BASICS, CORES AND CHOICES:
prospects for curriculum reform

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The primary curriculum is on the move again - or is it? This chapter could be viewed as being of merely historical interest but for the fact that history teaches us that when the dust of curriculum reformist rhetoric subsides we usually find that change has been outweighed by continuity, the things which most need to change persist unaltered, and the lessons of the past have been studiously ignored.

The chapter originated as a contribution to the review which led to the introduction of a revised National Curriculum from September 2000.[1] The review was initiated by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) and taken over by its successor, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). This chapter was one of a number of papers which SCAA commissioned for a national conference on how the review might affect the primary curriculum. The conference took place shortly after New Labour's May 1997 landslide election victory on the slogan 'education, education, education'. The new government honoured its predecessors' commitment to national curriculum review, but reduced the review's options by placing the key areas of literacy and numeracy under direct ministerial control. These were made the subject of separate strategies which prescribed in considerable detail not only content but also time allocations, lesson structure and teaching methods.[2] This was the first time in recent history that national government had sought to control pedagogy as well as curriculum.

This, in bare outline, is the background. The paper remains pretty well as it was first presented, though I have added a brief postscript on how matters stand three years on.

Prospects for curriculum reform

With the arrival of a government committed to 'education, education, education', the review of the National Curriculum will be either an event of the profoundest importance for the future of this country or a damp squib, a mere tinkering at the margins of the apparatus of orders, key stages, programmes of study, levels and assessment, which leaves their fundamentals intact and vital questions about the proper purposes of state education unanswered, and indeed unasked.

What clues as to the likely outcome of the review do we have so far? First, in its proper and necessary pursuit of higher standards of literacy and numeracy the government appears to be signalling not only that these are pre-eminent but also that they are all that matter. So, for 'education, education, education' it seems that we must read, at the primary stage anyway, 'basics, basics, basics'.[3] Second, the curriculum review *Framework* document suggests a certain ambivalence about the scope of the proposed review, offering on its first page a commitment to 'fundamental thinking and ... debate about the nature and structure of the school curriculum' while on its last page diffidently toning this down to 'a possible revision of the National Curriculum ... should this be felt to be necessary'.[4]

This shift, incidentally, reasserts the reductionism of the period since 1988. ERA started with a concept of curriculum in which the National Curriculum was the innermost of three circles; beyond it were a 'basic' curriculum and, beyond that, a 'whole' curriculum. Since then, 'national' and 'whole' have become synonymous (and this was underscored in the change of name from a National Curriculum Council to a School Curriculum and Assessment Authority). The cross-curricular themes, skills and dimensions of the 1988-9 National Curriculum Mark 1 disappeared without trace in Dearing's 1993 National Curriculum Mark 2, implemented in 1995; while the 1996 values consultation paper from SCAA and the National Values Forum[5], which was widely commended as a reinstatement of social morality in the face of that notorious Thatcherite *fiat* 'there is no such thing as society', was ousted from the agenda, like so many other educational initiatives of real worth, by the more dependable appeal of 'standards' and 'basics'.

To express the problem thus is not to imply that the course plotted since 1988 is fixed for all time. Rather, my concern in beginning in this vein is to direct attention to the gravity - and excitement - of the choice we confront. We have an opportunity to match the millennial rhetoric with genuinely millennial decisions. Whether we seize this opportunity depends on those who participate in this review and, above all, on the government. My own position is clear. The review must be a radical one, and it must be allowed freely to engage in versions of the primary curriculum for the 21st century which are markedly different from the one imposed on the country in 1988.

I want to rehearse three essential perspectives on the five 'key areas' nominated in the review *Framework* document, before commenting on some of the areas themselves. The perspectives set the post-1988 English model of the curriculum in the contexts of time, space and pedagogy. In such a brief chapter they cannot do more than start the ball rolling.

The context of time: lessons of history

There are two main lessons of history in the present context. The first is that we are unable to break free of it. The second, which is certainly not a paradox, is that people of power and influence tend to act as though history has nothing to teach them.

