argue that the development and proper deployment of co-ordinators were critical to the coherence and quality of the curriculum as planned and delivered.

The other reason why it would have been good to have had more information about the work of co-ordinators in the 31 successful schools is that, like the matter of the relationship between the basics and the rest of the curriculum, the debate on this one has tended to run on and on, inconclusively, when it needed to be resolved.

Clearly, this lack of resolution has been in large part to do with money. A succession of reports, starting as long ago as Hadow in 1931 and continuing with Plowden in 1967, the 'three wise men' report of 1992, and the Commons Education Select Committee reports of 1986 and 1994, argued that primary schools needed to be staffed more generously than the funding formula of the day allowed and that the primary-secondary funding differential – born of the bad old days of 'cheap but efficient' elementary education – was no longer defensible. Several of those reports rested their case for funding parity on the need for schools to have sufficient flexibility to be able to use curriculum co-ordinators not just in

² OFSTED/DfEE (1997) *National Curriculum Assessment Results and the Wider Curriculum at Key Stage 2: some evidence from the OFSTED database*, OFSTED.

whole-school planning but also within the classroom. The 1986 Select Committee argued that to facilitate the proper use of co-ordinators and to generate the necessary time and flexibility, all but the smallest school should be staffed on the basis of head, one teacher for each class, and one extra teacher, and they calculated that this would require the appointment of 15,000 additional teachers.³ The case was accepted by the then Secretary of State, Keith Joseph, but shortly afterwards he was moved to another post.⁴ More specifically, the 1994 Select Committee report argued that the primary-secondary funding differential was indefensible for a variety of reasons but chiefly because it denied curriculum co-ordinators what they called Monitoring and Support Time (MAST) to enable them to monitor and work with colleagues 'while teaching is in progress', which they regarded as no less crucial than whole-school curriculum planning. This idea was strongly supported at the time by OFSTED, but subsequently their support for classroom-based intervention by co-ordinators became more muted.⁵

Also partly dependent on adequate funding was the idea, offered by the 'three wise men' report of 1992, that schools should be prepared to be more flexible in the ways they deployed staff, bearing in mind that the role of generalist class teacher was only one of several possibilities. They proposed a continuum ranging from 'generalist' (i.e. the traditional class teacher role) through 'generalist/consultant' (i.e. class teacher with a curriculum co-ordinator responsibility) and 'semi-specialist' to 'specialist'. They - we - said:

We do not think that any one of these possibilities is the answer on its own and we recommend that each school should work out its particular combination of teaching roles in the light of two principles: ... that the pattern of staff deployment must serve pupils' needs ...[and] that the strategy must work from the professional strengths of the staff and build on both their subject knowledge and their expertise in respect of specific age groups or pupils.⁶

That idea didn't get very far, partly because the then government simply passed the buck to LEAs, partly because of the likely uproar it would cause in secondary schools, but partly, too, because of professional unwillingness to consider alternatives to the combined generalist-consultant/co-ordinator role. Indeed so strong was professional sensitivity on this score that many teachers attacked the 'three wise men' report for recommending a shift to full specialisation when even a cursory reading showed that it recommended nothing of the sort.

So the new OFSTED report, in touching on the way that co-ordinators work, should remind us that these debates of the 1980s and 1990s about primary funding, professional roles and staff deployment have not been resolved. It is time for them to be revisited, for - as I myself argued as long ago as the early 1990s - there's nothing sacrosanct about the class teacher system. Today's primary schools merely inherited it from their Victorian elementary school

³ House of Commons (1986) *Achievement in Primary Schools: Third Report from the Education, Science and Arts Select Committee*, HMSO.

⁴ I provided all this historical background in some detail in the written evidence I gave to the Select Committee. This, together with the Committee's important discussions of MAST, are in House of Commons (1994) *The Disparity in Funding Between Primary and Secondary Schools: Education Committee Third Special Report*, TSO. The then government rejected the Committee's recommendations about rectifying the funding anomaly.

⁵ See, e.g. OFSTED (1996) *Subjects and Standards*; OFSTED (1997) *Using Subject Specialists to Promote High Standards at Key Stage 2: an illustrative survey*.

