

DFE CONSULTATION ON THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM, PHASE 1: GENERAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE PROCESS

(From the Cambridge Primary Review's response to the 2011 National Curriculum consultation, section K, question 36)

1. We deplore the perpetuation of an approach to planning a national curriculum for a highly diverse and complex country of 51 million inhabitants which has no discernible educational aims or rationale, or whose aims are at best cosmetic. Aims in this exercise are vital, and they should precede rather than decoratively follow the determination of content. They should be properly researched and clearly argued. They should attend to the conditions and needs of learners and society today. They should respond to a much wider and more secure range of national and global imperatives than international benchmarking based on contested evidence about student achievement. And they should understand that the notion of 'essential knowledge in key subjects', which the government has provided as the main criterion for 'slimming down' the curriculum, is far from straightforward (see below).
2. In the absence of such a rationale we do not see how defensible decisions can be made about which subjects to include in the national curriculum, which subjects to exclude, and which aspects of the chosen subjects to define as 'essential'. Running the exercise as a curriculum popularity contest is emphatically not the way to proceed, but in the absence of aims and a rationale it looks like the only way forward, especially as the heavy use of tickboxes in this consultation form's sections on each subject allows no analysis other than quantitative. The aims and rationale for a national curriculum, incidentally, deserve at least as much public debate as the content. They cannot simply be imposed.
3. We are concerned about the risk that the phasing of the NC review will exacerbate the 'two-tier' curriculum referred to earlier and the damage this has done over many decades to the education of generations of young children. If the NC review opts for what we call 'minimalism 1' (see response to 7a) then in all but the country's best schools this risk becomes a strong possibility, and in some of them – on the basis of past inspection evidence – a certainty. We need only to recall the way that the curriculum in many primary schools sharply contracted when in 1998 the then Secretary of State freed schools from the obligation to teach the non-core programmes of study in order to encourage them to concentrate on the newly-introduced national literacy and numeracy strategies. This serves as a clear warning of the ever-present danger of 'minimalism 1'.

The CPR supports and has itself argued for simplifying the curriculum, reducing the amount of national specification, and encouraging schools to respond creatively and flexibly to the opportunities such simplification and reduction afford. However, for reasons which have to do with both children's moral entitlement to a broad and balanced foundation for future learning and with what is required to raise educational standards, we have argued in this submission that the more sensible and sustainable approach is what we call 'minimalism 2': making breadth statutory, guaranteeing children's entitlement to a range of specified domains of knowledge, understanding, enquiry, skill and disposition, and identifying core learnings *across all these domains* rather than defining the core as just four subjects.

4. It is highly unsatisfactory that the list of subjects whose place respondents are invited to consider includes only those which are in the current national curriculum and thereby excludes subjects such as drama and dance which are not current named subjects or which at best are subsumed under others. Taken with the entrenchment of the two-tier curriculum referred to above and elsewhere in this submission, this confirms that the current exercise is in danger of looking backwards, rather than forwards to the needs of children and society over the next decade or two.
5. DfE has announced that there is to be a separate review of PSHE. Undertaking this outside the context of the NC review is also unsatisfactory, as is the perpetuation of the semi-detached status of religious education. The CPR argued (final report, p 268) that 'religion is so fundamental to this country's history, culture and language, as well as to the daily lives of many of its inhabitants, that it must remain within the curriculum.' The CPR went on to explore what this domain, which it called *Faith and belief*, should entail, and how it should be distinguished from the inculcation of particular religious beliefs and should attend to other belief systems (such as humanism) and to the conditions of agnosticism and atheism too. Leaving RE in the curriculum annex where it was parked by the 1944 Act is not right for a country which now has many faiths, but is also by some estimations predominantly agnostic yet where religion itself is caught up in the sensitivities of cultural, national and international politics.
6. The case of RE takes us back to the criterion of 'essential knowledge'. Overall, the CPR has argued (final report, pp 257-60) that a national curriculum must be concerned, *inter alia*, with acculturation. We quote, once again, from the final CPR report.

From the final CPR report, pp 257-9:

What should children learn?

It is a conventional truth, but a useful one, that *how* children learn is as important as *what* they learn, in as far as a curriculum, however relevant or inspiring it is on paper, will make little headway unless the teacher succeeds (CPR aim 2) in igniting 'children's active, willing and enthusiastic engagement in their learning.' The aims we have proposed contain other such reminders: the importance of the imagination (aim 11); of dialogue and joint activity which both motivate pupils and capitalise on what is now known about how brain, mind and understanding develop during the early and primary years (aim 12); and of generating that sense of empowerment allied to skill through which learning becomes inner-directed and autonomous rather than dependent on pressure from others (aims 3 and 4).

Yet we cannot accept the claims in some of the Cambridge Primary Review submissions that 'process' is *all* that matters, that the content of the curriculum is no longer significant, and that in a fast-changing world knowledge is merely an ephemeral commodity to be downloaded, accepted without question or summarily discarded. Indeed, this is a view which we have deemed it necessary to contest with some vigour, for we believe it to be based on a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature and possibilities of knowledge and on a caricature of teaching as telling and of learning as factual memorisation and recall. We have also suggested that if the caricature has substance, it is a comment not on knowledge but on teachers.