Thus, in its scope and balance (or imbalance) the 1988/1995 National Curriculum bore a striking resemblance to all of its primary and elementary predecessors, so much so that Dearing's 1993 assertion that 'The principal task of the teacher at Key Stage 1 is to ensure that pupils master the basic skills of reading, writing and number'[6] was uncannily close to the 1861 Newcastle Commission's assertion that 'The duty of a state in public education is to ensure the greatest possible quantity of reading, writing and arithmetic for the greatest number'. The other echo, explictly admitted by Kenneth Baker in 1987-8, was the public/grammar school emphasis, again reaching back into the nineteenth century, on a canon of bounded subjects including alongside the 'basics' the 'humanising' claims of history, geography and art, and - *mens sana* etc - PE.[7]

Thus it was that an act of Parliament bearing the proud label 'reform' could prescribe for our primary schools, regardless of all those debates about the curriculum in the 1970s and early 1980s (including the important HMI framework document *The Curriculum from 5 to 16*),[8] the familiar combination of elementary (3Rs), grammar (non-

core foundation) and Butler compromise (RE as compulsory yet separate). Thus it was that for all its radicalism on the social and physical context of primary education, the 1967 Plowden Report grounded its discussion of curriculum in the same far-from progressive subject labels that had framed curriculum discourse in this country for most of the previous century.[9] Thus it was that we were misled into presuming that the concerns about 'breadth' and 'balance' which exercised Dearing might yield, as they implied, discussion about what a broad and balanced curriculum ought to entail: instead, they were merely a shorthand for the logistical challenge of 'manageability' - how to fit an unquestioned model of curriculum more effectively into the time available. Thus it was that the pre-Dearing cross-curricular themes, skills and dimensions could not permeate the established curriculum in the way asserted but had to be bolted on to it - the more readily to be unbolted a couple of years later. And thus it is that nearly every other official or quasi-official statement on how the 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 characterised in a book published in 1984 as comprising a high priority, protected, and heavily assessed 'Curriculum I' (justified by reference to utilitarian values like economic need), sharply differentiated from a low priority, vulnerable, unassessed 'Curriculum II' (justified by reference to vague notions of a 'rounded' or 'balanced' education).[10]

Given that this is 2000, not 1870, the historical questions are as simple as they are necessary. Should 'core' and 'basics' be treated as synonymous? Should core and non-core be so sharply differentiated? Even if a notion of 'basics' is as essential at the primary stage 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 well-run factories?

The other lesson of history I identified was late twentieth-century arrogance about its significance. A striking feature of many educational pronouncements during the interventionist 1980s and 1990s is the failure to acknowledge and build on past thinking and practice. In academic writing the condition is manifested by those who cite no research earlier than, say, 1990 and thus rather than break new ground by building systematically on the work of their predecessors at best replicate it, at worst achieve not even that. The principle of 'cumulation', so important in the physical sciences, seems to be poorly understood in education. Similarly, in the policy arena, the 'new' curriculum models and agendas, as we have seen, are in fact dispiritingly old, and the so-called debate on pedagogy is actually going backwards.

Why is this? The charitable explanation is laziness, or perhaps amnesia induced by policy overload. Where academics and politicians are concerned, however - for they can make no such excuse - a rather more venal motive may be at work: that of knowingly ignoring or misrepresenting past ideas and achievements in order to buttress present claims to originality, radicalism and authority. 1997, for the Blair government, was 'year zero', the start of a 'modernising' crusade which would explicitly belittle or ignore the achievements and lessons of previous decades, and marginalise alternative viewpoints as 'the forces of conservatism'.

