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Who should decide what children are taught?

The national curriculum is 20 years old. Do we still need it? A new inquiry plans to investigate. Janet Murray reports

Janet Murray

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The national curriculum, 20 years old this year, is to come under the scrutiny of a comprehensive inquiry announced last week by the commons select committee on children, schools and family. There have been several reviews on specific issues, most notably the Nuffield review of 14-19 education in 2003, and, more recently, the key stage 3 and primary reviews, but none took a broad overview.

This inquiry will ask the big questions. It will consider whether there should be a national curriculum at all, how it might be improved, and how

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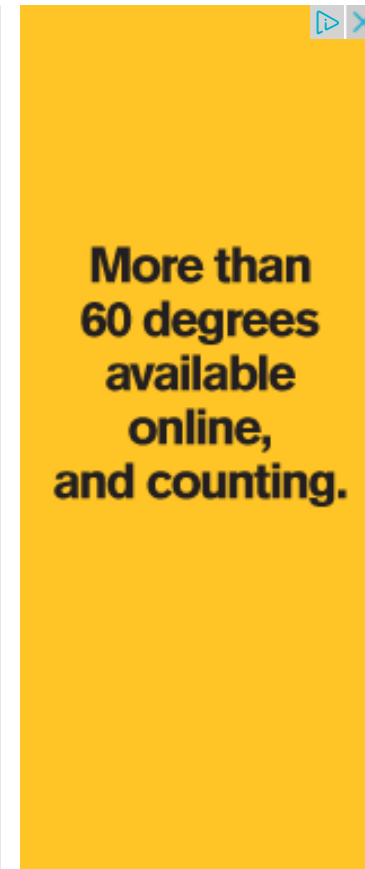


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well it fits in with other policies and strategies. Certain issues have been highlighted for discussion, such as the impact of testing and assessment regimes and the implications of personalised learning.

News of the inquiry has largely been welcomed by educationists but, with a new secondary curriculum due to come into force in autumn, some people question its timing.

The problem, says Mick Brookes, the general secretary of the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), has been a one-size-fits-all approach that has hampered creativity in the classroom. Chris Keates, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), adds: "There is much of merit in the national curriculum, but the major problem faced by teachers is that it is inflexible and overcrowded."

And with teachers under increasing pressure to "teach to the test", children are missing out on vital parts of their education, such as art, music and outdoor education, says John Bangs, head of education at the National Union of Teachers (NUT). "At the moment, testing seems to be the only way of gathering evidence of children's progress."

John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), says that while he is not against testing in principle, he believes the national curriculum has turned education into an "assessment regime, leaving teachers confused about the purpose of testing".

Brookes agrees: "For many schools, testing and assessment have narrowed the school curriculum, with pupils spending too much of the school day on exam practice. With the emphasis on children's output rather than the learning process itself, many may be turned off learning."

Lighter touch

New tests being piloted in 484 primary and secondary schools offer a glimmer of hope. The "lighter touch" maths, reading and writing tests could eventually replace the present ones. Based on teachers' assessment data, the tests are designed to confirm whether a child is



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attaining a particular level. Pupils can be entered for each level at different times and are only tested if they are deemed to be "secure" at that level. But educationists are cautious. "The format might be different, but as long as schools continue to be judged on national tests and performance tables, little will change," says Bangs.

Peter Tymms, professor of education at Durham University, shares his view that tests and league tables should go. "We have to remember it's not so much the curriculum that matters, but how it is interpreted in the classroom," he says. "When you have a teacher with 30 pupils who spends most of their time coaching children for exams because they are worried about league tables, they may not be looking at the whole child."

As well as stifling teachers' creativity, the national curriculum does not offer teachers enough scope to participate in planning and creating the curriculum, says Tymms. "Before, you'd get pockets of teachers in different authorities doing really interesting work to develop the curriculum. It would be good for teachers to have a bit of freedom to break away, reflect on their practice, and plan for change."

That is a view shared by Charles Leadbeater, a leading authority on innovation and creativity, and a strategic adviser to corporations and governments. "At its worst, [the national curriculum] has become a straitjacket that could infantilise the education system."

