

Values and principles underpinning the curriculum



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Primary education is the first stage of compulsory schooling. The primary phase is split into key stages one and two. Key-Stage one is orchestrated for children 5-7 years of age. Key-Stage two covers the age range of 7-11 years of age. Following Key-Stage two children progress to secondary school and undertake Key-Stage three learning. Thus Primary education must prepare children for KS3, and beyond.

Considering the diversity of the age range and ability range of children within the Primary phase, there are a number of theories about the purpose(s) of primary education and how they should be delivered to best suit children (toward Q10). However, all theories for best practice concur that children of primary school age are at a crucial stage of learning which can drastically affect their future learning and experiences. Thankfully the idea of primary school being a place where children are told stories and draw on their own with crayons as a transition to ‘proper’ school is history.

Primary education is now viewed as a valuable opportunity to teach children a number of complex skills which will form the foundations for a lifetime of future learning. The knowledge and skills taught in the early years of life will directly influence the child’s success as an adult in a now multicultural society (Q18; affect of social influences). Thus, the thrust of primary education must be to create a rounded experience for all children, through a range of subjects, delivered in an enriched environment by a knowledgeable, dynamic teacher with an effective pedagogy (towards Q14).

To begin this process, learning content and method of delivery of this must be appropriately designed for the individual child as part of a larger group.

As with all activities, it is critical to gain and retain the interest of those involved to maximise the effectiveness of the activity. It is up to the teacher and team of staff to collaborate efficiently to deliver this successfully (toward Q6).

The complex skills taught in primary education are delivered through three main areas; learning to read, learning to write (as part of literacy) and learning to manipulate numbers and all related content e. g. shape and space (numeracy). Since 2008 personal, social, health and economic (PHSE) has been added to the strategy for primary education.

Through these topics, enhanced by interaction with peers and adults, children are able to learn the knowledge, attitudes and range of skills required to cope with the vast range of issues that they are likely to face throughout their maturation into and during adulthood. Of equal importance during this period is that children develop the schemas required to acquire skills and are able to recognise opportunities for development. Parents, teachers and other adults can provide the required guidance.

By providing exceptional care throughout Primary education it is clear that potential can be maximised and utilised for the benefit of the individual and society (toward Q1).

Therefore a programme for education is required. This was introduced as part of the Education Reform Act 1988 as the ' National Curriculum'. The concept of key stages and educational objectives relating to these were also introduced. Furthermore the element of choice was also introduced to allow parents to specify their preferred choice of school for their child; league

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tables provided the necessary information for parents to choose. This inclusive approach signalled directly the importance of parental involvement and influence on the well-being, education and potential future attainment of their child. However, the introduction of league tables may have paradoxically shifted the focus from children's attainment to getting results (following emphasis on exam results used as a measure of understanding of the prescribed Curriculum content).

The prescription of the National Curriculum is under the direction and control of the Government advised by educational specialists guided by research into the ways in which children learn and what it is believed will be most beneficial throughout adulthood. The National Curriculum thus offers a list of the knowledge a child must gain. This approach provides consistency, guidance for educational institutions and a framework for future assessment of attainment.

The content of the Curriculum is impacted by its two aims and four purposes. The first aim is that "the school curriculum should aim to provide opportunities for all pupils to learn and achieve." (National Curriculum handbook). The second aim is "the school curriculum should aim to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life." These concepts clearly link closely with the invaluable objectives of the Every Child Matters policy.

The four purposes of the National Curriculum are to establish an entitlement, to establish standards, to promote continuity and coherence and to promote public understanding (knowledge for Q15).

The core statutory subjects of a national curriculum under the education act of 2002 are English, Maths, Science, Art and Design, Geography, History, ICT, Music and Physical Education. Additionally to this, all maintained schools have to teach Religious Education, which should reflect the Christian history of Great Britain. However, Religious Education should also consider practices and ideas of other religions represented in the UK; due to the movement of people, particularly to the UK, and the resultant shift in the 'majority', this teaching is and should be ever expanding. This is positive as Religious Education develops morals, spirituality and acceptance of others. Within a developing culture this acceptance and understanding should be encouraged, especially during the foundation-setting Primary phase. The school must be responsible through their ethos to highlight and harness the benefits of understanding and co-operation (toward Q2). For these reasons children should be encouraged to mix with one another where possible.

In September 2010, modern foreign languages will become an additional statutory requirement for delivery at Key Stage 2.

The Department of children, schools and families suggests that children should also be taught personal, social and health education (PSHE). Ed Balls, of the previous Labour government confirmed that PSHE will become a statutory part of the national curriculum in 2011, but as we now have a new government this may change. PSHE can include a range of topics which aid

children in their future lives. A number of beneficial topics can include drugs and alcohol education (DARE), emotional health and well-being, sex and relationship education, nutrition and physical activity, finance, safety and career education. Many of these topics are linked with the valuable outcomes of the Every Child Matters policy and allow the child to be healthy, to achieve and be safe. By learning about these topics, children can be encouraged to consider one another and the world that they live in (teaching toward Q19; promoting equality). Following this community cohesion can become possible, demonstrating clearly the benefits of teaching PHSE.

