

**STRENGTHENING CURRICULUM CAPACITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS:
DEFINITIONS, LEVELS, ROLES AND OPTIONS**

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DEFINING CURRICULUM CAPACITY

Two main aspects

As used by the CPR, the term 'curriculum capacity' refers to the human and other resources that a school is able to command in two areas:

- relating to the aims, scope, structure, balance and content of *the curriculum as a whole*;
- relating to the detailed planning and teaching of *individual curriculum subjects, domains or aspects*.

A school is regarded as having appropriate curriculum capacity if:

- it is able to conceive and plan a broad, balanced and coherent curriculum in pursuit of relevant and properly argued educational aims;
- each subject, domain or aspect of that curriculum is planned and taught to a consistently high standard, regardless of how much or little time is allocated to it.

Note that this version of curriculum capacity concentrates on the quality of a school's curriculum thinking, planning and provision but makes no assumptions about the way its staff are deployed. Note too that the debate about curriculum capacity has tended to concentrate on the second area – teachers' subject-specific expertise – and that the first has been relatively neglected. This neglect is one of provision as well as discourse, and is reflected in the focus of initial teacher training, CPD and school inspection. Although it is right that in pursuit of curriculum entitlement we should attend closely to the quality of teaching and the expertise in each subject, it must always be remembered that primary schools have to plan a coherent whole curriculum, that relationships *between* subjects are an important part of both curricular and educational development, and that under the prevailing generalist class teacher system in primary schools a holistic curriculum capacity is also required by every teacher. The historic impoverishment of primary schools' whole curriculum discourse is noted with considerable concern in the CPR final report. In the context of the government's offer of greater professional freedom on curriculum matters, and the reduction in both central and local curriculum support, it becomes more important than ever that we address capacity in both senses above, and that we don't see it as being merely about specialist teaching in, say, maths or science.

Three institutional levels

In light of the foregoing, it may be helpful to think of a school's curriculum capacity at three levels:

- *school level*: the capacity of *school leaders* to stimulate, inform and shape whole-school curriculum discussion, debate and planning;

- *intermediate level*: the capacity of *subject leaders* to plan, guide, monitor, support and where necessary teach their particular curriculum subjects or domains across the school;
- *classroom level*: the capacity of *individual teachers* to plan, teach and assess those specific aspects of the curriculum for which they are responsible – all of them in a generalist model, one or two of them in a specialist model, or a combination in the more flexible model of primary school staffing towards which some schools at last are tending and which both the 1992 ‘three wise men’ and the 2010 CPR final report were keen to encourage.

STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Extending the staffing repertoire: beyond the generalist default.

In its 2010 final report, the CPR recommended that the 1992 ‘three wise men’ report’s staffing continuum be revisited. In addition to underlining the importance of the head’s leadership on whole-curriculum matters, this proposed a generalist-specialist continuum of four main curriculum-led teaching roles for primary schools:

- The *generalist* teaches most or all of the curriculum to his/her class, specialising in pupil age-range or key stage rather than subject. This is the historic staffing default of primary schools, and it’s as well to remember that although it is widely perceived to offer considerable educational advantages it was introduced on the grounds of cheapness rather than educational efficacy, and it remains a less expensive staffing option than the subject-led model used in secondary schools.
- The *generalist / consultant* combines generalist class teaching with cross-school co-ordination, planning and support in one or more subjects. This, since 1978, has become the institutional norm in the primary phase, but successive HMI, Ofsted and Select Committee reports have shown it to be often problematic in practice: (a) when a school’s staffing arrangements don’t allow subject leaders sufficient time to undertake their work and especially to work alongside those staff who need support in their classrooms while they are teaching; (b) when schools allocate subject responsibilities to teachers who don’t necessarily have the requisite expertise. Schools in the latter case may satisfy the expectation that there be curriculum *leadership* but may not have the necessary curriculum *capacity*. Ofsted inspections have tended to conflate or confuse the two.
- The *semi-specialist* has a whole-school leadership role in relation to one or more subjects but takes this one stage further and teaches that subject/those subjects for a proportion of his/her time.
- The *specialist* teaches his/her subject(s) all the time.