⁶ Alexander, R.J., Rose, J., Woodhead, C. (1992) *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools: a discussion paper*, DES/DfES

predecessors, for whom it had the simple virtue of being the cheapest way to provide the masses with a minimal basic education.⁷

So, in sum, I'd like to have answers to these questions about the 31 schools. What did their co-ordinators do which was distinctive? Did they work alongside teachers in classrooms as well as at whole-school level? How did schools create time for this? How did they relate to the overall network of roles and relationships concerned with managing the curriculum?

Inside the classroom

If the new report says relatively little about the part played by co-ordinators in securing successful curriculum management and delivery, it says little more about classroom practice. For me, though I have said how warmly I welcome and endorse the report, this is its most serious omission.

Much, of course, is made of how the school day in the 31 schools was managed (and in this the report can usefully be read alongside the recent QCA guide on *Designing and Timetabling the Primary Curriculum*)⁸, and about the setting of targets, about pupil self-assessment, about lesson planning and about resources. But I have no sense of the kind of teaching which contributed to the success of these schools. And even though this report doesn't provide that evidence, I'm absolutely sure that here as in other schools the quality of teaching was no less significant a factor than short, medium and long-term planning, or the head's leadership. I really did want to know more about how the teachers in these schools worked. We read that they mostly taught subjects separately but made good use of links across subjects. That was how they *planned* things. But how did that work in practice? What issues of subject expertise did separate subject teaching raise at classroom level? How were they resolved?

But beyond the subject issue there are more generic questions. How exactly were these classrooms organised? Presumably they did not suffer from the problem of excessive organisational complexity so frequently noted in research studies during the 1980s and 1990s. And if they managed space and pupils effectively and economically, how did they manage *time*? At whole school level time, we learn from the report, was used flexibly and imaginatively, often breaking with the old elementary school doctrine of 'basics in the morning when the children are fresh, the rest – because it doesn't really matter, does it? – in the afternoon'. But how was time used at the level of individual classrooms and lessons? This is an extremely important issue, for the international evidence shows that by comparison with many countries in continental Europe we do not tend to use lesson time as efficiently as we could – except perhaps in the context of the numeracy and literacy strategies, in which lesson time management has been given explicit attention. This is a matter partly of lesson structure and planning, partly of physical organisation, but especially it comes down to how we handle the fine detail of classroom interaction, and indeed the question of the balance of written and oral work – issues which came through strongly in the data from my comparative study of primary teaching in England and four other countries,⁹ and on which I've been doing further work recently with QCA, the national strategies and several LEAs, under the banner of 'dialogic teaching'.¹⁰ And we don't need to remind ourselves that interaction – or shall we call it 'oracy'? – is important in any debate about high

⁷ Alexander, R.J. (1984) *Primary Teaching*, Cassell.

⁸ QCA (2002) *Designing and Timetabling the Primary Curriculum*, QCA.

⁹ Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Blackwell.

¹⁰ Alexander, R.J. (2004) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk*, York: Dialogos.

standards and successful schools because of the weight of psychological evidence which shows that structured, challenging and extended talk is one of the key ingredients in children's learning and understanding, as well as in the development of that social confidence to which the OFSTED report *does* refer.

So alongside the treatment of co-ordinators, the absence of insight into the character and quality of teaching in these 31 schools is rather frustrating. The danger of the omission of the teaching dimension is that some will read the report as implying that the aspects of school life on which the report *does* concentrate - that is, whole-school issues like planning, management and leadership - are what matters most in achieving high standards within a broad curriculum. In today's managerialist climate, that could be unfortunate. Already it is being asserted in the wake of the 2002 KS2 test results (for example by the head of SEU) that strong leadership by the head is the key to maintaining the trajectory of NLNS. Evidentially it is quite wrong to make, or by omission to imply, so exclusive a claim. The successful delivery of the strategies is about good teaching first, good management second, and it is clear from independent studies of the pedagogy of the strategies in practice that while they have produced impressive change in classroom culture and organisation, at the deeper layers of classroom interaction, on which children's cognitive engagement and advancement most critically depend, the long-established habits of English primary classroom practice - closed teacher questions, minimal pupil responses, much praise but little feedback, little extended dialogue and so on - remain deeply rooted. French primary schools, which operate on the basis of very different managerial structures to ours, and with a concept of headship which to British eyes must look very understated, demonstrate the case succinctly: without good teaching, educational leadership is meaningless.

