

Accidents can happen

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Two accidents of history have ill served our curriculum thinking. If we can recognise the impoverishment those events have imposed on us, then it might be possible to create a curriculum more suited to the present and future needs of our society collectively and of the individual citizen.

First the accidents and their damaging impact.

The state became fully involved in education for the first time in 1870. The Education Act of that year coincided with the Revised Code that ushered in the first period of payment by results. The architect of the Code, Robert Lowe, declared that the 'education of the poorer classes should be just sufficient to give them that sense of awe for higher education the leaders of the nation demand'. We did not recognise the need for a vocational and practical curriculum, having always put an exclusive value on the academic. In those days we even denied the need for our leaders to know any science, preferring to draw on the culture of the ancient civilisations. Elementary schools were erected close to mills, factories and mines so that they were convenient for the children of those who worked there; the next generation became accustomed to their life's destiny in unskilled and semi-skilled employment.

The second major accident was the introduction of the national curriculum in 1989. Not that a national curriculum was necessarily a mistake; after all, the state has a right to determine what is needed collectively for the future benefit of society. It was more that the purpose, scale, framework and choices for inclusion in the curriculum were inappropriate,

inheriting the traditions of a bygone age and repeating the mistakes of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Consider those mistaken processes and choices.

A curriculum should reflect agreed purposes and aims for education based on present and future needs. By 1988 it was clear we lived in an age of information technology rather than agriculture or industry. In half-heartedly embracing the principle of equality of opportunity for all, the secretary of state at the time, Kenneth Baker, declared that this implied that we must provide the same curriculum for everyone. With hindsight this is astonishing and doesn't follow the rules of logic. One curriculum does not suit all – which is Tomlinson's key underlying message. Technology aside it was a repeat of the 1904 grammar school curriculum defined in terms of subjects known to the 19th universities (which no more than 1 per cent of students attended). The range of subjects falls hopelessly short of describing the shape of higher education today and there is increasing dismay in this sector about the appropriateness of the curriculum. In 1989 for the first time the primary curriculum was also described in terms of the same subjects. Primary educators have never had the same voice as that of the university sector but they too are dismayed by the over-prescriptive and unbalanced choices made by the 1989 designs.

None of this need have happened. For at least a decade before 1988 HMI had led curriculum debate following on the thinking of the Schools Council. We had begun to realise that the school curriculum must serve the aims and purposes of education. Prior to 1988 we had debated broad 'areas of experience', a range of skills and the main ideas and values that a modern pluralist society like ours could provide for students to enjoy. That would have led to a very different curriculum framework than the one imposed since 1989. It would have been

much slimmer and would have detailed some basic core skills that everybody would have been expected to master in their early learning. Among the skills would have been literacy and numeracy and the essential skill in our ever-changing world of 'learning to learn'.

Instead we had a limited range of subjects lacking in balance of knowledge and skill. Incoherence arose from many of the skills and concepts recurring in all subjects, and in others not being included at all. This was compounded by the subject panels being sent away to design their syllabuses separately rather than the whole being designed beforehand so that each knew their allotted place and relationship with one another.

Inevitably what we decide our young should learn is a trillionth of what's on offer. In a multicultural society even the passing on of a culture from one generation to the next becomes a tricky matter. The choice of subject as the dominant reference in the curriculum framework compounded these problems.

The national curriculum also included an inherent flaw in assessment design. 'Assessment' it declared 'should be at once formative, summative, informative and comparative'. Inevitably formative assessment suffered. It is only as the whole edifice of the national curriculum has begun to collapse that assessment for learning, as we now call it, has made a welcome reappearance. Even now of course it is coloured by our preoccupation with summative, comparative and informative assessment. Primary schools for example focus on the borderline of level 4 in year 6 and secondary schools on the C/D GCSE cut off at key stage 4. Most youngsters know and are reconciled to their learning limits very early in school life.

Finally the national curriculum has failed in the one area in which it was reasonably expected to be successful. Instead of 'doing the Romans' four or five times, we

were assured, the national curriculum would ensure that when children move school they would seamlessly pick up in their new school where they had left off in their old one. In practice such claims were simplistic. Mobile pupils continue to suffer just as they did before.

So if these are limitations where are the solutions?

There are two major changes that these flaws and current and future changes within society demand of our curricular designers:

- mapping the curriculum to consider what lies beyond the timetable and to provide a better balance of skills and information
- methods of assessment, testing and exams.

Looking at the first: to overcome the monotonous metronomic nature of the timetabled curriculum, schools should have a *planned* non-metronomic series of days or weeks. At present these periods are not planned but happen irregularly (sometimes serendipitously) and are rarely evaluated. These events have a different value from the normal timetable.

Arguments to support this suggest that special events eagerly anticipated by pupils are of a different nature from the regular repetitive curriculum and heighten their readiness to learn.

The word 'experience' revives a pre-national curriculum way of thinking. In the 1970s and 80s we talked of the areas of experience that all youngsters are entitled to either within the formal timetable or in extracurricular activities. In the mid 1990s Birmingham LEA introduced three 'guarantees' – one each for early years, primary and secondary education. Each guarantee was a set of experiences that

the school would be responsible for monitoring to ensure that every one of their students enjoyed in school or in the community. The primary guarantee, for example, stipulated that every pupil should:

- take part in a public performance
- have a chance to develop an aspect of the creative arts
- take part in a residential experience
- work in a group to brainstorm, create, plan and design a book or a multi-media disc aimed at a younger age group
- take part in a survey of an environmental issue of concern to the local community.

These experiences, though not entirely arbitrary, were by no means comprehensive. It was accepted that each school would want to add to that set.

The delivery of these activities was aided, especially at secondary level, by the funds for what has been called 'study support' or 'out of hours learning', boosted by specific grants and lottery funds.

This account of recent history reveals two new propositions about the future of curriculum design. First it is important to have some agreement about experiences that lie either outside the usual timetable or beyond the timetable itself. In short non-metronomic timetables should be considered seriously.

Second any new slimmed down national curriculum must cover the nature of tests and of assessment. The tension between summative and formative assessment could be ameliorated if assessment were not tied in to particular ages. We are preoccupied with all students taking tests at age 7, 11, 14, or 16 – but why doesn't this practice apply to the driving test, swimming certificate or music grades?

In such areas of skill and competence it would be nonsensical to suggest that assessment should be linked to a particular age; tests should be taken when the pupil is ready. Some summative tests could involve teacher assessment externally moderated. The need for national benchmarking could be met by the re-establishment of the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) created in the 1970s and prematurely abolished in the 80s.

Above all the curriculum should reflect better our values and purposes as they change over time. Today values of equity and equality have a greater place in our society than they did 100 years ago.

We are also much more interdependent, so an international element to the curriculum has a very strong claim for inclusion. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights might profitably lead to agreement among nations about what global citizenship might demand of the curriculum. This has another implication at least for some of our metropolitan multi-racial, multi-faith and multi-lingual cities. The balance of curriculum that is right for those cities may not be right for more rural communities. In short a national curriculum should recognise regional need too.

Nothing less than a major rethink and redesign is required.

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