

What is the primary curriculum for?

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The Guardian, Tuesday 7 April 2009

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The national curriculum report fails to ask where schools should be heading next.

Photograph: Sam Frost

Two cheers for the select committee's report on the national curriculum. It registers the groundswell of concern about the weight and complexity of current requirements. It notes how the drive to micromanage everything from the centre deadens, intimidates and deprofessionalises. It proposes that what is specified in the national curriculum be reduced to a "minimum entitlement", that schools be trusted and teachers re-empowered. It does so with admirable directness. Let's hope that the government, the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency and the national strategies take note.

But it offers nothing on the two most important questions: does the current national curriculum represent an appropriate vision of education for the 21st century? And if not, where instead should schools be heading?

It is not enough to explain, as the committee might, that it didn't want to fall into the prescription trap, since on this it is inconsistent. It wants prescription to be kept to "an absolute minimum", but objects that the secondary curriculum programmes of study "lack clear and concise statements on what should be taught".

Similar confusion attends what "minimum entitlement" might mean. First, it is "the learning experiences that children should have a right to access in order that they can operate as effective citizens", which sounds pretty comprehensive. Then, it is just "literacy and numeracy and ... general guidelines on breadth and balance", which strongly suggests that the 3Rs are all that children are entitled to and that the rest of the

curriculum doesn't matter.

Does the committee really want a return to the pre-1989 lottery of having vital subjects taught in some schools but not others, thus frustrating educational continuity for those families who are geographically mobile? Does it not recall what happened in 1998, when the government removed the requirement on primary schools to do more than pay lipservice to the non-core subjects (as the committee now appears to recommend) and thus spelled their virtual disappearance from some classrooms? Has it not yet registered that standards and breadth are interdependent?

The committee complains that "no submission made a concerted attempt at illustrating what [a basic entitlement curriculum] might look like", but ignores two such attempts with which it was presented, the Rose and Cambridge reviews. The Cambridge report elaborates an entitlement framework comprising 12 core aims, eight domains of learning, a distinct "community" component, a 70%/30% apportioning of time for national and local, with only the overall framework prescribed and the rest to be developed in non-statutory form for schools to use as they determine.

Crucially, and unlike the select committee, the Cambridge framework argues that children are entitled to excellence and high standards across the whole curriculum, not just part of it.

As to the committee's jibe that the Cambridge report offers a good analysis of the problems but no solutions, this is bizarre. Apart from the detailed proposals on curriculum aims, substance, structure, development and implementation, which the committee appears not to have noticed, other ideas from the Cambridge review appear, almost verbatim, in the committee's own recommendations: abandoning the national strategies in their present form; supporting local ownership; reconfiguring the roles of national agencies, local authorities and schools; making Curriculum Matters central to initial teacher training. More bizarre still, the committee's report includes as an appendix a comparison of the Rose and Cambridge curriculum reports, which says enough to contradict its criticisms of both of them.

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