The curriculum

So far, I've identified three pieces of unfinished business in the debate about the curriculum in successful primary schools: (i) the relationship between curriculum breadth, balance and standards in the basics; (ii) professional roles in the primary school, including that of the co-ordinator, and related questions of funding; and (iii) the kinds of classroom teaching which deliver the high standards across the curriculum for which these 31 schools have been singled out. The other piece of unfinished business is the curriculum itself.

The report concludes that radical change to the content and organisation of the National Curriculum is unnecessary. I beg to differ, and strongly.

I believe that the report's conclusion on curriculum change is a *logistical* rather than an *educational* one. It has been claimed that the reason why many schools are failing to deliver the national curriculum in the breadth and depth required is that there is too much of it to deliver. Those who assert this then go on to argue that the only solution is to reduce the curriculum, either by cutting back on what is taught in the non-core subjects, or by cutting out some subjects altogether. The great strength of the OFSTED report is that it demolishes these despairing, anti-educational and ill-founded arguments - which, as I've said, have for some time been influential in DfES, winning a partial victory in 1997-8 and surfacing yet again at Baroness Ashton's Primary Education Programme Board. It is in this sense, I assume, that the report concludes that radical change to the content and organisation of the curriculum are unnecessary.

But if the logistical case has been made for retaining the KS1/2 curriculum in its present form, the educational case has not. Indeed, this was not within the OFSTED enquiry's remit,

for OFSTED's role is to inspect and report on the standards of school and classroom practice, not to define curriculum goals and content. However, as with the balance of attention given to whole-school and classroom factors, I'm a bit concerned at how the report's assertions about the future of the primary curriculum may be read. I can envisage that some will use the report to argue yet again, when the national curriculum comes up for its next review, that QCA mustn't rock the boat, and that 'curriculum review' means, as in 1993-4 and 1997-8, tinkering at the margins rather than tackling the fundamentals.

For I'm pretty sure of three things. First, ever since the idea of a national curriculum was first mooted, in 1986-7, successive governments have refused to address the one question which most urgently needed to be asked: 'What kind of a primary curriculum do our children need for the 21st century?' Second, the reasons that this essential question has remained unasked, and therefore unanswered, have to do with timidity, complacency, lack of imagination and the sheer power of historical habit. Third, one reason why in many schools curriculum overload is perceived as a problem is that the primary curriculum has been constructed by bolting more and more new bits onto the old, rather than rethinking the whole. The primary curriculum story started with the old elementary basics and a few trimmings. With elementary upgraded to primary there came a more serious engagement with the arts and humanities, while at the same time the boundaries of literacy and numeracy were extended to include wider aspects of language and mathematics. Since 1988 these have been supplemented by science, CDT, IT and PSHE, with citizenship and a foreign language waiting in the wings. Meanwhile, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and the tests have generated further pressures. At no time have those responsible had the wit or wisdom to call a halt, and ask whether this is actually a sensible way to devise a curriculum.

As for whether the accretions of 130 years of curriculum ad hocery add up to a coherent and forward-looking education for the nation's 5-11 year olds, I'd like - at the risk of beginning to sound like a cracked gramophone record (or its digital equivalent, whatever that is) - to quote from a paper which I submitted in connection with the last review of the National Curriculum, in 1997:

Nearly every official or quasi-official statement on how the primary curriculum should attend to this country's future has responded to its brief by repeating or at best marginally updating the curriculum of the country's past. The formula from which we seem so incapable of escaping is the one I once characterised as comprising a high priority, protected and heavily assessed 'Curriculum I' (justified by reference to utilitarian values like economic need), which is sharply differentiated from a low priority, vulnerable and unassessed 'Curriculum II' (justified by reference to vague notions of a 'rounded' or 'balanced' education).¹¹ The National Curriculum simply translated the Curriculum I/II divide into the vocabulary and attendant values of 'core' and 'other foundation' subjects.

