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## **REFORM, RETRENCH OR RECYCLE? A CURRICULUM CAUTIONARY TALE**

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### **Prologue**

This session is called ‘An English tragedy’ – but, I must emphasise, not by me. There are two possible reasons for the choice of title: the symposium organisers have decided, using the well-known Australian definition of the words ‘England’ and ‘English’, that England’s national curriculum, like its cricket and dentistry, is a tragedy; or they are saying that it’s a tragedy that this keynote has to be given by someone from England but, sorry, that’s the best they could do.

Let’s leave open for the moment whether what you are about to hear is a tragedy, a comedy or perhaps even a tragi-comedy which leaves you poised uneasily between laughter and tears. After this prologue, Act 1 will briefly chronicle the English national curriculum and where it came from, for history in these matters is all-important. Act 2 enters the murky territory of the politics of curriculum reform. In Act 3 we get to the heart of the matter and contrast alternative views from England, official and independent, of where the national curriculum should go next, giving particular attention, as you’d expect, to what has emerged from the Cambridge Primary Review.

I shall make occasional references to the Australian curriculum but will leave the drawing of any lessons to you. I shall focus mainly on the primary curriculum, not just because this is what I’ve been working on, but also because the primary stage is *foundational* and therefore throws into relief the question of what kind of curriculum, in terms of its scope, priorities and character, provides a proper basis for the individual’s future development. We all accept that the foundation succeeds only if it equips the student with the necessary basic knowledge, understanding and skills for future choice and lifelong learning. But that begs some pretty obvious questions:

- What, at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are the essential ‘basics’?
- Does the mantra ‘back to basics’ (always back, never forward) convey the right message for the times and world we live in?
- Is the tried and tested formula of literacy and numeracy sufficient, with literacy defined as reading and writing but not being literate in any other sense? Where, in a 21<sup>st</sup> century concept of ‘basics’, does IT fit in? And where, given what we know about the essential place of talk in human development, learning and teaching, is oracy?

- What range and balance of curriculum experiences, beyond whatever is defined as 'basic', are necessary for future development and choice?

It may well be thought that these matters were settled long ago. Here, at this conference, we should keep an open mind.

### **The situation in 2010**

So: Act 1. The curriculum in English state schools - note that each part of the UK has its own education system and I'm talking just about England - represents an uneasy accommodation, never fully resolved, between three traditions or legacies:

- First, the minimalism of the nineteenth-century elementary school curriculum, designed mainly for the children of the working poor in England's industrial cities, and concentrating on the three Rs, knowing one's place at the bottom of the social and economic heap, and not much else.
- Second, also going back to the nineteenth century, a belief in the central and civilising role of subjects, especially the humanities and later science; a belief which derives from the so-called public - that is to say private - schools attended by those at the very top of the same social and economic heap, and by the grammar schools which imported public school customs and costumes and repackaged them for the middle classes.
- Third, occasional inroads into both of these two traditions made by so-called 'progressive' thinking of various hues, notably during the 1930s and 1970s, and generally defining itself as pro-child and anti-subject (which of course is a false dichotomy, one of many which bedevil curriculum discourse).

Progressivism is more transient than the other two traditions. Typically, it flowers briefly before being scapegoated for Britain's educational, economic, social, moral and sporting decline. In the Cambridge report we diagnose three major outbreaks of this anti-progressive epidemic since the 1960s, under the headings 'back to basics', 'back to basics again' and 'back to basics yet again'. Typically, too, these episodes relate to political circumstances. In England, when political parties are in trouble or preparing to fight an election they talk tough on standards, and standards invariably means the 3Rs, no less and certainly no more.

Until 1988, England's education system was decentralised. Religious education was a legal obligation, but the rest of the curriculum was up to schools and to the local education authorities to which most of the funding for schools was devolved. In practice, this was a recipe not for anarchy but for remarkable curriculum homogeneity, in secondary schools because of the constraints of public examinations, in primary schools from force of habit.

The 1988 Education Reform Act of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government brought in England's first national curriculum. It was unapologetically cast in the grammar/public school mould of the conventional disciplines, though it also preserved the Victorian elementary school legacy of a sharp divide between the 3Rs and the rest. Science joined the 3Rs within a three-subject core - English, mathematics and science - and primary science was one of the great success stories of the first national curriculum. But after 1997 primary science was increasingly squeezed by the Blair government's insistence that only literacy and numeracy really mattered and - in the words of Blair's first education secretary - the job of primary schools was to teach children 'to read, write and add up' (but not, apparently, to subtract, multiply or divide).

This neo-elementary view of the curriculum has been reinforced by high stakes tests, narrowly-focused school inspection, published school league tables, commensurate requirements for teacher training, and targeted funding for teachers' continuing professional development. Political advocacy of the wider curriculum has tended to be tokenistic rather than genuine. Thus, in 2003, the government launched a new national primary education strategy under the title 'Excellence and Enjoyment'.<sup>1</sup> It turned out that excellence was to be confined to literacy and numeracy while the rest of the curriculum was to provide the enjoyment, time permitting, thus also signalling that literacy and numeracy are far too serious to be enjoyable and that the arts and humanities may be fun but that's because they are not intellectually demanding. That's not the cheap jibe it sounds: in England, the two-tier curriculum, and the profound lack of understanding which it displays about the cognitive power of the arts and humanities as well as their intrinsic educational value, is one of the biggest and historically most persistent obstacles to genuine curriculum reconceptualisation and reform.