The notion of delivering PHSE through the Primary phase, rather than commencing during Secondary education, is a positive step as a preventative measure to avoid the current generation making the mistakes of previous generations.

Whilst the National Curriculum sets out guidelines, each individual school is responsible for determining how they deliver the programmes of study for each of the subjects specified. The programme of study is prescribed for each subject and indicates what children should learn, as defined by the Education Act 1996, section 353b. This guide also provides a useful basis from which schedules can be planned. It is up to the teacher to decide upon the delivery to give maximum benefit to the pupils in their care. It is important for the school and teacher to deliver National Curriculum study programmes in imaginative ways (toward Q10) but not be constrained by the necessities of the Curriculum itself.

Attainment targets define the expected standards of knowledge, skills and understanding for pupils in each key stage for each of the specified subjects and allows for appropriate assessment tools to be developed

(<http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-1-and-2/Values-aims-and-purposes/about-the-primary-curriculum/index.aspx>). As attainment is not static and isolated to specific intervals, it is necessary for the teacher to monitor the developing achievements of the individual child, the child in the context of their peer group and relative to descriptors of attainment-level. With this in mind, it would be appropriate to ensure that class sizes do not exceed the maximal number of pupils beyond which the teacher cannot effectively plan for, teach and assess.

As suggested, it is important to continually assess the abilities of pupils, and therefore their progress (towards Q12) and to report this to all involved in the education of the child, especially parents. I believe that the benefit of parental involvement cannot be overestimated; parents have an established relationship with the child and are therefore ideally placed to provide extra or remedial learning at this critical phase of education (facilitating Q5).

Whilst the stipulated content of a National Curriculum aims to cater for all, it cannot always achieve this, especially if those children who fall both above and below the 'average' are not considered. Furthermore providing a list of required learning content may be restrictive upon the ability of teaching staff and schools to provide suitably varied lessons for the group(s) of learning needs they are responsible for.

Following the change of Government in May we cannot say if the National Curriculum, or even the notion of one, will remain consistent due to the difference in the ideas of Government ideology. This is particularly dynamic if the Educational Minister and her advisors of educational best-practice change (knowledge for Q15; remain aware of curriculum). For example, the Rose review (commissioned by the leaving government) and its suggestions for educational best practice for KS 1 and 2 may become obsolete.

The Rose review considered the National Curriculum and the ability of teachers to effectively deliver learning content to children. Furthermore the review considers whether the curriculum needs to be altered to achieve the aforementioned key objective; in other words, what should children learn and how should this be delivered to facilitate successful learning.

The Rose review states that too much time is spent revising and practising for exams rather than making sure that children have a love for learning. Teaching staff must be responsible for ensuring that children enjoy Primary school, especially as this will encourage enjoyment of further educational phases. To do this, the new curriculum must understand the way that children learn and develop physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially, culturally, morally and spiritually.

Furthermore Rose indicates that the current three core subjects (English, Maths and Science) should be replaced by four 'skills for learning and life' (Literacy, Numeracy, ICT and Personal Development). The following areas of learning should feature within the Primary curriculum:

understanding English, communication and languages

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mathematical understanding

scientific and technological understanding

historical, geographical and social understanding

understanding physical development, health and well-being

understanding the arts

(Rose Review 2008 P17 Section 31)

The above revised aims for the primary curriculum take influence from the values issued under the every child matters policy of the Education Act 2002.

The new curriculum must also be well-planned and fun to ensure children have the opportunity to learn independently as well as be challenged and engage in practical activities (Q22). Giving children the opportunity to learn more about the world around them, through experiences in art, literature, and religious education and much more will facilitate this. The curriculum should allow many opportunities to use learned knowledge through cross curricular studies.

With the Primary years in mind, the review recommends that high-quality play-based learning would benefit young children immensely as well as teaching parents the importance of play and read to/with their child (Q5 & Q30). It is also critical that opportunities for spoken communication are taken to maximise the child's ability to learn to read and write. Phonics sessions will further aid development in this critical area.

Encouraging use of Information & Communication Technology (ICT) is important to allow children to use a number of the tools often needed to find employment and be financially healthy in today's technologically advanced society.

Generally, the review pronounces that there needs to be more continuity through the stages of learning e. g. from EYFS to Key stage one and beyond to maintain success; the DCSF should give primary schools one extra in that day in 2010 to train/understand the new curriculum and transition between key stages. As stated by Rose, the curriculum should aim to teach pupils how to learn as well as the learning content.

Having outstanding teachers in any education centre is crucial for pupils' success here. Therefore, it is critical to consider ways that teachers can improve their pedagogy to deliver the required content (in whatever form it takes), for the benefit of the children in their class (toward Q10).

Significantly, the review also suggests that it may be appropriate to restructure Key Stage 1 to include the Early Years Foundation Stage i. e. begin schooling and reap the rewards as early as possible, especially if parental involvement is successfully encouraged.

Another research based review of the Curriculum, and ways to realise successful learning, is provided by the Cambridge report.