Given that this is 1997 (now 2002), not 1870, the questions are as simple as they are necessary. Should core and non-core be so sharply differentiated? Even if a notion of 'basics' is as essential in the twenty-first century as it was in the nineteenth, should these 'basics' be defined in pretty well the same terms as they were when the task of elementary schools was to provide a minimal education for the urban poor with a view to ensuring social conformity and productive factories, that is to say, as

¹¹ Alexander, R.J. (1984) *Primary Teaching*, Cassell, chapter 3.

reading, writing and calculating (but not speaking, reasoning, questioning, speculating and arguing, for such activities were deemed subversive)?¹²

So, now as then, I would wish to suggest that the Ashton Primary Education Board's 'new strategy for primary education' will be pretty pointless if it leaves unexamined what in its structure and values, if not in its detailed content, is essentially an updated version of the Victorian elementary school curriculum.

So we *must* be allowed to reconsider the notions of 'breadth' and 'balance'. What is the range of learning encompassed by a supposedly broad curriculum? Are we talking of a broad range of subjects, or breadth *within* subjects, or both? And what subjects?

And we *must* be allowed to reconsider the idea of 'basics': nobody, least of all myself, disputes the importance of literacy and numeracy, but is the old formula of reading, writing and calculating a sufficient response to today's very different world? And indeed is the very idea of 'basics', as a core within the core, still helpful?

And we *must* be allowed to question the received view of the core curriculum. Again I quote from my 1997 paper:

A modern conception of primary education, one which will properly serve the needs of children and society in the new century, needs, almost certainly, a core curriculum of some kind, but it must include a wider spectrum of knowledge, understanding and skill than the current idea of three core subjects allows. For the great mistake in 1987/8, when the national curriculum was introduced, was to treat *core curriculum* and *core subjects* as synonymous. This was a mistake which a number of other countries avoided.

In case this seems too radical, there is actually a fairly easy way of tackling it. First, examine the existing orders and ask not which of the ten subjects listed should be in the core and which outside it, but *which aspects of each subject* are essential to a complete education – for it is what lies beneath the subject labels, rather than the labels themselves, which matters most. Doing this counters the 'winner takes all' consequences of the current approach, whereby because one aspect of a core subject (numeracy in mathematics, for example) is undeniably essential, every other aspect of that subject is given ring-fenced 'core' status and is treated as *de facto* more important than those aspects of the non-core subjects which by any reasonable definition are of greater significance. In the alternative dispensation, the curricular equivalent of proportional representation, we would almost certainly find that the core ought to contain aspects of those subjects currently relegated to the margins of 'other foundation'.

The exercise as presented here has the virtue of manageability within current constraints and time-scales. The more radical variant, however, is to cease to treat the existing subject canon as sacrosanct. On this basis, the sequence would be: (i) revisit and update our account of the purposes of primary education; (ii) identify and map

¹² The SCAA paper is reprinted as Alexander, R.J. (2001) 'Basics, cores and choices: prospects for curriculum reform, in J.Soler, A.Craft, H.Burgess (ed) *Teacher Development: exploring our own practice*, London: Paul Chapman, 2001, pp 26-40.

out the knowledge, understanding and skill which will achieve these purposes (and which, inevitably, would include aspects of some existing subjects alongside other fields hitherto given more marginal status); (iii) identify, in respect of each field mapped out, the knowledge, understanding and skill which are truly essential at KS1 and 2 (no longer treating 'primary' as monolithic); (iv) define these as the core.

This new core – a core curriculum rather than core subjects – would not need a second tier of lower-priority 'other foundation' subjects to meet the statutory requirements of breadth and balance, for it would be in itself considerably broader and more balanced than the current triumvirate. Beyond the new core curriculum, therefore, would be a combination of discretionary elements and options which would also include wider aspects of some subjects in the core.