Educationists fear that instead of encouraging children to participate in the process of learning, the national curriculum turns education into something which is "done to them" and ignores the expertise of teachers.

"It assumes that a small group of experts at the centre are better placed to know what should be learned than heads, teachers, parents, pupils, employers on the ground," Leadbeater says. "It turns education into a delivery system, rather than a process of discovery and engagement."

The Excellence and Enjoyment strategy for primary schools, published in 2003, seemed to offer a solution. It promised "a rich, varied and exciting curriculum which develops children in a range of ways", but educationists are sceptical about how much impact it has had. As Brookes puts it: "We should always strive for excellence, but there isn't much enjoyment about



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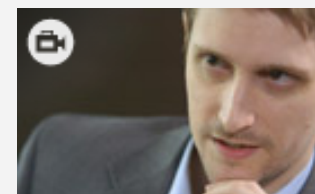


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at the moment."

Early findings made public last week by the Cambridge-based primary review study suggest he may have a point. It found that UK children are subjected to more testing - and at an earlier age - than children in other western countries. The assessment regime begins with baseline testing when children start school, and is followed by tests at 7 and 11. The primary review, which examined 22 countries, found that "no other country appears so preoccupied with national standards". The review also raised concerns about the starting age and the appropriateness of the curriculum in the reception year.

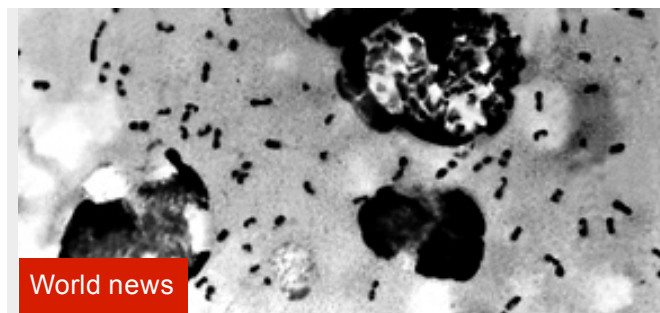
A former director of the Institute of Education, Peter Mortimore, welcomes the inquiry, saying he hopes it will give teachers the time to be more creative. He believes a limit should be set on how many hours they have to spend working closely to the curriculum, with as much as 50% of time available for "free" teaching.

For Brookes, there is a paradoxical relationship between the national curriculum and the government's latest obsession, "personalised learning".

Leadbeater agrees. In his study *Personalisation through Participation*, he points out that it is only possible to personalise learning and engage young people by varying what and how they are taught, in different settings. "The schools I visited said the national curriculum was the biggest constraint," he says.

Educationists seem to agree that schools that have taken a selective approach to the national curriculum have been the most successful. "Schools are hampered by staff and headteachers who follow the national curriculum to the letter," says Bangs. "Confident heads cherry-pick the best bits, while maintaining their own vision."

Geoff Wybar, headteacher at Gravesend grammar school, a selective boys' secondary in north Kent, does just that. "Our students do the key stage 3 Sats a year early, not because we're a selective school, but because we wanted to give students more time on key stage 4 work. We were prepared to take the risk of a dip in our results at key stage 3,



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which there has been. But the longer run- up has impacted positively on student achievement at key stage 4."

Need for a framework

What is needed, says Bangs, is a national framework, not a national curriculum. He admits that the new secondary curriculum goes some way towards this, but not far enough. He is disappointed that comparison with successful education systems outside the UK is not on the agenda for the national curriculum inquiry.

Mortimore agrees. In an article in Education Guardian last month, he highlighted the fact that while national test scores are improving, performance in international tests, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa), is declining.

The new 14-19 diploma qualifications get the thumbs up from many education professionals, including John White, emeritus professor of philosophy of education at the Institute of Education, who says that for too many years "education was largely aimed at the middle classes".

For Brookes, it is definitely a step in the right direction. "We have to remember that only a small percentage of children are going to end up in academic professions. The vast majority will not. We need a curriculum that reflects those needs."

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