Yet on paper the current English national curriculum seems broad and liberal enough. At the primary stage, or what are called key stages 1 and 2 (that is, ages 5-7 and 7-11), it comprises three core subjects and up to 10 others:

#### ENGLAND'S PRIMARY NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN 2010: SUBJECTS

##### *Core subjects*

- English
- Mathematics
- Science

##### *Other foundation subjects*

- Art and design
- Citizenship (non-statutory at KS1 and 2)
- Design and technology
- Geography
- History
- Information and communications technology (ICT)
- Modern foreign languages (non-statutory in 2009, statutory at KS2 from 2010)
- Music
- Physical education
- Personal, social and health education (PSHE) (non-statutory at KS1 and 2)

##### *Also statutory*

- Religious education (statutory at KS1 and 2, but with non-statutory programme of study)

##### *Also required*

- Sex education<sup>2</sup>

There's a second axis, more about aspiration than formal requirement, comprising elements of 'learning across the national curriculum' such as spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; so-called 'key skills' of communication, application of number, IT, and 'thinking skills' like information-processing, reasoning, enquiry, creative thinking, and evaluation, together with financial capability, enterprise education and education for sustainable development.

#### ENGLAND'S PRIMARY NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN 2010: LEARNING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
- Key skills
  - communication (defined as 'skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing')

- application of number
- information technology
- working with others
- improving own learning and performance
- problem solving
- Thinking skills
  - information-processing
  - reasoning
  - enquiry
  - creative thinking
  - evaluation
- Financial capability
- Enterprise education
- Education for sustainable development<sup>3</sup>

How these are to be realised through the specified subjects isn't made clear, and indeed there's a conceptual question about calling everything that isn't a subject a 'skill'. I shall return to this later.

### **A brief excursion into the politics of curriculum reform**

What has happened to the national curriculum which became law in 1988? In 1997, nine years after its introduction, it was up for review by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, or QCA (roughly equivalent to ACARA, and now currently relabelled QCDA - the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency). By then, Tony Blair had replaced Margaret Thatcher and John Major, riding high on the slogan 'education, education, education' and determined to raise standards in literacy and numeracy. So determined, in fact, and so confident in the strategy adopted, that education Secretary David Blunkett said that if primary school test scores didn't reach the specified targets by 2002 he would resign. They didn't, but by 2002 he had moved to another ministerial position so his successor resigned instead. (This part of our story probably qualifies as an English comedy).

In pursuit of his standards agenda Blair introduced daily literacy and numeracy lessons to be taught to a tightly prescribed formula in every classroom in every one of England's 17,300 primary schools, thus decisively breaking with the long-established British convention that governments may tell schools *what* to teach but not *how*; and he raised the public profile of national tests as measures not just of student progress but also of the performance of individual schools and the system as a whole.

So much was invested politically in these initiatives that the government could not allow a free rein to the planned 1997 review of the national curriculum. QCA - of whose governing board I was then a member - was told that it should confine itself to tidying up the curriculum at the margins, and that it should under no circumstances touch literacy and numeracy. When a group of us from QCA went to talk to the minister about this in the context of QCA's supposed responsibility for English and mathematics, his chief standards adviser smoothly intervened. 'Minister', he said, 'literacy and numeracy are standards, not curriculum. QCA may be responsible for the curriculum but you are responsible for standards.'

So there you have the neo-elementary curriculum in a nutshell: literacy and numeracy are not part of the curriculum at all, and the notion of standards does not apply to the rest of children's education. Thus we move from comedy to the theatre of the absurd.

Fast forward another ten years, to 2007 and the next scheduled national curriculum review. As required, QCA started with the secondary curriculum, revising it for implementation in September 2008. It then turned its attention to the primary curriculum.

At that point the process encountered an unexpected obstacle. An independently-funded enquiry into the whole of primary education, the biggest since the Plowden report of 1967, had been launched in 2006 and had begun to publish interim reports which were supportive of some aspects of recent policy but not of all of them. Faced with the risk that this independent enquiry – it was of course the Cambridge Primary Review<sup>4</sup> – might come up with a radically different model of the curriculum, and that this might command popular support, the government launched a pre-emptive strike. In 2008 it took the scheduled official primary curriculum review away from the supposedly arm’s-length QCA, appointed its own review team instead, placed it in an office at the DCSF (equivalent to Australia’s DEEWR) within ministerial earshot, and – just as in 1997 – instructed it to do what had to be done without in any way questioning existing policies and priorities. Indeed, contingent matters like the national tests and the literacy and numeracy strategies were explicitly excluded from the official review’s remit. With admirable brazenness the government then named their enquiry ‘the independent primary curriculum review.’<sup>5</sup>

I really don’t want to dwell here on the messy politics of the two reviews except to make the point that this extent of overt politicisation and manipulation of England’s curriculum debate has seriously compromised its credibility and outcomes, and there’s a lesson in this for governments with interventionist inclinations everywhere. Rather, we need to keep in view the bigger questions about curriculum purposes, values, structure and content.