The context of space: lessons of international comparison

We are by now familiar with the exercise of international comparisons in education. Hard on the heels of the IEA, IAEP, OECD, TIMSS and other league table exposures of the country's poor educational performance (as judged, inevitably, in terms of 'Curriculum I' outcomes only), have come the solutions: homework, text books and 'interactive' whole class teaching, as used in Switzerland, Germany, and Taiwan.[11] Informing these prescriptions are two questionable assumptions: first, that there is a direct, linear and causal relationship between pupils' test scores in reading, number or science and a country's economic performance;[12] second, that there is a similar relationship between these test scores and the presence or absence of whole class teaching. Ergo, we are told, a régime of interactive whole class teaching will reverse the years of national decline and propel Britain up the league tables of educational and economic performance.

International comparison is both essential and instructive, as those of us who are engaged in it have discovered, but it is genuinely instructive - in the sense of offering insight rather than soundbite - if applied comprehensively and with due regard for the conventions of empirical research, rather than selectively. The current cause-effect analysis, for example, is an exercise in less than rigorous correlation which conveniently ignores those countries with high test scores in the basics but problematic economies; and those with poor test scores but booming economies. And it ignores the fact that being almost a universal feature of primary education whole class teaching can be shown to correlate, world-wide, with every level of educational and economic performance which we may care to identify - high, low, middling and all points in between. Apart from that, the advocates of this solution to our problems display a pretty poor understanding of the research evidence on whole class teaching itself, as Maurice Galton has argued[13]. For that necessary understanding, prefixing 'interactive' is no substitute.[14]

The current vogue for international comparison ignores other lessons too, and these bear pressingly on the review of the school curriculum. In contrast, as is shown in the QCA-sponsored NFER comparison of curriculum and assessment in sixteen countries, the universal dominance of the 3Rs at the primary stage, like the near-universal dominance of whole class teaching, is only part of the story. Thus, if we take the sixteen countries featured in the NFER analysis,[15] we find that at the primary stage:

- the national language and mathematics are compulsory in all sixteen countries;
- science, art, PE and societal/civic education are compulsory in all but two of them;
- a modern foreign language, technology, history, geography and music are compulsory in something over half of them;
- religious education, environmental studies, moral education, domestic science and lifeskills are compulsory only in a small minority of them.

Put another way, England at the primary stage goes against the international trend (a) in excluding societal/civic education; (b) in excluding a modern foreign language; (c) in making religious education compulsory. And in common with several other countries it relegates, at least as far as the official curriculum is concerned, areas like environmental studies, health, moral education and lifeskills to the status of options.

Further, if we examine in greater detail the curricula of specific European countries with demographic and economic circumstances not unlike our own, we find that the critical point of variation is not my 'Curriculum I' (the three/four subject core) but 'Curriculum II' (the non-core foundation and beyond), and especially the extent to which children in their primary schools engage with the question of what it means to be a social being, whether as a member of a family or local community, or as a citizen in a democratic society, or as user, inheritor and custodian of finite global resources, or as part of an interdependent community of nations. It seems to me to be not insignificant that these are precisely the areas which feature most prominently in the National Forum for Values in Education framework to which I referred earlier. On the basis both of international comparison and national consensus, then, there are pointers here for curriculum review which we cannot afford to ignore.

Alongside these comparisons we might place others. Leaving aside for a moment the very different distribution of power between national government, local/regional government and schools in many other countries, or the sharp contrast between coercive/punitive and supportive/facilitative models of inspection, there is the matter of the balance in the curriculum of mandatory and optional, and of national requirement and local variant. Thus, to take Switzerland, one of the countries whose teaching methods our primary schools are being urged to copy, there is considerable local discretion and variation beyond the nationally-prescribed subjects of mother tongue, mathematics and a foreign language, so much so that it might invite even the most naive of international comparers to ask whether a centrally-prescribed curriculum really is one of the keys to raising educational standards. Certainly, many other countries have decided that reform is best served by loosening the grip of national government on curriculum and pedagogy and in this respect are heading in the opposite direction from England.

