



... children, their world, their education

NATIONAL CURRICULUM REVIEW, 2010-12

NOTES ON THE DfE CONSULTATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON ON 29 JUNE 2012

This was one of two sessions organised by CPR at the request of DfE to consider the Secretary of State's proposals of 11 June 2012. Participants were invited mainly from the West Midlands. DfE was represented by Keith Hill and Graham Pepper.

Note: while this event was facilitated by CPR, CPR does not necessarily endorse the views expressed.

Diane Swift (CPR Network West Midlands Co-ordinator) welcomed attendees, explaining that it had been organised through the Cambridge Primary Review Network and was to take the form of 'informed dialogue' about the proposed changes to the National Curriculum and the effect this will have on teaching in the primary school. Diane noted that there was a diverse range of schools represented, together with LA advisors, members of the university primary team and the Dean of the School for Education Futures. The DfE was represented by Keith Hill and Graham Pepper. The group was informed that the new curriculum is still at the pre-consultation stage (before becoming statutory in 2014) and that the purpose of this meeting was to find out what matters to teachers and to get 'front line' feedback.

Principles of the national curriculum review

KH outlined the procedures used during the review process. School information regulations would be amended and from September 2012 all schools (including academies) will be required to publish their full curriculum on-line. Placing detailed curriculum plans on the web will negate the need to produce either a curriculum policy document or a prospectus.

While it is known that the on-line information will have to describe the curriculum subject by subject and year by year there is currently no indication as to how much detail will be required. Similarly, there are currently no guidelines relating to how much information will have to be provided about the percentage of teaching time allocated to each subject.

The meeting raised concerns about the timescale in which this work will have to be completed, since the summer holidays are imminent. There were also concerns about how this web content would be judged and whether OFSTED would use it during inspections. Several school-based colleagues stated that they would simply upload existing documents/newsletters to the school website.

Questions were raised about the timing of publishing curriculum details on the web. It was thought that by making pupils aware in advance of the subjects that they would be taught (and when) then there could be no build up to these units of work and no excitement could be generated. This was seen as an issue that pitted rhetoric against school philosophy, where bland statements could be used on the web while more energised/inspiring documents could be prepared for use within school.

Aims, breath and the school curriculum

While the new curriculum calls for 'breadth and balance' those present wished to know why only three subjects had been considered in the draft programmes of study produced by the DfE.

It was felt that the new proposals created an unhelpful and false tension between creativity and rote learning. The meeting discussed the notion of inspiring 'a love of learning' as it was felt that the

proposed curriculum emphasised academic/grammar school style learning, which was not considered appropriate for all children. The documentation did not mention the dispositions that teachers need to instil in children, for example relating to the joy of learning and the ongoing, lifelong nature of this process. This could perhaps be addressed through the aims, but there are inherent difficulties to imposing aims after the curriculum content has been determined.

Concerns were raised that the use of motivational contexts would be lost due to the need to ensure that children pass the year. Participants wanted to know what would happen to children who did not pass the year, stating that not all children would catch up at the beginning of the next academic year. Similarly, what would happen to the children who *always* need the extra or intensive catch-up period at the start of the year?

DfE's view of 'essential knowledge' was discussed and it was felt that it could constrain or limit professional freedom and creativity and adversely affect what is taught. The difference between essential knowledge and powerful knowledge was recognised. An emphasis on key concepts would have been more welcome than the proposals' heavy emphasis on propositional knowledge.

It was felt if essential knowledge is not defined in *all* subjects, it will produce/confirm a strict and unhelpful subject hierarchy.

Participants called for an enabling rather than a restricting curriculum.

Secretary of State's response to the expert panel report

With regard to speaking and listening, participants drew attention to a serious discrepancy between the Secretary of State's letter and the draft PoSs. Three paragraphs were devoted to spoken language in the letter, but apart from brief general statements it is not referred to at all in the PoS. Participants argued that oracy is such an important foundation for both learning and communication that it should retain its place as an explicit section of the English PoS.

Concerns were expressed that anything not labelled as essential would become subsidiary or dispensable.

It was felt that the proposed curriculum would lead to the teaching of skills and facts and that this is a rather limited view of knowledge. The group felt that primary education should produce children who would be learners for life, independent learners with the disposition to go on learning.

Participants felt that respect should be shown to key concepts within every subject taught and that the teaching of both skills and knowledge are important.

It was recalled that CPR and Ofsted have found that schools that perform well in maths and English usually offer children a broad curriculum too: too tight a focus on the core subjects will be counterproductive.

The importance of the linkage between the English programme of study and other subjects (maths, science, geography etc.) was discussed, as was the importance of looking across the curriculum as a whole.

It was suggested that having representatives from different subjects working together on curriculum design would be of benefit, as it would reflect the teaching seen in a busy primary school.

It was reiterated that an over-emphasis on the three subjects identified as containing 'essential knowledge' would lead to the marginalisation of other subjects.

The group believed that the proposals address national needs in relation to entering universities or employment but that they are unlikely to equip children to be thoughtful and active citizens.

Participants wanted to know how schools and teachers would be held accountable for these new standards.

General questions

External pressures on classroom teachers were discussed, particularly OFSTED and testing. The repeated use of ‘high standards’, ‘rigorous’ and related terms within the Secretary of State’s letter was noted.

It was thought that the proposed curriculum would create conflict between the early years and the foundation stages of primary education, since a certain level of knowledge will be required at the *beginning* of year 1.