On these, as might be expected, the two reviews pursued diverging paths in respect of three vital matters: the problems of the current national curriculum which needed to be addressed, the purposes and values which a revised national curriculum should pursue, and the structure and content of whatever might replace current arrangements. I’ll say something about each of these in turn.

## **Curriculum problems and visions**

### *The problems of the current English national primary curriculum*

The government’s own primary curriculum review identified just one problem to be fixed: not aims, values, relevance or balance, let alone vision, but merely *manageability*. I quote: ‘How can we best help primary class teachers solve the “quarts into pint pots problem” of teaching 13 subjects, plus religious education, to sufficient depth, in the time available?’<sup>6</sup> I assume you can get your heads round the pre-metrication metaphor of pints and quarts. Many younger teachers in England were baffled by it, assuming that a quart was a quarter of a pint and that consequently there was no problem. Choose your metaphors with care.

Actually, the perception of an overcrowded curriculum was widely shared. However, three separate studies by the national inspectorate, in 1978, 1997 and 2002, showed that England’s best primary schools, as judged by inspection and the national tests, succeeded not just in teaching the national curriculum as specified but also in achieving high standards in literacy and numeracy. This evidence, that breadth supports standards in the basics rather than undermines them, is crucial.<sup>7</sup>

Further, the government review’s casual reference to ‘primary class teachers’ – that is, generalists who teach the entire curriculum to their classes, which is another Victorian legacy

- ignored the possibility that part of the problem might be the way that primary schools are staffed; and that this pattern of staffing, which the ever-prudent Victorians adopted because it was cheap - might not be up to the demands of a curriculum vastly more complex than that of the 1870s, or to a pedagogy which claims to be about much more than filling empty vessels with facts. I'm conscious, by the way, that in this part of Australia the adjective 'Victorian' has other meanings, all of them utterly admirable. You know which sense of the word I'm using.

In contrast, and drawing both on its extensive evidence and on its freedom to roam across all aspects of education on which curriculum decisions are contingent, the Cambridge Primary Review judged that there was not one curriculum problem to be fixed, but many. For example, quoting from our final report:

- The detachment of curriculum from aims.
- The supplanting of long-term educational goals by short-term targets of attainment.
- The loss of the principle [and statutory requirement] of children's entitlement to a broad, balanced and rich curriculum, and the marginalisation, in particular, of the arts, the humanities and, latterly, science.
- The test-induced regression to a valuing of memorisation and recall over understanding and enquiry, and to a pedagogy which rates transmission more important than the pursuit of knowledge in its wider sense.
- The dislocation and politicisation of both the whole curriculum and two major elements within it - English and mathematics - by the national literacy and numeracy strategies (the former much more than the latter) and the accompanying rhetoric of 'standards'.
- The use of a narrow spectrum of the curriculum [literacy and numeracy again] as a proxy for the quality of the whole, and the loss of breadth and balance across and within subjects as a result of the pressures of testing, especially at the upper end of the primary school.
- The parallel pressure at the start of the primary phase, this on the developmental early years curriculum introduced by the government and widely supported by teachers and parents.
- Excessive central government prescription and micro-management, and the resulting loss of professional flexibility, creativity and autonomy.
- The historic split between 'the basics' and the rest of the curriculum, in which differential time allocations legitimately set in pursuit of curriculum priorities are compounded by unacceptable differences in the quality of provision.
- The continuing and demonstrably mistaken assumption that high standards in 'the basics' can be achieved only by marginalising the rest of the curriculum.
- A muddled discourse about subjects, knowledge and skills which infects the entire debate about curriculum, needlessly polarises discussion of how it might be organised, parodies knowledge and undervalues its place in education, and inflates the undeniably important notion of skill to a point where it, too, becomes meaningless.<sup>8</sup>

### *The division between 'the basics' and the rest*

What we were saying in presenting this somewhat depressing list - which without doubt takes us from comedy and absurdity to tragedy - is that 'solving the "quarts into pint pots" problem' will in achieve very little if the more serious political, conceptual and ethical problems are not attended to.