Finally, we might note that high standards in the 3Rs are not incompatible with a broad and balanced curriculum. On the contrary, the international evidence shows that the countries which outperform Britain in literacy and/or numeracy do so from a curriculum base which is often as broad as ours. Even the English inspection evidence confirms this,[16] though governments prefer to ignore the finding. 'Basics' wins votes; 'breadth and balance' does not.[17]

To reduce the richness of what is suggested by the international research evidence on curriculum and pedagogy to the shibboleths of phonics and whole class teaching is to reveal the mountain which has to be climbed before we in this country can have a proper debate about education in the 21st century.

The context of pedagogy: lessons of research on learning and teaching

If pedagogy is defined as the 'how' of education and curriculum as the 'what', then this section may seem irrelevant to questions about the purposes, structure and content of the primary curriculum. However, properly conceived, pedagogy is both the how and the what, for decisions about how to teach are, or ought to be, shaped in part by the character of the knowledge and understanding we wish children to acquire; and decisions about both of these are, or ought to be, inseparable from questions about how children develop and learn.

There is an immediate corollary for curriculum review. During the past decade or so, the argument that children's development and learning are essential ingredients of professional understanding and decision-making has in some quarters been rejected or ridiculed as tantamount to raising the (red) flag of 1960s progressivism. This nonsense - as unhelpful to the cause of improving educational standards as was the earlier tendency to argue that a concern for curriculum was incompatible with a concern for children, or that because young children do not see the world in terms of subjects then subjects have no place in the curriculum - can now be replaced by a saner and more comprehensive pedagogy which unites subject-matter, development, learning and teaching.

If we endorse this shift, we are bound to address two kinds of question. The first is about the nature of the primary curriculum as a whole. Is the proper model for the next century one which pushes down into Key Stage 1 knowledge structures which originate in the thinking and practices of those working at Key Stages 3 and 4, and indeed beyond? Can the evolved form of a subject, as Jerome Bruner argued nearly forty years ago, really be translated into a form which enables it to be taught 'effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development'?[18] Or should the foundations for later learning be laid in a different way, by mapping out two quite distinct kinds of knowledge and understanding: (i) those necessary to provide a foundation for KS3/4 subject learning; and (ii) those necessary in the here and now of early childhood and KS1? These objectives are not, as some tend to insist, mutually exclusive, but complementary. A complete education can attend to children's present as well as to their future, just as it can attend to personal fulfilment as well as to societal and economic need.

The second kind of question is more straightforward, and arises once the first has been answered. Having mapped out a curriculum structure which is both developmentally apposite and, in terms of subsequent stages of education, epistemologically coherent, how should the components of that structure, whether we call them subjects or something else, be translated into an appropriate and viable sequence or programme of learning tasks? What kind of 'scaffolding', to coin an important Vygotskian principle which is now in danger of becoming as bowdlerised as was 'discovery' in the 1960s, is needed to bridge what children know and what we want them to know?

To ask these questions is to risk incurring the response that we cannot afford to go back to the days when there were endless questions about the primary curriculum but no answers, a frustrating situation to which the then government's summary imposition of a nine/ten subject national curriculum might seem in retrospect to have been a fair or inevitable response. ('If you people don't sort out a way of defining the primary curriculum', Eric Bolton, one of the current HMCI's predecessors, presciently warned me in 1985, 'then the government will impose its own definition.') But in the primary world of the early 2000s there seems to be a clearer understanding than in the early 1980s of curriculum matters in general and epistemological matters in particular, and a greater willingness to acknowledge their importance. For this improved understanding the exercise of implementing the National Curriculum can take some of the credit. The climate for asking my two questions, fundamental though they are, is therefore as right now as it is ever likely to be.

So much for the first bout of ground-clearing. For the second we can go to the 'key areas for consideration' set out in the 1997 curriculum review framework document. They included questions - on each of which I shall now reflect - about the purposes of education,

the relationship of curriculum to lifelong learning and the world of work, and about curriculum flexibility and structure.