The difficulty of determining what constitutes working ‘at’ and working ‘towards’ a given level was discussed.

Many participants would prefer not to have ‘levels’. Similarly, it was suggested that performance management would lead to a push to bring all children up to a limited level and would not allow teachers time and space to work with more able children: attainment rather than progress would be emphasised and children would be set up for failure.

Participants wanted more information on what would be statutory.

It was felt that the rigid structure imposed by the new curriculum would remove the teacher’s flexibility and concerns were raised that unless the teacher was a particularly good one, they would stick solely to what was specified. There is a tension between the aspirations of the teacher (and their ability to decide what to teach when) and the demands of complying with a rigid curriculum.

The group thought that the year on year system would only work if teachers were not held accountable. A preferable system would judge the child at the end of each Key Stage, thus giving the school the flexibility to manage how this was achieved.

It was thought that the teaching of applied knowledge was missing from the proposed curriculum; problem solving and creative thinking will not be fostered by these proposals.

The group questioned how a national curriculum could be produced without clear aims from the beginning.

SEND needs to be considered: it is possible to have high expectations of all children *within their own range of achievement*. The importance of acknowledging the achievement of all children was stated.

Similarly, it was felt that there should be provision to accommodate changes within the emotional/family life of the child and the affect that this can have on their achievement: are they to fail the year on top of everything else?

Pre-consultation questions on content for primary core subjects

KH informed the group that subject specific sessions were currently being conducted and invited the submission of questions and comments, particularly to the first three or four questions listed on his slide.

Timescale

KH emphasised that colleagues are more likely to influence or inform refinements to the content of the new curriculum during the informal than the formal consultation period.

The formal consultation period for maths, English and science will run ahead of those for other subjects.

It was not known whether there was to be an informal consultation for subjects other than maths, science and English but the group thought that this would be a valuable process, particularly if the issue of breadth is to be given proper consideration.

It was felt that care should be taken to ensure that the new curriculum does not just cater to the lowest common denominator.

Challenges and opportunities

The large amount of completely new material for any given year group was greeted with surprise. Questions were raised about how the new curriculum would be implemented, particularly as there seemed to be nothing to back up the new material if all schools start working to it at the same time. There was thought to be a large jump to the new starting point for both children and teachers. Questions were raised about the necessity of CPD, professional up-skilling and their financial implications.

Several Leading Teachers in the group expressed reservations about the dryness and the prescriptive nature of the proposals. They wondered how they would be able to teaching an ‘outstanding’ lesson as judged by Ofsted using the current criteria if the new curriculum was to be implemented in its current format.

The issue of specialist teachers was raised, with reference to where the expertise and capacity for teaching the proposed subjects would be acquired. Many teachers do indeed have the required subject expertise, but if they are busy teaching they have very limited opportunity to use it to best advantage. Heads are reluctant to release outstanding teachers from the classroom as they are mindful of the standards required by the new Ofsted framework. The notion of subject specialisms was thought to be potentially beneficially but careful thought needs to be given to timing and capacity. The current new curriculum will require many staff to engage in demanding CPD – whilst this could be potentially beneficial perhaps some phasing in the implementation of the draft proposals needs to be considered.

Participants noted the suggestion on Andrew Pollard’s that the new curriculum was designed to encourage schools become academies, in order to avoid being bound by these proposals.

Participants asked how schools were to select which MFL would be taught, with reference to the continuation (or not) of this language at secondary level.

Some participants felt that there is now a generation of teachers in school who have had the national curriculum and national strategies imposed on them throughout their career and may not have developed the capacity for autonomous curriculum planning. Others thought that schools should be able to take the new proposals forward by themselves; that there should be systems and mechanisms in place within each school to implement developments of this nature.

The notion of gradual implementation, rather than a ‘big bang’ approach, was favoured as it would allow schools to maintain their existing curricula without sweeping away that which has been set in place and developed over the last 20 years of National Curriculum. Without this, it was feared that the some schools would operate on the basis of low-level compliance.

Networks of schools and ITT providers working together were seen as part of the answer to the problems of implementing the new curriculum, but this again raised questions of capacity and credibility.

The effect that these changes would have on the children who would have to undergo them was considered: would the mental health or inner security of these children be affected; when will SATs relating to the new curriculum be introduced; will Year 6 children be expected to achieve all the new standards (i.e. will they undergo four years’ worth of new learning in a single year (this comment was informed by the issue of how much is new in the drafts); will Key Stage 3 still have levels; what will Key Stage 3 look like; how will the transition to Key Stage 3 be managed?

Participants asked that DfE should apply a child’s lens to whatever changes are introduced during the life of a school cohort: what will it feel like for the child?

It was suggested that DfE make connection to the existing national curriculum (i.e. build on what already exists) when writing proposals for the other subjects.

It was stated that the entire means of teaching within the primary classroom would have to change if these proposals were implemented as the emphasis on what is important would change completely. APP was thought to be a potential means of phasing in curriculum change: it is an on-going

assessment tool, rather than a form of testing; it gives children confidence; it improves enjoyment; it changes the rhetoric back to that of learning, rather than teaching; it reduces pressure.

Message to the Secretary of State

Participants noted that despite their range of backgrounds and professional contexts they were in broad agreement about the issues raised by the Secretary of State's proposals. However, in light of their considerable reservations they wished to ask the Secretary of State whether the full spectrum of research and other evidence is really being considered, as has been claimed, by those who are preparing the national curriculum proposals.