Take the historic split between 'the basics' and the rest, which produces a curriculum which more often than not is two-tier in terms of quality as well as time. While many of today's political leaders in Britain believe that you can improve standards in the basics by concentrating on the basics alone, and find counter-intuitive the notion that basics and breadth are intimately related, it was not always so. 25 year ago, a government white paper presented to the British parliament said this:

The mistaken belief, once widely held, that a concentration on basic skills is by itself enough to improve achievement in literacy and numeracy has left its mark; many children are still given too little opportunity for work in the practical, scientific and aesthetic areas of the curriculum which increases not only their understanding in these areas but also their literacy and numeracy ... Over-concentration on the practice of basic skills in literacy and numeracy unrelated to a context in which they are needed means that those skills are insufficiently extended and applied.<sup>9</sup>

Although this assessment hints that the relationship between basics and breadth works both ways, the point perhaps needs underlining. Children need the wider curriculum not just because it is educationally essential in itself, but also because it enhances and accelerates understanding in the so-called basics. And the fast-growing field of neuroscience supports this. Only this week, a paper at the conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science reported that playing a musical instrument significantly enhances the brain's sensitivity to speech and shapes the brain's development so that it more effectively engages with basic tasks like reading and listening.<sup>10</sup> In the arts in particular, there's now a substantial research literature on the cognitive impact of activities which, in the political and public arena, tend to be judged on narrowly utilitarian grounds. So with little difficulty we can make a much more persuasive case if we choose. On the other hand, if we end up arguing that the wider curriculum is needed only because it enhances the basics we shall be no further forward, so there are dangers in this updating of the old notion of the transfer of skill.

#### *Aims and values: what is it for?*

Then there's the matter of aims. The Cambridge Review criticised the very British tendency to detach curriculum from aims, or rather to devise a curriculum and then invent aims with which to legitimate it, so you'd expect us to have taken this part of the enterprise seriously. In contrast, the government's own review was about tidying up the existing curriculum rather than rocking the boat by asking what it was for, so it took the line of least resistance. The secondary curriculum review undertaken some years earlier by QCDA had come up with a list of aims for secondary schooling. The government's primary curriculum review decided that these would do nicely for primary as well, rationalizing its decision by arguing that the entire school system needed a single set of aims.

Actually, that argument has much to commend it, but it doesn't preclude a reassessment of the aims of each stage of schooling, or the possibility that the needs of 5-year olds and 16 year-olds may not be identical and therefore that we need both overall school aims and more specific aims for each stage. But of course the real objection to the government's approach was its continuing pursuit of what one might call the Mrs Beeton style of educational planning, or should we call it educational cookery: first catch your curriculum, then liberally garnish with aims.

Yet it is with some trepidation that I reveal the educational aims first adopted in 2008 for the revised secondary national curriculum in England and then in 2009 proposed by for the primary curriculum. The aims of both primary and secondary education, said the British government, are to produce:

- successful learners, who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve;
- confident individuals, who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives;
- responsible citizens, who make a positive contribution to society.<sup>11</sup>

The trepidation arises because you may possibly have seen these before. Was it in Scotland perhaps?

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens
- effective contributors.<sup>12</sup>

Or was it, give or take the odd adjective, Singapore?

- self-directed learners
- confident persons
- concerned citizens
- active contributors.<sup>13</sup>

Or perhaps even Australia?

- successful learners
- confidential and creative individuals
- active and informed citizens.<sup>14</sup>

Is this a coincidence? Is it the case that great minds separated by geography, history and culture really do think alike? Or is this where globalisation has taken us, and do educational planners everywhere, regardless of geography, history and culture, now shop at the same curriculum supermarket?

But taking the *English* curriculum aims as they stand, and remaining diplomatically silent about the 2008 *Educational Goals for Young Australians*, my substantive concern is that they are perhaps too exclusively concerned with terminal outcomes – though that’s probably why they secure such ready agreement, because of course we all want schools to produce people who are successful, confident and responsible, don’t we? But what such aims don’t do is get close enough to the educational action to tell us what schools should actually *do*, and on what a curriculum should try to concentrate. Successful learners in relation to what? Science? Safe-cracking? We need, then, aims with a more proximal focus and an ethical intent. Aims are about ends but they need to say something about means and values. In fairness, the elaborations offered for each of the three English school aims take us some way down this road, though not very far.

How did the Cambridge Primary Review approach the same task? The Review had an exceptionally broad remit. Aims was one of its themes, curriculum another, but so too were assessment, teacher training, school leadership, staff deployment, learning, teaching, governance, funding and much else. Overriding the education-specific themes were larger questions about childhood today and children’s development, learning and needs, about parenting and family life, and about the condition of the society and world in which today’s children are growing up. On all these matters the Review assembled evidence from its four principal sources: invited written submissions, commissioned surveys of published research, face-to-face regional and national soundings or focus group sessions, and re-assessments of official data, both national and international.<sup>15</sup>

It is out of all this data that the proposed aims for primary education have been constructed. They reflect concerns expressed in our evidence about, for example:

- the importance of a broad, rich curriculum at the primary stage as a proper foundation for subsequent choice and lifelong learning;
- the need for a modern understanding of childhood as being about agency, capability, voice and rights rather than passive learning and fixed developmental ages and stages;
- balancing education as preparation for what follows with education for its own sake, here and now (the official aims are all about what emerges at the very end of the process and see one stage of schooling essentially as preparation for the next);
- recovering the community cohesion and vitality which are felt to be in sharp decline in England as in many other countries;
- placing culture in all its senses – anthropological, artistic, Arnoldean - at the heart of the curriculum);
- responding to adult witnesses' anxieties about childhood wellbeing, social cohesion, international tension and global sustainability;
- advancing the cause of a genuinely participatory and critical democracy (the official aim of 'responsible citizens' can too easily mean merely doing as one is told);
- making the acts of exploring, knowing, understanding, creating, imagining, engaging, questioning and arguing central to life in classrooms, because aims are about *process* as well as content and outcomes.