The purposes of education

The current arrangements provide some point of purchase on the all-important question of what a primary education is actually for, and it is good that in its 1997 review document SCAA was prepared to put this question first. For example, the sentiments in ERA's first chapter ('a broad and balanced curriculum which (a) promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society; and (b) prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life')[19] have been shown to be pretty meaningless. The National Curriculum is broad and balanced only in so far as it manifests the equilibrium of tautology: every child is entitled to a broad and balanced curriculum; the National Curriculum is every child's statutory entitlement; therefore the National Curriculum is a broad and balanced curriculum. In practice, it is clear that of the various purposes which a state education could properly pursue, utilitarian, and more specifically economic, imperatives have been paramount. In relation to all the other imperatives arising from a complex, pluralist society such as ours, and from the needs of individuals trying to make their way in that society, the National Curriculum may be fairly broad but it is not balanced: and balance rather than breadth is the real issue here.[20]

I stress - because in the context of this country's dichotomous way of looking at education I probably need to - that I strongly endorse the attention given to economic/workplace-directed purposes in our education system. However, a review of the National Curriculum must also recall and debate - for there was no debate the first time round - the other purposes with which these might or should be balanced. The new debate, therefore, will need to address some pretty searching questions about where the existing primary curriculum has attended, and where the new primary curriculum will attend, to:

- economic and workplace needs in the context of change, globalisation and uncertainty;
- individual development, freedom and fulfilment;
- personal and collective morality;
- social justice, cohesion and inclusion;
- culture, broadly and pluralistically conceived;
- the needs and obligations of the citizen in a democratic society.

In these matters, as I suggested earlier, we can learn from international comparisons. The educational purposes distilled from considering these six themes are fundamental rather than peripheral: in curriculum terms they must be intrinsic rather than bolted on.

Lifelong learning and the world of work

The essential truths to grasp in assessing how a primary curriculum can prepare for lifelong learning and the world of work are these. First, on the basis of current medical and demographic projections, there are children entering primary education now who will live

not just well into the 21st century but also into the 22nd. Second, the scale and unpredictability of change in the economic and occupational structure of this country are likely to be at least as great during the next century as they have been in the present one. Third, though 'the world of work' will impinge on everyone, individuals will be part of that world for but a proportion of their lives, and the imperative of lifelong learning is therefore both powerful and urgent.

The usual response to the mind-boggling implications of these truths is to talk vaguely about a curriculum for 'adaptability' and 'flexibility'. Admirable and necessary though these principles are, they generate two further problems. First, they cast the individual very much in the passive role of victim or recipient rather than active agent of social change (which takes us back to the issue of citizenship). Second, they carry no clue about implementation.

The curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2, therefore, must be above all an *empowering* one. Literacy (which must include IT and media literacy) provides one - in our world undoubtedly the most critical - kind of empowerment; numeracy another. But for the first and arguably most important stage of education these, *pace* Dearing, are not enough, and we need to identify alongside literacy and numeracy the other kinds of knowledge, understanding and skill which individuals will need in order actively to shape their lives rather than passively to get by. To those habituated by history into viewing state primary education as a means of ensuring subservience and conformity, this requirement will seem not - as it should seem - basic and obvious, but dangerously radical.

Flexibility

We no longer bother to ask what happened to Dearing's twenty per cent. The school curriculum and the National Curriculum are, to all intents and purposes, one. The invitation to consider the issue of flexibility is therefore welcome and important. National evidence indicates that the weight of current requirements for curriculum and assessment, even after Dearing's ministrations, allows little room for manoevre within, let alone beyond the National Curriculum. International evidence, on the other hand, shows some at least of our successful economic competitors providing a primary curriculum in which national requirements are contained so as to allow considerable scope both for the wider curriculum and local variation. The combination of both kinds of evidence suggests that in this country the current balance of statutory and discretionary is probably wrong.

The structure of the National Curriculum

When this question is framed in terms of programmes of study, attainment targets and so on, it begs, or possibly pre-empts, two others. First, is the sharp division of a national curriculum into a high-priority, narrowly-conceived core and a lower-priority array of 'other foundation subjects' appropriate? Second, what subjects (using the word neutrally, simply to indicate discernible components of a curriculum, rather than, necessarily, the traditional subjects with which we are familiar) should our particular national curriculum contain?

