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## The curriculum and state knowledge

### Introduction

This chapter examines the state control of knowledge in the school curriculum. For the first three-quarters of the twentieth century it seemed that what children learned in school was of little interest to politicians or the government. But for the last thirty years the curriculum has become one of the hottest political issues. We look at how the curriculum has changed over the years and why recent governments have made children's knowledge central to government policy.

### The Development of the State Curriculum in England

#### Elementary Schools and the Basics for the Working Class

The first state elementary education in England from 1870 had a closely defined curriculum known as 'the four Rs': reading, writing, 'rithmetic and religion. The curriculum in the board schools was based upon the Church foundation model: literacy and numeracy to equip the poor with basic skills for employment, with religion to propagate Christian moral values in society. It was not designed to produce the leaders of the nation and the cultural elite who were being educated in the fee-paying public schools. Those schools taught a rich and balanced curriculum based upon a broad range of subjects: mathematics, sciences, the arts and humanities. Elementary education was for the poor: an upcoming workforce and military personnel (see Chapter 3). It is difficult to know quite how successful the curriculum was in the board schools, but it has been judged to be effective by the quality of diaries and letters written home by soldiers in the First World War. The

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notion of 'basics for all' still lingers over the political discussions of the curriculum, rooted in the notion that literacy and numeracy are all that are required for the working classes. The curriculum was 'gendered' with differential provision for girls and boys (see Chapter 8). The curriculum in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not just *reflect* the social structure of society, it shaped and replicated it, keeping the working classes and women in their places.

### The Twentieth-Century Hands-Off Policy

Following the Balfour Act in 1902, the curriculum of elementary schools had been left to teachers: there was no curriculum directive from government, and the local authorities who controlled schools did not see it as their role to intervene either. The reluctance to establish a national curriculum for schools continued with the 1944 Education Act.

The twentieth century brought Keynesian economics and the beginning of the welfare state, and the 1944 Act was one attempt to bring social equality. The Act made secondary education available to all regardless of class and the ability to pay, bringing a broader curriculum to some working-class children by giving them access to secondary and higher education. However, Chapter 3 shows that the 11-plus selection process favoured middle-class families. The Act had little impact on the curriculum which was left unmentioned, with just one exception: schools should teach Religious Education and include a daily act of corporate worship of 'a broadly Christian kind'. The state saw its role as defining religious and moral direction, but not the knowledge to be taught, confirming the influence which the Christian Church still had on education.

The state neglect of the curriculum reflects its satisfaction with what teachers were doing. It shows also, perhaps, a lack of awareness by politicians about the importance of knowledge in state schools. Until 1944 all governments in the twentieth century had been Conservative or Liberal in which most MPs and ministers had attended public schools and received a curriculum with which they were satisfied. However, Lawton (1992) suggests another reason for the lack of a state curriculum: the fear of the politics of totalitarian regimes which dominated Europe during the 1930s. The Second World War had been engendered by nationalism and the extreme ideologies of left and right. The Nazi regime under Hitler in Germany and the Communist government in Soviet Russia under Stalin had made schools into propaganda machines to support state ideology. Politicians in the UK, anxious not to be seen to be anti-democratic, were reluctant to impose national control of the school curriculum. Rather than indifference to the curriculum, it might be that politicians saw the curriculum as *too* powerful and potent a force for them to engage with. This becomes significant when we look at the creation of the National Curriculum in England and how it was to be made 'democratic'.

While the government had no direct influence on the school curriculum during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, the 1944 Act did affect the primary curriculum. The 11-plus selection comprised tests of IQ, literacy and mathematics and, in the later years of primary schools, teachers prepared children to pass them, resulting in a curriculum in which other subjects were marginalised. The 1944 Act left secondary schools to carry on with the subject-based curriculum which they had inherited from the public schools, with mathematics, English and science at its core. Grammar schools would teach a strong humanities curriculum, including Latin, and the technical schools would have more emphasis, for boys, on science and engineering. Secondary modern schools had a watered-down version of the subject curriculum.

The lack of any government policy on the curriculum left things as they were, with many children lacking access to certain subjects. The introduction of the technical schools could have been an initiative to strengthen the curriculum towards technology and industrial production. But Chapter 3 shows that technical schools were not popular and the majority of children who passed the 11-plus went to the high-status grammar schools for the traditional humanities-led curriculum. There was no government drive to harness the school curriculum to industry and the economy. The failure of the secondary technical schools, and consequently of the technology curriculum, was probably due to the hierarchical status of the tripartite system of the 1944 Act. Grammar schools were seen to replicate the public schools' high-status humanities curriculum. Technology was viewed by the British, in contrast with the rest of Europe, as a low-status form of education (Hutton, 1995).

### The 1960s and Curriculum Integration

It was the 1960s that brought changes to the primary curriculum, but by the professionals in the schools, not the state. We see in Chapter 6 how the Plowden Report (1967) affected teaching methods, but also the curriculum. Plowden was a government commission of inquiry about what was considered to be good primary education. Essentially, it recommended the 'progressive' model of primary education which had been developed in early years teaching and recommended a broader curriculum than the literacy and numeracy model which had been perpetuated by the 11-plus. Plowden criticised subject-teaching as inappropriate for young children:

The conventional ways of categorizing these phenomena as biology, branches of physics such as optics, electricity and magnetism, chemistry, engineering and so on are neither natural nor, except very crudely, understandable classifications to young children of primary school age. If, for the terms used above, rabbits, railway engines, telescopes, TV sets and aeroplanes are substituted, these are at once seen to be things about which children show a spontaneous curiosity and ask endless questions. (para.668)

Plowden signalled a move from the narrow literacy and numeracy curriculum and the abolition of the subject-based model. It produced a wave of thinking among teachers about topic-teaching and recommendations for changing the

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curriculum on integrated 'topic-work' lines which continued into the 1980s (Gunning et al., 1981). 'Integration' was 'child-centred' in shaping the curriculum to make sense to children, with the idea that 'subjects' are abstract, adult concepts that mean little to children. Primary schools tried to distinguish themselves from secondary education by rejecting the rigid timetabling of secondary subjects and specialist teachers in favour of an integrated curriculum with a single 'generalist' teacher.