The proposed aims are in three interlocking groups. The first group identifies those individual qualities and capacities which schools should strive to foster and build upon in each child, in whatever they do, and the individual needs to which they should attend:

- well-being
- engagement
- empowerment
- autonomy.

The second group includes four critically important orientations to people and the wider world:

- encouraging respect and reciprocity
- promoting interdependence and sustainability
- empowering local, national and global citizenship
- celebrating culture and community.

The third group focuses on the content, processes and outcomes of learning, or the central experiences and encounters which primary schools should provide:

- exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense
- fostering skill
- exciting the imagination
- enacting dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

As they stand, the headings may convey little. Each is elaborated and explained in our final report, which is where I'm afraid you'll need to go if you want the full picture. But, to give a flavour, here are three examples, one from each group. Again, I quote from the report:

- *Autonomy.* To foster children's autonomy and sense of self through a growing understanding of the world present and past, and through productive relationships with others. Autonomy enables individuals to establish who they are and to what they might aspire; it enables the child to translate knowledge into meaning; it encourages that critical independence of thought which is essential both to the growth of knowledge and to citizenship; it enables children to

discriminate in their choice of activities and relationships; and it helps them to see beyond the surface appeal of appearance, fashion and celebrity to what is of abiding value.

- *Empowering local, national and global citizenship.* To help children to become active citizens by encouraging their full participation in decision-making within the classroom and school, especially where their own learning is concerned, and to advance their understanding of human rights, democratic engagement, diversity, conflict resolution and social justice. To develop a sense that human interdependence and the fragility of the world order require a concept of citizenship which is global as well as local and national.
- *Exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense.* To 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. *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. *Exploration* is grounded in that distinctive mixture of amazement, perplexity and curiosity which constitutes childhood wonder; a commitment to discovery, invention, experiment, speculation, fantasy, play and growing linguistic agility which are the essence of childhood.<sup>17</sup>

The last of these, though offered merely by way of example, anticipates the stance taken by the Cambridge Primary Review on the content of the curriculum, for it insists on the centrality of knowledge, and of knowledge conceived as balancing the predictable and the open-ended, induction and exploration, familiarity and novelty, the public and the private, acculturation and self-actualisation.

### *Curriculum structure and content*

The official review of the primary national curriculum, as I've noted, has tidied up current arrangements. It has done so by collapsing the current 13 subjects into six 'areas of learning' and by reducing and simplifying the content of each so as to make it more likely that quarts will indeed be able to fit into pint pots.<sup>18</sup> The risk, of course, is that because the problems identified by the Cambridge Review have not been admitted, let alone attended to, they will have been transferred from the current framework to the new one.

So it's with the larger list of problems and challenges that the Cambridge Primary Review's alternative approach starts and you won't be surprised that we make curriculum reform conditional on the reform of assessment and on a reduction in political intervention. But the Cambridge curriculum framework goes much further. Thus (see diagram at the end of this paper):

- It is driven and constantly informed by the 12 educational aims that I've outlined.
- It has regard to an explicit set of procedural principles, incumbent on schools and policy-makers alike, which highlight entitlement, quality, equity, breadth, balance, local engagement, and guidance rather than prescription.
- It respects and builds on the best of early years provision that is now available in England, while at the end of the primary phase it seeks as seamless as possible a transition to the secondary curriculum.
- It dispenses with the notion of the curriculum core as three protected subjects, which itself perpetuates an increasingly questionable view of what is 'basic' to a modern education, and places all curriculum areas within a unitary curriculum framework.

- It does so on the principle that although teaching time will continue to be differentially allocated, all areas are essential to young children's education, none is dispensable, and all must be taught to the highest possible standards. The hierarchy of 'the basics' and 'the rest' is – finally and not before time – abolished.
- To prevent the two-tier curriculum returning in disguise, the Cambridge framework requires that educational 'standards' can no longer be defined, by proxy, as performance in a narrow range of competencies in literacy and numeracy, but must be about the quality of the entire curriculum to which children are entitled; and this, of course, has implications for assessment as well as the specification of curriculum and educational standards.
- At the same time, the Cambridge framework insists on the centrality of language, oracy and literacy not as a self-contained 'basic' but as enabling learning across a curriculum in which breadth and standards go hand in hand.
- Structurally, it is conceived as a matrix of 12 educational aims and 8 domains of knowledge, skill, enquiry and disposition, with the aims locked firmly into the framework from the outset.
- It provides for a strong local component, differentiates the *national* and *community* curriculum, and divides time between them on the basis of 70/30 per cent of the yearly teaching total. (The full framework is shown diagrammatically on page 15).