In this brief commentary I do not want to get into the business of PoSs and ATs. Rather, I'd hope that we can focus our attention on the need to challenge the current

notion of core/non-core, certainly at Key Stage 1, and probably at Key Stage 2 also. I have indicated my unease about the way the nineteenth century Curriculum I/II divide has fossilised into structures for social and educational circumstances which are manifestly different from those for which it was designed. Adding science and IT to the core was sensible enough, but no more than tinkering, and adding citizenship and a foreign language to these could make matters more difficult.

If we can become clearer about the purposes of the primary stage of education, and if we are prepared to accept - as invited above - a more generously-conceived balance of the economic, occupational, personal, cultural, moral, social and civic, then the inappropriateness of the current curriculum model will be understood. We need, almost certainly, a core curriculum of some kind; but it must include a much wider spectrum of knowledge, understanding and skill than the current idea of core subjects allows. Indeed, the great mistake in 1987/8 was to treat core *curriculum* and core *subjects* as synonymous.

In case this seems too radical, there is actually a fairly easy way of tackling it, at least for feasibility purposes. First, examine the existing Orders and ask not which of the nine KS1/2 subjects (and RE) should be in the core and which outside it, but which *aspects of every 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 subject (numeracy in mathematics, for example) is 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 should contain aspects of those subjects currently relegated to the margins of 'other foundation'.

This exercise would re-order priorities within the existing ten-plus-one canon of subjects and would seem to represent a minimal definition of what curriculum review should entail, though judged against the historical persistence of the 'basics plus' model it would represent a considerable change because it would give key aspects of the arts and humanities the protection from erosion which they have rarely enjoyed.

The exercise as presented here has the virtue of manageability within current constraints and time-scales, and of not requiring a programme of teacher re-training. The more radical variant, however, is to stop treating the existing subject canon as sacrosanct. On this basis, the sequence would be: (i) identify the purposes of primary education as invited; (ii) identify and map out those fields of knowledge, understanding and skill which, properly fostered, will achieve these purposes (these could well include some of the existing subjects alongside other fields hitherto relegated to the status of options and cross-curricular themes, as well as areas like a foreign language, citizenship and social education to which I referred earlier); (iii) identify, in respect of every field thus mapped out, those kinds of knowledge, understanding and skill which are 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.

Once this fundamental task is addressed, the second order questions about programmes of study, attainment targets and levels can be considered.

Conclusion

The debate now is about values first, structures and content second. In this context we might note that *Values in Education and the Community*, timely and well-conceived though it was, failed to engage as completely as it might with the existing curriculum. The document proposed an audit of the curriculum to discover where the proposed four key values and thirty principles could be located, but it failed to examine the values which the curriculum *already* reflects and manifests, for all aspects of the curriculum, of any curriculum, are suffused with values of some kind. To take one example, the pluralist thrust of the National Values Forum document could well be at odds with the cultural exclusivity (not to mention nationalism) which has driven some of the more prominent contributions to the debate about English, history and RE in recent years.

Even if the basic structure of the curriculum remains the same after the review it is essential to examine the value messages which it delivers about what matters most - and least - in the learning and life of individuals and in the culture and progress of society. There is little point in proposing a grand statement of educational purposes for the next century if the curriculum as prescribed and transacted does not reflect them.

We have a clear choice, as I have noted, between a fundamental rethink and adjustment at the margins. I want the former, which is all the more necessary now for having been avoided in 1987-8 and 1993-4. I do not for one moment deny the gains made at the primary stage since the muddle and inconsistency of pre-ERA laissez-faire were replaced by something altogether more coherent and purposeful. However, the case against allowing what in 1987-8 was an unexamined, ideologically-loaded and backward-looking model of curriculum to serve, by default, as the basis for state education in twenty-first century seems pretty powerful too, for a curriculum is validated by its purposes, not merely by being purposeful; and though pragmatic and logistical criteria for decisions about what and how to teach are important, they should be subsidiary to philosophical and ethical ones.

