

# Understanding the curriculum values and principles



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' The touchstone of an excellent curriculum is that it instils in children a love of learning for its own sake' Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum, Sir Jim Rose (2009) The current National Curriculum (NC) was introduced into the United Kingdom by the Conservative government as an ' integrated framework for learning' (National Curriculum Primary handbook, 2010, p8) through the Education Reform Act of 1988. A statutory nationwide curriculum for all state and maintained primary and secondary schools which is organised into four Key Stages (KS), applies to all children and young people between the ages of 5 and 16. It sees itself as lying at the heart of ' policies to raise standards', (The Primary National Curriculum 1999) and prior to its introduction, the school curriculum was largely determined at local authority level.

The national curriculum's objective is to ensure that these schools follow a common curriculum which specifies the subjects taught for children throughout their school career, (the core subjects being Literature, Numeracy and Science), and to standardise the content taught at state schools across the UK with the exception of Academies, which are publicly-funded and have a significant degree of autonomy. The curriculum also sets out the knowledge, skills and understanding required in each subject and sets standard or attainment targets for each subject, enabling teachers to plan for individual children's learning needs, whilst adhering to three principles of inclusion; setting suitable learning challenges, responding to learners' diverse needs and overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment.

In the following I will explore the values and principles which underpin the National Curriculum and the opportunities it offers, drawing on other relevant documentation, for example, the Foundation Stage Curriculum, Every Child Matters, the Rose Review, the Cambridge Report, the Creative Curriculum and the recent Government White Paper, whilst offering how they will impact on my own

teaching, believing passionately about the importance of creativity, and my personal views of their success in meeting their objectives.

## **Values and Principles of the National Curriculum**

‘ Education influences and reflects the values of society’[i](The Primary National Curriculum, 1999, p10).

There are four main purposes and two principal aims set out in the National Curriculum:-

1. To establish an entitlement for every child to develop and apply the skills and understanding necessary to ensure self-fulfilment through motivation and engagement. ‘ Teachers should aim to give every pupil the opportunity to experience success in learning and to achieve as high a standard as possible’ (The National Curriculum Primary Handbook, 2010, p9). Whilst teachers are bound by a mandatory curriculum, the teaching of knowledge through inclusion, differentiation, skills and understanding, must be taught in a flexible way which suits an individual’s needs, drawing on a child’s previous knowledge and with a clear agenda for the route forward to obtain maximum pupil progress.

If a child falls significantly behind, a teacher may use the curriculum's programmes of learning to differentiate to a greater degree and plan according to ability.

For high achievers, suitably challenging work can be found again within the curriculum's programmes of work and differentiation met through planning a greater breadth and in depth study of the subject.

To establish publicly accessible national standards of children's academic performances enabling a framework for targets and improvement, and also a regulated assessment of achievement in the form of Assessment through Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), introduced into the UK in 1991, and initially taken at the end of Years 2, 6 and 9. Arguably never a popular addition to the school calendar, Year 9 SATs were subsequently abolished in 2008 and replaced by continual student assessment through Assessing Pupil Progress (APP). The SATs results lead to a compilation of published league tables, giving parent and carers not only newfound access to achievement statistics for each school as they are individually measured for their ability to successfully teach the National Curriculum, but also a free choice in the school they wish their children to attend.

To promote continuity and coherence of taught subject matter, providing life-long learning and allowing ease of transition between key stages and establishments,

4. To promote public understanding, allowing the general public to feel confident about, understand and be assured of the achievements and worthiness of compulsory education.

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Aim 1: The school curriculum should aim to provide opportunities for all pupils to learn and to achieve.

The implementation of equal opportunities and inclusion for all pupils to achieve have seen the barriers of discrimination and stereo-typing challenged and dispelled, enabling children and young people to achieve at all levels of their personal and professional lives, producing a fair and healthy society and a productive economy with sustainable employment.

Through the integrated framework of statutory subjects, the National Curriculum's objective is to ' provide a breadth and balance as well as securing the fundamentals of literacy, numeracy and ICT' (The National Curriculum Primary Handbook, 2010, p8) and through rigorous teacher planning, allow flexibility to adapt to individual child's learning styles and needs. With the resultant overcoming of potential barriers to learning and assessment, ultimately children and young people will gain access to a more fulfilled future and have more choice in its direction.