That is why the aims, for all their apparent emphasis on process, include the unambiguous statement (aim 9) that primary education should enable children

to encounter and begin to explore the wealth of human experience through induction into, and active engagement in, the different ways through which humans make sense of their world and act upon it: intellectual, moral, spiritual, aesthetic, social, emotional and physical; through language, mathematics, science, the humanities, the arts, religion and other ways of knowing and understanding.

The statement goes on to remind us that knowledge matters because culture matters. Indeed, culture is what defines us:

Induction acknowledges and respects our membership of a culture with its own deeply-embedded ways of thinking and acting which can make sense of complexity and through which human understanding constantly changes and advances. Education is necessarily a process of acculturation.

That, too, is why the same statement couples knowing and understanding with exploring, discovering, experimenting, speculating and playing, for 'content' and 'process' are not mutually exclusive as in yet another of primary education's dichotomies they are held to be, but are equally essential aspects of knowing and understanding.

It is on this basis that we argue not only for faith and belief as necessary and explicitly specified elements in a national curriculum, but also for the arts, the humanities and much more. To confine the national curriculum's 'essential knowledge' to English, maths, science and PE betrays extraordinary insensitivity to the nature, power and educational importance of culture, and makes the constant references to Matthew Arnold's 'best that has been thought and said' somewhat hollow. Equally, to presume that every school understands that the other domains are in their way no less important to the processes of learning, education and acculturation, and that they must be treated with equal rigour if not equal time, is, regrettably, to ignore the hard evidence of recent educational history.

7. As recalled in the quotation above from its final report, the CPR has argued strenuously that knowledge is central to the curriculum, has deplored the way it is downgraded and caricatured in some of the prevailing discourse of primary education, and has cautioned against the profligate attachment of the word 'skill' to curriculum elements which are about knowledge or disposition rather than skill properly conceived (CPR final report, pp 245-51). At the same time, we warn against another kind of reductionism in the current NC review, equating 'essential knowledge' with 'essential facts'. Even supposing that we could agree on what are the 'essential facts' of science or history, there is of course much more to knowledge than propositions.

Re-thinking the curriculum therefore requires a proper engagement with epistemology – in the NC review no less than in schools and teacher training. At the very least, a distinction needs to be made, as in the quotation above, between process and content, between a subject's *essential structural features, processes and procedures* – or its key concepts and modes of enquiry – and what are taken to be its *essential content*. This distinction is a long-established one which commands a great deal of support. It was used, on the basis of a considerable amount of consultation and discussion, by those who planned the first national curriculum introduced in 1988, and it survived, as the structure of attainment targets, into the version introduced in 2000. It should be revisited. If this earlier analysis is still regarded as valid, then paring back a subject's specifications must at all costs retain its structural features, core concepts, processes and procedures so that pupils come to understand the essence of what it is to think and act as a mathematician, a historian, a scientist or a musician, whether these forms of understanding are timetabled and taught as separate subjects, as broad domains or by some other framing device. That, we emphasise, is for schools to determine, and as the CPR warns (final report, p 263), we should not confuse the way a curriculum is conceived and framed at the level of national specification with the way it is re-packaged for the purposes of timetabling and teaching in schools.

And, as drawing on research evidence we also argue (final report, chapter 21), the greater the *teacher's* command of the knowledge and understanding on which the curriculum draws, the more freedom he or she acquires to translate that knowledge and understanding into classroom experiences which will engage the attention and advance the understanding of the *learner*. A curriculum conceived as a number of domains or subjects can be structured and taught in many different ways.

We might suggest that a subject's distinctive features, concepts, processes and procedures constitute its *invariables*, while the content which results from the working of these invariables comprises its *variables*. There is of course debate about both elements, but there is also far more consensus about each subject's conceptual and processual invariables than its content, for it is on the content that the key concepts and processes work, and it is the content that is contested, modified and sometimes superseded as the boundaries of subjects are extended and new understanding builds on old. In the current debate, especially in the primary sector, there has been a tendency to merge the two elements, and this category confusion has prompted some to dismiss knowledge as *ipso facto* obsolescent. That charge can be justified when content is merely transmitted as unassailable fact detached from processes of enquiry, exploration, creation, verification or authentication.

8. Finally, we remind the NC review that the CPR's own review of the primary curriculum formed part of a much wider enquiry into English primary education which in turn was embedded in consideration of the condition and needs of children, society and the world today. In all these matters it drew on a vast array of carefully-balanced evidence which responded to questions which were posed in a genuinely open manner. The NC review has nothing like this breadth of focus and many of its questions are closed or lead respondents in one direction only. We therefore urge that full advantage be taken of the evidence and thinking in the CPR interim and final reports which accompany this submission as well as the extrapolations from CPR evidence cited in our responses to the questions on the consultation form. The CPR offers an unrivalled resource of genuinely independent evidence and thinking about primary education which the previous government chose to reject. Let that not happen this time. Children have too much to lose, and in England they have already lost too much, when education policy is justified by evidence which rather than being even-handedly applied is selected on the basis of ideological fit, party-political ambition or ministerial whim.

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