Nervousness about radical reform is understandable. The teaching profession is dispirited by over a decade of change piled upon change, and policy-makers want their agenda to be pursued and delivered without distractions. For this and other reasons we may well end up with no more than Son of Dearing, or the Bakerlite Curriculum Mark 3. Yet at least let us consider the alternatives. Among those floated in this paper, I would hope that we might look particularly at the case for five radical shifts:

- from values as optional extras to values as intrinsic;
- from the old 3Rs concept of 'basics' to one which reflects a fresh contemporary analysis of what is essential for both individual empowerment and social progress in the 21st century;
- from a small number of *core subjects* to a more broadly-conceived *core curriculum* which draws on a wider and more diverse spectrum of knowledge, understanding and skill;

- from a concept of KS1/2 conceived mainly as preparation for KS3/4 to one which also addresses the imperatives and needs of early and middle childhood;
- from a view of state education still enslaved by the elementary/grammar legacy of the nineteenth century to one which is attentive to the very different needs and circumstances of the twenty-first.

Postscript

That was what I said in 1997. How far have things changed since then and how far have my predictions and fears been confirmed?

There is room for both hope and concern. I anticipated that in arguing that we should start questioning the Victorian Curriculum I/II structure I might be regarded as dangerously radical, and so it was. Bang on cue government 'standards' tsar Michael Barber attacked me for being excessively pessimistic about the likely impact on the wider curriculum of the government's standards agenda. HMCI Chris Woodhead went considerably further, and accused me of proposing a model of 'empowerment' in which children do not learn to read.[21] Readers of this chapter can of course judge how preposterous this accusation was, though the press had a field day and I, Ted Wragg and John MacBeath (the other two academics singled out by Woodhead) were pilloried by the *Daily Mail* as 'the trio of academics failing our schools......at the real heart of darkness over falling pupil performance.'[22] As the debate developed during 1998 and 1999, a clear split emerged between proponents of the archetypal 'basics plus' version of the primary curriculum and those who wanted genuine modernisation. The latter included a broad and substantial coalition of opinion from industry, business, the arts and religion, as well as from education.

For its part, QCA (which by then, in one of life's finer ironies, I had been invited to join) showed genuine concern to keep options open, though it was somewhat boxed in by the government's 'standards' rhetoric. In 1999, citizenship, whose absence I had noted from international comparison as one of the more glaring curriculum anomalies, appeared at last in National Curriculum Mark 3, though at the primary stage it was to be non-statutory. Alongside it, though again non-statutory, were the National Values Forum statement and suggestions for modern foreign languages at Key Stage 2, both of which I had also commended. Meanwhile the IT/ICT revolution proceeded apace and the government pressed for trans-European school internet access to keep Britain and Europe competitive with the United States. Here, at least, there were to be major changes.

Yet though there was less overt talk of 'core' and 'other foundation' subjects the statutory range and hierarchy of the national curriculum remained firmly within the established Curriculum I/II framework. There were frequent pronouncements about the inability of English children to 'read, write, add up and do their times table', and government insisted that in order to guarantee its literacy and numeracy targets for the year 2002 as little of the curriculum should be altered as possible. For their part, teachers began to report that the Curriculum I/II divide was being exacerbated on a day-to-day basis by the pressures of the literacy and numeracy hour, and that history, geography, art, music and physical education were now vulnerable as never before. At the same time, though citizenship and an updated concept of personal and social education had appeared on the official scene, they were prevented from disturbing the historical status quo by being classified as optional.

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Notes and references

[1] DfEE and QCA (1999) *The National Curriculum: handbook for primary teachers in England.* London: DfEE/QCA.

[2] DfEE (1998) *The National Literacy Strategy: framework for teaching.* London: DfEE; DfEE (1998) *The Implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy: the final report of the Task Force.* London: DfEE.