Aim 2: 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.

Every Child Matters (2003) acknowledges the link between pupil well-being and effective pupil performance. Drawing on the ECM outcome, Making a Positive Contribution', a non-statutory PHSE programme designed to develop the social and emotional skills of all pupils through complementing, consolidating and strengthening good practice in the school, was soon rolled out nationally to address

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this challenging role. With the introduction of Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) (2010)(primary) and Citizenship (2010)(secondary) programmes, using a whole-school approach, the tools to help children reinforce links between emotional wellbeing and effective learning now has a firm place in every day school life, whilst continuing to celebrate cultural and religious diversity along with a broad range of subjects.

Through nurturing a child as a valued individual, promoting self-esteem, self worth and emotional well-being, the school curriculum should enable them to form worthwhile and meaningful relationships whilst learning the fundamental difference between right and wrong. Responsibility for themselves and their environment will empower children and young people to instil sound values into their own children, which in turn will benefit society as a whole. Children and young people are given the confidence to manage risk, adversity and change and encouraged to take up opportunities in further education and work in a rapidly changing world, and this preparation for further education, training and employment, will ensure they become ' successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens' (The National Curriculum Primary Handbook, 2010, p5).

(Q3a, Q3b, Q10,

' Education only flourishes if it successfully adapts to the demands and needs of time' (The Primary National Curriculum, 1999, p11)

Let battle commence! Following the introduction of the National Curriculum, the criticism, reforms and attempts at reform have come in abundance as a result of the national curriculum being felt by many practitioners to be too

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prescriptive and too restrictive. With an increased amount of government control, many felt they were being told how to teach as well as what to teach. The emphasis placed on the Literacy and Numeracy was often felt to be at the expense of the other curricular subjects. In a study by Cambridge University's international exam group, Professor Tim Oates, (2010) claimed the curriculum to be 'overloaded' and leading to a 'tick list' (Ibid, 2010) approach to teaching, whilst still recognising the national curriculum has been effective in raising standards, improving pupil progression and has led to higher expectations for young people.

### **Excellence and Enjoyment 2003**

Seen by many teachers as a breath of fresh air, Excellence and Enjoyment (2003), the strategy document for teaching children with English as a Foreign Language (EAL) in Primary Schools was published. Built on the National Literacy Strategy (1998), and the National Numeracy Strategy (1999), in the executive summary, it encourages teachers to; 'take ownership of the curriculum' (Excellence and Enjoyment, 2003, p3), and be 'creative and innovative in how they teach' (Ibid p3).

In his forward, Charles Clarke, the then Education Secretary states; 'Children learn better when they are excited and engaged' (Ibid, p2), 'Different schools go about this in different ways. There will be different sparks that make learning vivid and real for different children. I want every primary school to be able to build on their own strengths to serve the needs of their own children' (Ibid, p2).

The debate for the relaxing of the government stronghold of the curriculum expectations was well and truly under way.

## **The revised Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics (2006) and the Revised Secondary Curriculum (2007)**

The renewed Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics was introduced into the curriculum in 2006 (DCFC, 2007). It was felt more widely that this was a step in the right direction as the new framework began to loosen some of the hold on teaching practice. The aims were wider, creativity was encouraged and a new emphasis on speaking and listening and Assessment for Learning (AfL) meant teachers could more readily plan for personalised learning and begin to address the ECM outcomes. A revised Programme of Study for secondary schools was introduced in 2007. The curriculum offers greater 'Flexibility and Coherence' (The New Secondary Curriculum. What Has Changed and Why? 2007, p4), giving schools the flexibility to personalise learning and design a curriculum that meets the specific needs of their learners;

'To give schools greater flexibility to tailor learning to their learners' needs, there is less prescribed subject content in the new programmes of study. Instead, the curriculum focuses on the key concepts

and processes that underlie each subject.' (Ibid, p4). In relationship to the argument for a more cross curricular approach, it states;

'The common format contributes to greater coherence, making it easier to see links between subjects. Several subjects share key concepts and

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processes; curriculum opportunities highlight the potential for cross-curricular links' (Ibid, p4).