### *Why 'domains'?*

The Cambridge Primary Review received many and various representations on what the curriculum should include, and it considered several different starting points. Some argued for the traditional subjects. Others insisted that subjects have had their day, that *how* children learn is more important than *what*, and that the curriculum should be re-configured as generic processes or skills. Thus, the submission we received from one major organisation argued that we need:

a skills-based curriculum, focused on the physical skills, the communication, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and the thinking and learning skills as well as the academic skills which will be essential components of the educated person who is able to think and act effectively in the 21st century.<sup>19</sup>

The government's own review took this line, itemising 'literacy skills', 'numeracy skills', 'ICT capability', 'learning and thinking skills', 'personal and emotional skills', and 'social skills'.<sup>20</sup>

Others argued that the IT revolution had changed the curriculum debate, and the curriculum, for ever. In the words of one witness who was representative of many:

Children do not need to know lots of dates. They can look up information on Google and store it on their mobile phones ... The days of teachers barking out facts are long gone. Our job as teachers is to prepare children so that they can access information and knowledge in the modern world.<sup>21</sup>

Historians were understandably incensed at this parody of their discipline, but parody is what this kind of thinking depends on. However, as our report also says:

We cannot accept the claims in some of the Review submissions that 'process' or 'skill' are *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. We believe this view to be based on a fundamental

misunderstanding of the nature and possibilities of knowledge and on a caricature of teaching as telling and of learning as memorisation and recall. If the caricature has substance in the experience of students in the classroom, this is a comment not on knowledge but on teachers.<sup>22</sup>

The central problem here - so depressingly illustrated by that assertion that all children need today by way of a curriculum is Google, a cellphone and instructions on how to use them - is the equating of knowledge with facts or information, and the failure to grasp the vital place of pedagogy in mediating what the student encounters, learns, knows, understands and is able to do, and in translating the dead letter of specified content into something which engages, excites and inspires. In contrast, our report goes on:

If the various domains of knowledge are viewed not as collections of inert or obsolete information but as *distinct ways of knowing, understanding, enquiring and making sense* which include processes of enquiry, modes of explanation and criteria for verification which are generic to all content in the domain, then, far from being redundant or irrelevant, knowledge provides the means to tackle future problems and needs as well as offering windows of unparalleled richness on past and present ... We cannot at the same time hope that science will enable us to cure the hitherto incurable disease, or offer the world a route to sustainability and survival, while asserting that subjects - including of course science - are educational old hat and need to be replaced by skills or themes ... In the processual sense advocated above, mathematics, the sciences, arts and humanities will be no less relevant and useful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than they were in the 20<sup>th</sup>. For they develop rather than stand still, proceeding on the basis of cumulation, verification and/or falsification, or by other tests of authenticity and quality.<sup>23</sup>

The Cambridge Review, then, argues against the reductionism which in England so often downgrades knowledge while elevating 'skill' or 'process' far beyond what these terms can sustain. Skill, at the level that educators conceive it, should always be grounded in knowledge, understanding and disposition, so that the skill is informed by understanding and applied with discrimination and judgement; and 'process' in isolation is meaningless. A 'process of enquiry'? About what? 'Academic skills'? In relation to what? And what, if you pause to think about it, is an 'emotional skill'?

Knowledge vs skill, content vs process: these are two more of the dichotomies which frustrate curriculum debate. Further, the advancement of a process or skills-based curriculum, in which knowledge is reduced to the incidental or redundant, denies both culture and history. For the curriculum, as Denis Lawton pointed out years ago, is always and inevitably 'a selection from culture'<sup>24</sup>; and central to culture, in Clifford Geertz's famous definition, are the 'stories we tell ourselves about ourselves'<sup>25</sup> - mythical, religious, scientific, artistic, philosophical, mathematical, historical ... and many others.

It is out of this discussion that our report argues, first, that English curriculum discourse stands in urgent need of some conceptual ground-clearing about key terms like 'subjects', 'disciplines', 'knowledge', 'skill' and 'curriculum' itself; second, that a curriculum somehow has to combine both initiation into the existing culture and the building of capacities to challenge, extend and transform our thinking so that culture does not become moribund; and so that we stand a chance of tackling the problems which human ingenuity has put in the way of human dignity and survival, and of advancing rather than stifling the best that humankind has thought and said, and indeed, written, acted, painted, played, sung and danced. Hence, in that key twelfth aim about 'exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense', the distinction between *induction* and *exploration*.

As we stipulatively define it, a curriculum domain has:

- epistemological or thematic coherence;
- an identifiable core of knowledge, skill, disposition and enquiry drawn from both established disciplines and other sources;
- the capacity to contribute to the pursuit of one or more of the 12 proposed aims;
- and, especially, that critical balance of induction and exploration.