Can I toss in another squib? The conclusion to the OFSTED report (paras 85-8) raises some very important questions about the *control* of the curriculum in the context of the debate about whether it should be slimmed down. It argues for schools to have greater flexibility, though it also cautions against reducing the curriculum to a statutory minimum. There are dilemmas here, then: the balance of prescription and freedom, and of within-school ownership and between-school consistency, in the context of the principle of *entitlement* which a national curriculum necessarily embodies.

One of the problems here is the way the national curriculum has expanded to become the whole curriculum whereas it was originally intended to be but a part of the whole (and whatever happened to Dearing's 20%?). If we rethink the idea of core curriculum as I have proposed, we could recover the room for manoeuvre which was originally envisaged.

We might go further, and emulate those countries which combine a national curriculum with protected school-level components. In Russia, for example, the formula is 60:30:10 – the national component accounts for 60% of the time, a distinct regional or local component for 30% and a unique school component for 10%. It doesn't always work very well, the precise proportions are open to question and – well – Russia is Russia – but the principle is worth considering. After all, if 'one size fits all' schools are no longer acceptable, how can a 'one size fits all' curriculum continue to be justified? The combination of national, local and school components, provided that the proportions are right, protects entitlement, cross-school consistency and cross-phase continuity, while also encouraging diversity. It's an idea whose feasibility in the English context should be explored.

In any event, I hope I've convinced you that though the OFSTED evidence from your 31 schools shows that contrary to popular belief the national curriculum *is* manageable in its present form, and that rather than cut back the curriculum schools should be looking to how they plan, timetable, manage and teach it more effectively and economically, there nevertheless remains an *educational* case for reviewing the curriculum's purposes, structure and content.

Conclusion

I've commended the OFSTED report as welcome, important and heartening, and as showing that the pessimists are wrong and that breadth and balance are feasible as well as desirable. I've also identified four areas where there's 'unfinished business', or scope for further work, and I've argued:

- that curriculum breadth, balance and consistency and standards in literacy and numeracy are closely and necessarily connected; this finding is an absolute constant in inspection evidence going back to 1978 and ought finally to dispel the idea that cutting back on the wider curriculum will raise standards in the basics;
- that in reconsidering curriculum management we need to probe further the played by co-ordinators, and to develop more flexible professional roles and patterns of staffing; and as recommended in numerous reports and enquiries primary schools need to be funded so as to permit this flexibility and to enable co-ordinators to achieve their potential, especially through monitoring and support inside classrooms while teaching is in progress;
- that we need to know rather more about the kinds of teaching, and especially the kinds of teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interaction, with which successful delivery of both literacy and numeracy and the wider curriculum were associated; and we need to ensure that the report's emphasis on whole-school and management issues doesn't detract attention from the fundamental importance of effective teaching;
- that though the current national curriculum is manageable, on educational grounds it still needs to be reviewed; that such review should stop regarding ideas like 'basics' and 'core subjects' as sacrosanct just because they've been around a long time; and that we should work towards a rather different conception of the core primary curriculum, and a different balance of national prescription and school autonomy.

APPENDIX

Curriculum Management in Primary Schools (CCPS) study, Birmingham, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire & Warwickshire LEAs, 1997-8

From: Alexander, R.J. (ed) (1998) *Time for Change: primary curriculum managers at work*,
NPC/CREPE

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

- Positive leadership by head, but in the context of delegated curriculum responsibilities.
- Curriculum leaders have clearly defined roles and are given the status, power and resources needed to do their job.
- Staff think and act collegially and collectively: team work essential.
- Proactive, rolling and long-term approach to curriculum planning.
- Vision combined with realism but not compromised by it.
- Good within-school communication – horizontal as well as vertical.
- Good relationships with governors, parents and the community.
- Supportive LEA.
- Curriculum leaders are able to work with colleagues *in their classrooms* as well as at whole-school level.

OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS

- Lack of time and/or resources.
- Lack of LEA support.
- Teachers' pressure of multiple responsibilities.
- Inadequate specialist curriculum expertise.
- Badly-managed workloads.
- Rigid and/or overly hierarchical management.
- Poor communication.
- Lack of teamwork.