## **Early Years Foundation Stage 2008**

The Foundation Stage, which covers children from birth to the August after their fifth birthday was introduced in 2000, and through the Education Act of 2002 the statutory inclusion of the Foundation Stage became part of an extended National Curriculum. Under the guidance of the Every Child Matters (ECM) (2003) five outcomes, the principles introduced into the curriculum via the Childcare Bill (2005) and further developed in the Children's Plan (2007), the Primary framework and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) linked the EYFS and KS1 mathematics and literacy for the first time, and assessment of each child recorded via the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. Through the ECM, the government had a vision to create a joined-up system of health, family support, childcare and education services to ensure all children get the best start possible. The EYFS' four main principles, (A Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments, Learning and Development) which some might argue, including philosophers Piaget (logical thinking and reasoning) and Vygotsky (Social interaction and learning), are the principles that lie at the heart of how children learn.

## **The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (Rose, 2006) and the Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum (Rose, 2009)**

Through the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading in 2006, the concept of synthetic phonics was introduced. Known as the 'Simple View of Reading' (2006), many teachers objected to this method of teaching, and

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following a growing feeling of disillusionment generally within the teaching ranks surrounding the perceived government strangle-hold on the profession, the fated Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum (2009) was commissioned by Ed Balls, the then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families. Ed Ball asked Sir Jim Rose to; ' propose a curriculum which would inspire life-long learning while reducing prescription and giving teachers greater flexibility' (Balls 2008, p2) and in particular, to consider at how primary schools could develop children's personal skills. Proposed was a new curriculum based on six areas of learning (English, communication and languages, mathematics, the arts, historical, geographical and social, physical development, health and wellbeing, scientific and technological) which would help pupils achieve academically as well as enable them through a strong curricular progression to have a smooth transition between early years and primary school, and into secondary school.

Sir Jim, a former Ofsted chief published his report in 2009, and in recognition of the changing face of the world around us, called for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to be made a core skill of the new curriculum (making provisions for additional training for teachers), alongside literacy and numeracy. Although he insisted this would not mean other subjects such as science - traditionally seen as a core subject - would become less important, ' In no way does that suggest we are stepping back from recognising the importance of science and technology' (Rose, 2009, p 82), Rose saw as imperative that we should allow for a digital generation of

children who are being brought up using technology in their recreation to make the link between this technology and learning. .

Inspired by the recently published Cambridge Report, also recommended was a more theme based cross-curricular approach to teaching subjects, which provides children with ample opportunities to apply and use their knowledge and skills in cross-curricular studies, allowing them to deepen their understanding and think creatively, with an added emphasis on personal development and on social and emotional learning and finally, a focus on spoken communication, making particular use of the performing and visual arts, especially role play and drama.

## **Cambridge Report 2009**

Before the Rose 2009 review could be delivered, The Cambridge Primary Review published an independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England led by Professor Robin Alexander.

Whilst acknowledging a need for some kind of national curriculum and that the EYFS areas of learning provide a good basis for the progression of education, the Cambridge Review sees the current curriculum as 'overcrowded and unmanageable' as reported in the (Alexander, Telegraph Article, February 2009) with too little value put on creativity and imagination. Launched in October 2006 and with 900 pieces of data being collected from both official and independent sources including academics, children and teachers, the in-depth report accuses the National Curriculum of implementing a system that values facts more than understanding and enquiry, and suggests a complete over-haul of the curriculum with the

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introduction of 12 new underlying aims and 8 subject domains. It proposes only 70% of teaching be attached to the National Curriculum with the remaining 30% being attached to a newly proposed Community Curriculum.

Alexander argues that the current curriculum places an over emphasis on the importance of children gaining high standards in the basics (reading, writing and arithmetic) at the expense of the peripheral subjects which in turn is jeopardising children's right to a full and broad education, and as such, is undervaluing the importance of creativity and imagination, leading to lack of engagement and problems occurring in their progression through school and beyond.