The eight domains we identify as reconciling the various aims, claims, needs, imperatives and possibilities identified in the Cambridge Review's evidence and discussions are:

- arts and creativity
- citizenship and ethics
- faith and belief
- language, oracy and literacy (including ICT and a modern foreign language)
- mathematics
- physical and emotional health
- place and time (geography and history)
- science and technology<sup>26</sup>

Most are familiar – that, given our stance on knowledge and culture, is not surprising – but, for reasons I have rehearsed, the domains are not necessarily what some advocates of 'traditional subjects' would like to see: that is to say, closely-prescribed bodies of propositional knowledge, transmitted and received but never questioned. So a domain inevitably incorporates a pedagogy, not just a content syllabus: a pedagogy of both induction and exploration. Like the twelve aims, each of the eight domains is carefully defined, and in the process some tricky categorical decisions are explained.

For example, in the descriptor for 'arts and creativity' we warn against too exclusive a concept of the latter:

Creativity, of course, is not confined to the arts, but also entails what the Robinson enquiry called the 'democratic definition' of creativity, which 'is equally fundamental to advances in the sciences, in mathematics, technology, politics, business and in all areas of everyday life' and which has four features: the pursuit of purpose, the use of the imagination, originality, and the exercise of discriminating judgements of value.<sup>27</sup> The arts are indelibly creative, and properly pursued they achieve the aim of 'exciting the imagination' which features in our list of twelve. But we have also stressed that both creativity and imaginative activity can and must inform teaching and learning across the wider curriculum.<sup>28</sup>

We also argue – contentiously for some – that in a multi-faith and increasingly secular society, faith and belief have an essential place in the Cambridge primary curriculum because they are fundamental to England's history, culture and language as well as being central to the lives of so many of its people. But the treatment of faith and belief, as we propose it, does not extend beyond teaching about religion to the inculcation of particular religious beliefs – except of course in schools which have an explicit religious foundation and character that parents consciously choose for their children – for that would both deny pluralism and infringe the rights of those who have other or no religious beliefs. In any case, we do not define 'faith and belief' in exclusively religious terms, suggesting that 'other beliefs, including those about the validity of religion itself, should also be explored.'<sup>29</sup> This accommodates the concerns of both humanists and secularists that religious belief should not be privileged. But it's a difficult balance to strike.

Further, moral education and the treatment of ethical questions are handled within the domain 'citizenship and ethics' because although all religions have a moral component

which must therefore be respectfully considered, they do not have a moral monopoly. Instead, the handling of ethical questions is seen as part of citizenship, which in turn gives life to several of the aims in the central group – respect and reciprocity, interdependence and sustainability, culture and community – and, through pedagogy, to the vital twelfth aim, enacting dialogue.

The grouping ‘physical and emotional health’ raised some eyebrows, but we argued:

This deals with the handling of human emotions and relationships and with the human body, its development and health, together with the skills of agility, co-ordination and teamwork acquired through sport and PE as conventionally conceived. It is important that the significance of this reconfiguration be properly understood and that neither emotional/relational understanding nor health be treated as a mere PE add-on. We believe that it makes medical as well as educational sense to group together physical and emotional health, and indeed for health as such to be named as a mandatory component of the child’s curriculum for the first time. However, unlike the government’s review, we do not go so far as to place well-being as a whole in the physical domain, for, as defined in our list of aims, well-being has aspects other than the physical, and although attending to children’s physical and emotional well-being and welfare is an essential task for primary schools, well-being is no less about educational engagement, the raising of aspirations and the maximising of children’s potential across the board. As with several other domains, we wish to stress that what is required here is a complete reconceptualisation.<sup>30</sup>

Then, again, what looks like the familiar territory of language and literacy is extended not just by the inclusion of ICT and a modern foreign language. It also gives oracy, at last, the pride of place it has rarely had in English education, ever since the Victorians said that children must learn to read and write to a functional level but feared to take literacy further, still less to unleash the subversive possibilities of talk. Given what we now know from psychology, neuroscience and classroom research about the conditions for thinking, learning and effective teaching – including the effective teaching of literacy itself – the spoken word can no longer be viewed as a mere appendage to ‘the basics’, and certainly not as mere ‘communication skills’.

Similarly, our report argues that information technology cannot be viewed, as it is in the government’s specification, as a mere content-free ‘essential skill’. We say (and again I quote):

The task is to help children develop the capacity to approach electronic and other non-print media (including television and film as well as the internet) with the degree of discrimination and critical awareness that should attend reading, writing, talking and communicating of any kind. This, we believe, is an argument for treating ICT both as the cross-curricular informational tool which it obviously is, and as an aspect of the language curriculum which demands a rigour no less than should apply to the handling of the written and spoken word, and to traditionally-conceived text, information and evidence.<sup>31</sup>

These examples hint at debates about the domains, separately and in combination, with which our report engages and which we believe are central to proper curriculum discourse anywhere. There’s much more to it than that, of course. Now it may be the case that you find yourself baffled that I see the discourse as in any way problematic, and that you’ve achieved here the kind of intelligent conversations about curriculum, culture, knowledge and skill that so far has eluded policy-makers in England. But that, as I said earlier, is for you to say.