The report suggests that a new primary curriculum be introduced which is broad, deep, balanced and offers high standards in all subjects; by separating literacy and numeracy they are afforded a higher level of emphasis and importance.

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Furthermore, new aims and values should be adopted within modern primary education. The 12 aims of the report focus on:

The individual

Well-being including mental, emotional and physical welfare (in line with Every Child Matters)

Ensuring children have a thirst for engagement in their learning

Empowering children with knowledge to meet and be adaptive to the changing challenges of the world

Autonomy to promote aspirational thought (satisfying Q1)

Self, others and the wider world

Promote self-respect, respect for others, respect for diversity and difference as well as acceptance of others' ideas and values (awareness for Q19, satisfying Q25)

Promoting interdependence to develop sustainable positive relationships.

Empowering local, national and global citizenship, encouraging children to make decisions in the world around them e. g. school council, as well as knowing about human rights, conflict resolution and social justice.

Celebrating culture and community; schools should strive to become the centre of the community life and culture.

Learning, knowing and doing

Exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense, giving children the opportunity to actively experience the world around them (towards Q25).

Fostering skills to make sure that pupils' have the skills which learning, employment and rewarding life depend on. This includes all customary subjects in the curriculum as well as communication, creativity, intervention, problem solving, critical practice and human relations.

Exciting imagination, giving children the opportunity to extend their knowledge outside the limits of their experiences.

Enacting dialogue, to help children understand the need for communication and collaboration between teacher and pupils, and among pupil whilst becoming aware that knowledge is not just given but negotiated and recreated. This form of dialogue is central to effective pedagogy (facilitating Q2).

It is highlighted that language, literacy and oracy (the capacity to express oneself in and understand speech) are critical to accomplishing these aims, as well as allowing aims to drive rather than follow the curriculum.

Significantly, the report advocates extending the foundation stage to the age of six. Therefore the primary phase would include children 6-11 years of age, eliminating key stages one and two. Extending the foundation stage to 6 years old gives children the opportunity to develop personally, and learn to interact, before they embark on a journey harvesting knowledge.

This can only work if there is the correct cooperation, communication and cohesion between foundation stage and the primary phase and their

curricula (working toward Q32; development of effective team practice). This must be embraced by the teacher with pedagogy that is centred on personal accountability for effective teaching. This is obviously aided by providing adequate space, equipment and resources to ensure that pupils' EYFS education provides solid foundations for the future.

To aid the process it is imperative to ensure that disadvantaged and vulnerable children are given the help they need swiftly and successfully. To begin this, eradicating child poverty must be prioritised. Equally, opportunities must be provided for pupils with SEN, EAL or disability to progress to the same degree as their peers (Q19).

Based on continuing research, the new Government has released a white paper for reform of the education system and the curriculum. The paper reflects much of the aforementioned, noting that the most important factor upon attainment is the quality of teaching/teachers. In order to help schools and their staff to deliver high quality teaching, the bureaucratic burden must be removed to allow focus on what is necessary for the children in their care. This burden is largely caused by the restrictive nature of the current Curriculum and the focus upon the attainment of qualifications which have the highest value in performance tables; often Primary schools over-rehearse 'teaching for the test' (Q12, understand the value of assessment).

I have experienced this with year 6 pupils preparing for SATs I felt that other subjects had been put aside to make way for the tests. The enjoyment of learning had been forgotten because of the pressures of ensuring each child passed. It was necessary to teach the children how to interpret and

understand the questions rather suggesting that the assessment method may be unreliable. There appears to be a disparity between assessment, curriculum and the prescribed method of teaching i. e. utilising practical activities does not seem to match the way the children are tested.

Furthermore, the National Curriculum should be tightened to contain less non-essential knowledge, especially in core subjects. By reducing the prescribed content and giving back decision making power to the school (about what, and more importantly how, to teach) it will be possible for children to gain the knowledge they to reflect the high standards expected of children in other nations.

In order to improve, schools must be freed from compliance with Government initiatives to become self-improving. To aid this programme, schools should have access to regional league tables to identify and seek guidance from those schools from which they can learn (working toward Q5).

In conclusion, Primary education must be grounded upon the needs of children as individuals. From this, guidelines for the content to be taught can be established. It is important that whilst the value of these guidelines is embraced, they do not become restrictive upon the imaginative element of pedagogy, allowing teaching staff to cater for all children as unique and valuable individuals. In doing so, children can learn how to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve and in doing so allow the child to make a positive contribution and achieve economic-well-being which are crucial to acceptance of the diverse culture we live in. Furthermore with guidance the child/growing adult will be free to develop social understanding/sensitivity to

behave appropriately with others in numerous and changing social situations (Q1, Q19 and Q25).

Adaptability and accountability of the teachers who mould young minds are paramount to children's on-going success. As part of this group, I must strive to develop a pedagogy and effective relations with other members of the school which allows me to deliver teaching which enables children to maximise their potential (Q14, Q6, Q1). To continue to deliver this I must continue to embrace my desire for Continuous Professional Development (Q9).