If we add to this continuum the whole-curriculum role of the head (and/or designated others, since the head may wish or need to delegate this vitally important task) and the support roles of teaching assistants, we can see that the potential repertoire for curriculum planning and implementation is now quite extensive, and there is no longer any reason why schools should remain locked into the old assumption that there are just two complementary roles, headteacher and classteacher, or ‘my school’ and ‘my class’.

In 2012, what makes curriculum-led flexibility a much more realistic option than when the above staffing continuum was first proposed is the large number of support staff now operating in primary schools - 75,000 in 1997, 172,600 in 2008.

The generalist-specialist continuum is just that. It eschews the familiar opposition of ‘generalists’ and ‘specialists’ in favour of the more nuanced and flexible array of teaching roles for the primary phase which a modern curriculum requires. It should become a more familiar part of professional discourse.

It is essential that schools be encouraged to consider ways of using TAs and other support staff not just to support generalist class teachers operating in traditional mode but also to extend their repertoire of curriculum-related staffing so as to make excellence in all subjects a real possibility.

2. Tailoring staffing profiles to key stage rather than phase

The CPR final report envisaged schools moving towards not a single staff model for all pupil ages but a variegated one, perhaps with a greater degree of specialist support and teaching in the later primary years. In any event, it is hard to justify the belief that a single staffing model will serve for the entire primary phase - seven of the most intense years in children's development.

The NC Review Expert Panel's proposal for subdividing Key Stage 2 within a 2+2+2+2+3 framework provides an ideal opportunity to combine the reform of both curriculum and curriculum-led staffing in the primary phase.

Schools could be encouraged to develop staffing strategies which are key-stage specific rather than identical throughout the primary phase, and in particular to consider different ways of using specialist expertise in Years 5 and 6 (especially if these become a separate Key Stage).

3. Schools working together more effectively

Again, recent changes open up possibilities. As the CPR final report notes, the trend towards school clustering and partnership encouraged by the Primary National Strategy makes the physical movement of staff between schools a realistic option, and there are already primary schools, including small rural schools, which exchange teachers in order to strengthen their provision in specific subjects. The process has been given a further nudge by recent initiatives on academies and teaching schools.

The CPR proposed a 'community curriculum', an idea which appears in modified form in the report from the NC Review Expert Panel. As envisaged by the CPR (though not the Expert Group, which instead uses the 'local curriculum' more as a repository for non-statutory subjects), the community curriculum was about cross-school curriculum conceptualisation, planning *and implementation* and included curriculum-led exchange not just between primary schools but also between primary and secondary.

The opportunities for cross-school curriculum support and exchange need to be more thoroughly explored and exploited.

4. Different teaching roles, different teacher training

After DES Circular 3/84 and the establishment of CATE, all primary trainees were required to offer and develop a curriculum specialism as a basis for later subject leadership. However, this was envisaged strictly within the traditional generalist framework. The extended role repertoire proposed here implies greater diversity in routes into primary teaching. At present diversity in ITT tends to mean institutional arrangements and course structures – undergraduate, PGCE, SCITT, EBITT, Teach First etc – rather than teaching roles.

In light of the arguments above, we should explore ways of diversifying patterns of primary initial training by role as well as route. At the same time, we need to maximise trainees' employment prospects and schools' flexibility in staff recruitment and deployment. So although the four roles on the 'three wise men' / CPR continuum might at first sight seem to imply four distinct patterns of training, it would probably be better to differentiate just two broad patterns which we can call 'generalist/specialist' and 'specialist/generalist'. This supports the role flexibility which primary schools need to retain, especially if they are one-form entry or smaller.

The *generalist/specialist* is trained to be a generalist class teacher of most or all subjects within, say, one or two of the proposed three primary key stages, but also offers schools a specialist subject from which he/she can build cross-school subject leadership. He/she is

therefore a 'specialist' in teaching a broad curriculum to children at a given stage of their primary education.