**Epilogue: where next?**

The British government has accepted the recommendations of its own review of the primary curriculum. Since this adhered faithfully to its narrow remit, refrained from questioning existing policy and for good measure was managed by DCSF staff, its adoption was a foregone conclusion. The proposals have now been incorporated into a parliamentary bill which the government hopes will very soon become law.

However, also very soon there will be a general election – probably on 6<sup>th</sup> May, though the date hasn't yet been confirmed – and the main opposition party, which is ahead in the opinion polls, has said that it does not like the government's revised primary curriculum and is under no obligation to implement it.

So in England, despite the government's best efforts to close it down, the debate about the purposes, content and quality of the foundational curriculum remains wide open, and the Cambridge Primary Review is far from alone in arguing this. It is clear from the extensive media coverage of our 31 interim reports and our final report, from our dissemination conferences and from the pronouncements of some pretty significant organisations and illustrious individuals, that the government's pre-emptive strike is widely deplored, and that alternative frameworks such as the one I've outlined have many supporters. These include a fast-expanding network of schools which have announced their intention to take forward the Cambridge Review's ideas, regardless of central directives. More fundamentally, there's a growing consensus across the spectrum of professional, parental, religious and public opinion that the neo-elementary curriculum has had its day, and that we need a richer and more humane educational vision for today's children and tomorrow's world.

**ELEMENTS IN A NEW FOUNDATIONAL CURRICULUM**

**As proposed by  
the Cambridge Primary Review**

<b>AIMS</b>	<b>DOMAINS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• well-being</li> <li>• engagement</li> <li>• empowerment</li> <li>• autonomy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• arts and creativity</li> <li>• citizenship and ethics</li> <li>• faith and belief</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encouraging respect and reciprocity</li> <li>• promoting interdependence and sustainability</li> <li>• empowering local, national and global citizenship</li> <li>• celebrating culture and community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• language, oracy and literacy</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense</li> <li>• fostering skill</li> <li>• exciting the imagination</li> <li>• enacting dialogue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mathematics</li> <li>• physical and emotional health</li> <li>• place and time</li> <li>• science and technology</li> </ul>

**THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM**

70% of teaching time

- overall framework**
- nationally determined
  - statutory
- programmes of study**
- nationally proposed
  - non-statutory

**THE COMMUNITY CURRICULUM**

30% of teaching time

- overall framework and programmes of study**
- locally proposed
  - non-statutory



## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- <sup>1</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2003) *Excellence and Enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools*, London, DfES.
- <sup>2</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge, p 207. Hereafter, this publication is referred to as 'Final report of the Cambridge Primary Review'.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p 208.
- <sup>4</sup> [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)
- <sup>5</sup> The so-called 'Independent review of the primary curriculum' issued its interim report in December 2008 and its final report in April 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> Sir Jim Rose, leader of the government primary curriculum review, on that review's website: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/primarycurriculumreview/>. Accessed 28 April 2009. The reference to 'quarts into pint pots' has now been removed, almost certainly in response to our report's criticism.
- <sup>7</sup> (i) DES (1978) *Primary Education in England: a survey by HM Inspectors of Schools*, London: HMSO; (ii) Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (1997) *National Curriculum Assessment Results and the Wider Curriculum at Key Stage 2: evidence from the Ofsted database*, London: Ofsted; (iii) Ofsted (2002) *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools*, London: Ofsted.
- <sup>8</sup> Final report of the Cambridge Primary Review. pp 251-2.
- <sup>9</sup> Department for Education and Science (1985) *Better Schools*, London, HMSO.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Music has the power to shape a child's mind', conference report in *The Guardian*, 21 February 2010.
- <sup>11</sup> <http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-1-and-2/aims-values-and-purposes/index.aspx> (accessed February 2010).
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence/whatisfce/purposes.asp> (accessed February 2010).
- <sup>13</sup> <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/desire-outcomes/> (accessed February 2010).
- <sup>14</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2008) *Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians*.
- <sup>15</sup> For details of the methodology of the Cambridge Primary Review, see its final report, pp 15-20 and Appendices 1-7, pp 515-543.
- <sup>16</sup> For the descriptors, see final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, pp 197-9. For a full account of the genesis and justifications of the chosen aims, see pp 175-197.
- <sup>17</sup> Final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, pp 197, 198 and 199.
- <sup>18</sup> Rose J. (2009) *The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum: final report*, London, Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, p 249.

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- 20 Rose (2009) *op cit*.
- 21 Quoted in the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, p 247.
- 22 Final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, p 248.
- 23 *Ibid*.
- 24 Lawton, D. (1983) *Curriculum Studies and Educational Planning*, London, Hodder and Stoughton.
- 25 Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books.
- 26 The domains are discussed in detail in the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, pp 265-272.
- 27 National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (1999) *All Our Futures: creativity, culture and education*, London, DfE.
- 28 Final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, p 267.
- 29 Final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, p 268.
- 30 Final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, p 271.
- 31 Final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, p 270.