[3] These words anticipated by seven months the Secretary of State's announcement of January 1998 that from September 1998 primary schools need not teach the previous-prescribed programmes of study in design and technology, history, art, music and PE.

[4] School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (1997) *Developing the School Curriculum: a Framework.* London: SCAA.

[5] National Forum for Values in Education and the Community (1996) *Consultation on Values in Education and the Community*. London: SCAA.

[6] Dearing, R. (1993) *The National Curriculum and its Assessment: Interim Report*. York and London: NCC/SEAC.

[7] Alexander, R.J. (1995) *Versions of Primary Education*, chapter 6. London and New York: Routledge.

[8] Department of Education and Science (1985) *The Curriculum from 5-16: Curriculum Matters 2.* London: HMSO.

[9] Central Advisory Council for Education (England) (1967) *Children and Their Primary Schools.* London: HMSO.

[10] Alexander, R.J. (1984) *Primary Teaching*, chapter 3. London: Cassell.

[11] See, for example, Reynolds, D., Farrell, S. (1996) *Worlds Apart? A Review of International Surveys of Educational Achievement Involving England,* London: OFSTED. Luxton, R., Last, G. (1997) *Underachievement and Pedagogy,* London: National Institute of Economic and Social Research. Prais, S.J. (1997) *School Readiness, Whole Class Teaching and Pupils' Mathematical Achievement,* London: National Institute for Economic and Social Research. DfEE Numeracy Task Force (1998) *Mathematics Matters,* London: DfEE.

[12] For an extended critique of this assumption, see Robinson, P. (1999) 'The tyranny of league tables: international comparisons of educational attainment and economic performance' in R.J.Alexander, P.Broadfoot, D.Phillips (ed) *Learning from Comparing: new directions in comparative educational research, Volume I.* Oxford: Symposium Books, pp 217-236.

[13] Galton, M. (1998) *Reliving the ORACLE Experience: back to the basics or back to the future?* Warwick: Centre for Research in Elementary and Primary Education.

[14] For a critical analysis of the uses and abuses of international comparisons in primary education, see Alexander, R.J. (1996) *Other Primary Schools and Ours: Hazards of International*

Comparison. Warwick: Centre for Research in Elementary and Primary Education. For a detailed comparative study of primary education in five countries, which covers the entire gamut from national policy to the classroom interactions of teachers and children, see Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education.* Oxford: Blackwell.

[15] Le Métais, J., Tabberer, R. (1997) *International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks: Comparative Tables.* Slough: NFER.

[16] DES (1978) *Primary Education in England: a survey by HM Inspectors of Schools*, London: HMSO; OFSTED/DfEE (1997) *National Curriculum Assessment Results and the Wider Curriculum at Key Stage 2: some evidence from the OFSTED database.* London: OFSTED/DfEE.

[17] When the Commons Education Committee was enquiring into the work of OFSTED during 1998-9, I drew attention to the discrepancy between OFSTED's published evidence and its public pronouncements on the question of the relationship between curriculum breadth and balance and standards in the basics. The Committee endorsed my concern: House of Commons Education and Employment Committee (1999) *Fourth Report of the Education and Employment Committee, Session 1998-9: The Work of OFSTED.* Volume I, paras 220-1, and Volume III, pp 153-5.

[18] Bruner, J.S. (1963) *The Process of Education*, New York: Random House, p 33..

[19] *Education Reform Act* (1988), chapter 1; *Education Act* (1996), chapter 1.

[20] Kelly, A.V. (1990) *The National Curriculum: a Critical Review.* London: Paul Chapman Publishing; Alexander, R.J. (1995) *Versions of Primary Education*, chapter 6. London: Routledge.

[21] Woodhead, C. (1998) 'Blood on the tracks: lessons from the history of educational reform', RSA Annual Lecture, 24 February.

[22] Halpin, T. (1998) 'The trio of academics failing our schools, by Woodhead' *Daily Mail*, 26 February.