The *specialist/generalist* is trained to provide in-depth specialist support in one or more subjects across all primary key stages, including adopting a semi-specialist or specialist teaching role where needed. At the same time, he/she receives a basic training for generalist teaching. In the interests of a school's subject leadership and curriculum planning, it is essential that the training provides not just subject depth but also the expertise for applying it throughout the primary phase.

For the sake of argument, we might quantify the generalist:specialist balance of training time as being 90:10 and 70:30 respectively.

In both cases, training would also attend to curriculum capacity in the first of the two senses used at the start of this paper. That is, they would also develop trainees' ability to understand and debate broader curriculum issues and to address contingent planning questions about aims, balance, cross-curricular activities and so on.

Note. Some are unhappy that 'generalist' implies lower status than 'specialist'. I use the term here for the sake of clarity, but a less tendentious term might be useful if/when the debate goes public. 'Specialist' is also problematic, but for different reasons. Another way of labelling the two routes is 'key stage focus' and 'curriculum focus'. That, however, may be a little too close to 'we teach children, not subjects.'

5. Better-targeted continuing professional development

To strengthen curriculum capacity across the primary sector, CPD needs to become more role and curriculum specific. In light of the above, we need effective CPD, for example, in the following areas:

- i. Whole curriculum leadership and planning, for heads and other staff with broad curriculum leadership roles across a school.
- ii. Specific subjects for generalists: CPD of a fairly basic kind for generalists in subjects where they lack confidence and indeed to build their basic expertise (typically in subjects beyond the curriculum core, since most primary ITT now gives these little or no attention, and primary teachers frequently complain about this).
- iii. Specific subjects for specialists: further in-depth training to enable a teacher to provide really effective cross-school leadership and, if needed or desired, specialist teaching.

To make the principle of curriculum entitlement as defined by the CPR (excellence in all subjects regardless of a subject's perceived status or time allocated) a realistic possibility in schools other than the best, (ii) and (iii) above should be available in all subjects of the national curriculum, not just the core subjects.

6. Auditing external sources of support

Many primary schools bring writers and artists into schools to work with children, but though their contribution is often invaluable it is usually occasional and *ad hoc*. And, of course, talented though such people are they may not be trained teachers.

It would be useful for LAs and/or groups of schools to audit the availability of local specialist expertise relevant to the school curriculum and to find ways of regularising its use.

7. Primary school funding: tackling the anomaly - again

The primary/secondary funding differential, and the way it inhibits significant deviation from the generalist model, have been running sores since the 1931 Hadow Report, or indeed

earlier. The government line, in response to concerns expressed in 1986 (Select Committee), 1992 ('three wise men'), 2009 (CPR) and indeed many other reports, has always been that the balance of funding is up to LAs. This, dare I say, was and remains a cop-out. Government should take a lead.

Eighty years is surely much too long to wait for this nettle to be grasped.

8. Case material: a role for the CPR Network?

What we need, I suggest, is case material from a number of primary schools representative of the very largest (up to 1000 pupils) and smallest (15 or fewer) which documents and illustrates the staffing diversity that is possible within existing resources and exemplifies different ways that teachers' specialist expertise can be deployed and schools can build and sustain curriculum capacity in the two senses identified at the start of this paper.

At our meeting, Alison Peacock can table a useful example from her own one-form entry school, but it is just one example among many and I would like to have been able to table for comparison staff deployment analyses from schools larger and smaller or merely different. I'm convinced that what is needed in the first instance is much wider awareness, especially among heads and school governors, of alternatives to the traditional model. Apart from enlarging primary schools' vocabularies of curriculum implementation at a critical time, this might also dispel some of the defensiveness in relation to the generalist staffing default and the irrational fear that the word 'specialist' often provokes. The CPR network could help in locating such instances and working with DfE on mapping the range. And/or Ofsted could be asked to do it. But because of the NC review the time couldn't be more auspicious.