“ The most conspicuous casualties have been the arts, the humanities and those generic kinds of learning, across the entire curriculum, which require time for thinking, talking problem-solving and that depth of exploration which engages children and makes their learning meaningful and rewarding”. (Alexander, Telegraph Article, 2009)

## **The Creative Curriculum**

The creative curriculum is a carefully planned, thematic approach to teaching and learning designed to support children's natural curiosity and stimulate their creativity. The non statutory Creative Curriculum, instigated by the publishing company Teaching Strategies Incorporated, builds on the findings of both Rose and Alexander and is viewed by many schools as a means of introducing creativity and cross-curricular subject learning back into the classroom. Deemed to allow for in-depth learning and giving pupils time for reflection, consolidation and transference of acquired skills, it has

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been gaining momentum over the last few years. In my role as teacher and with my background in the Creative Arts, I am fully aware of the impact creativity can have on children's self esteem when they find their creative strengths, and I welcome this move with open arms and enthusiasm. I can only put my trust in the strength of school leadership that by the time I enter the teaching profession this movement will not have been halted.

## **Government White Paper- The Importance of Teaching – 2010**

As it warned it would, the new government abandoned the recommended Rose framework for the primary curriculum and recently launched its own review in the form of the Government White Paper, the Importance of Teaching.

Michael Gove the Secretary of State for Education having accused Labour of squeezing the “ fun and enjoyment” (GMT interview 24 Nov 2010) out of school, unveiled the most radical programme of

education reforms for a generation. Overhauling the national curriculum, all schools (including primary schools for the first time) will be forced to meet tough new targets and a reading test for six-year-olds will be brought in. Proposals to toughen up exams are recommended as a direct result of the supposed dumming down of education, where it is felt that pupil's are taking ‘ soft’ options in order for the school to achieve well in the League Tables and yet leaving school with subjects that prospective employees simply do not value.

Mr Gove describes the national curriculum as a "straitjacket which stifles the creativity of our best teachers" (Ibid, 2010) and intends give teachers more freedom to "innovate and inspire" (Ibid, 2010) whilst promising to slim down the National Curriculum as it stands.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion the above discussion has demonstrated the key features of the national curriculum and reflected on its implications in schools today in the light of various damnations and proposals.

The prime duty of the school, I believe, is to instil a positive commitment to, and love of education, in order to allow each pupil to reach their full potential in life as outlined by Mick Waters, the then Director of Curriculum, QCA (2007) when he said, 'Most of all, young people should relish the opportunity for discovery and achievement that the curriculum offers'. Without motivation and a thirst for knowledge, a child will neither benefit from their school years nor aspire to let education be the door-opening to a better future. Through encouragement of their interests, inherent strengths and experiences, children will develop a confidence in their ability to learn as independent individuals or collaboratively with their peers, whilst developing a creative, inquisitive and rational mind in the process and I firmly intend to use my role as a teacher, working within a collaborative framework, to use my gained knowledge and skills, creativity and adaptability and inclusion to reflect, differentiate, plan for and teach in a way which will capture and enhance the learning capabilities of the children within my remit. (Q3a, Q3b, Q15, Q19)

Whilst I applaud the national curriculum for standardising the content of education nationally and its success at raising attainment levels, my experience in school has been that there simply is too much to cover in too little time and as a result, children do not necessarily process and remember what they have been taught.

Disappointingly and in my opinion, tragically, in the light of the Cambridge Review and the Rose Review, very little has been learned and very little has been implemented to create a less prescriptive, slimmed down curriculum and once again, it is the teachers, by simply following their professional orders, take the brunt of the blame for the purported failure of the education system when in my opinion it is surely due to lack of investment. With the budget of an independent school, surely every state school (even with their commitment to inclusion-unlike the private system) could begin to address class-sizes and never want for resources again. With a proposed £359m programme of education cuts, the present government seems to me to be looking for a quick fix agenda. If the government would finally put their money where their mouth is and, dare I suggest, give prospective teachers the wage structure they surely deserve given the responsibility they have towards educating the next generation, teaching would attract the caliber of applicants the government craves and maybe, finally, teachers would be seen in the light of respect they deserve.