These developments were of their time. The 1960s and 1970s saw a cultural change in society from the rigid and formal social mores of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There was a rejection of authority and Victorian family values coupled with a desire for 'freedom', which the child-centred model nicely fitted. Children should be free of the tyrannical constraints of formal schooling; the progressive integrated curriculum and more creative work provided that 'freedom'. Another factor was the development of teacher training during the 1960s and 1970s with the introduction of BED degrees (see Chapter 7), which encouraged trainee teachers to think about progressive primary education and often recommended the integrated curriculum. The Labour government's move to comprehensive schools with Circular 10/65 (DES, 1965) was consistent with Plowden on the curriculum; the abolition of the 11-plus allowed teachers to adopt a wider curriculum and to stop teaching to the 11-plus test. It was a sign to teachers that the old elitist structures were disappearing, and they felt strengthened in developing more adventurous approaches to their teaching and to the curriculum.

### Politics and the Curriculum

Resistance to teachers' control of the curriculum began in the 1970s with the publication of the so-called 'Black Papers' (Cox and Dyson, 1969) which accused primary school teachers of not providing a sufficient basic curriculum and of an overemphasis on art and creativity. The papers were written from a right-wing elitist perspective and were critical of the underlying philosophy of freedom for children as well as the move from traditionalist assumptions about the subject-based curriculum. However, this was not only a right-wing view, and the first of the government criticisms of the curriculum came with the speech made by the Labour Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan (1976) at Ruskin College. Callaghan launched 'the great education debate' by questioning the content of the curriculum, saying that it did not service the needs of industry and the economy. In 1973 Anthony Crosland, Labour Secretary of State for Education, borrowing a metaphor from his predecessor David Eccles, had famously complained that the school curriculum was 'a secret garden in which only teachers and children are allowed to walk'. Callaghan's criticism was about the content of the curriculum; but more than that, it was a complaint that only professionals were able to define it: no one else was allowed into the garden. Callaghan called for a 'democratic' approach to the curriculum, stressing the need for parents and the world of business to be involved.

The next move from government came in the HMI Survey of Primary Education (DES, 1978) in which inspectors criticised integrated topic work for lacking academic rigour and frequently being little more than children copying out sections of text books. The DES document, *A Framework for the School Curriculum* (DES, 1980) called for assessment and monitoring by local authorities. During the 1980s a series of pamphlets from HMI (1984) were the first attempts at a state definition of the curriculum; the fact that the documents came out subject by subject was an indication of a return to the subject-based curriculum, and the title of the series, *Curriculum Matters*, was intended to indicate that the curriculum now *did* really matter. The HMI definitions were not statutory: schools could, and did, choose to ignore them. It was challenging the progressive notion that children's learning should be dictated by their interests, and gave the 'positivist' view that knowledge exists as a set of subjects, is 'out there' and is to be learned. But these early attempts to bring the profession into line to teach a government-led curriculum were to fail. It needed the full force of state legislation with a national curriculum, and this arrived with the 1988 Education Act. Britain was a late starter, but it made up by creating probably the world's most detailed and rigorous national curriculum, and one that was to be assessed by nationally standardised tests: a pincer movement on the professionals.

 **Reader tasks**

- List the reasons for government's interest in the curriculum.
- Do you think that the state should define the knowledge to be learned in schools?

## The Development of the National Curriculum

The introduction of the National Curriculum was to be a properly democratic process, approved as statutory legislation by the House of Commons and the House of Lords. And for it to be democratic, as Jim Callaghan had suggested, everyone with an interest should be able to contribute to its formation before it reached Parliament. To get a nation of 60 million people to agree on what should count as knowledge was going to be a tall order, and it took some four years from the conception of the curriculum to its implementation. It produced a remarkable tale of argument, intrigue and manipulation – battles between government and its civil servants, professionals and academics. It was started by the Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker.

The first sign came before the Act with a slim red 'consultation document' in July 1987 (DES and Welsh Office, 1987) announcing that the government was planning a national curriculum of ten 'foundation subjects': a core of English, Mathematics and Science with seven 'other foundation subjects', History, Geography, Technology, Physical Education, Art and Design, Music and, in the secondary school, Modern Foreign Languages. It also proposed

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four key stages and all the subjects would be assessed with national tests at the end of each key stage, at the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16. We saw in Chapter 2 that the radical neo-liberal thinkers in the Conservative government saw no need for, and even opposed, a national curriculum. They saw it as unnecessary legislation in what was needed to bring education into the marketplace. The new National Curriculum was to apply to the maintained sector – state schools – and was not intended for independent private schools. This was a sure sign that the reason for the National Curriculum was about the marketisation of schooling. Independent schools did not need a national curriculum because they were already in a market.

The document provoked consternation, particularly among primary school teachers, for three reasons. First, a government-defined curriculum itself was disconcerting for a profession which had long been used to deciding on children's learning. Second, it was a subject-based curriculum derived from the traditional public school and grammar school model, with subjects defined from 5 to 16. It was a blow to those professionals who had worked to develop new models of a thematic or integrated curriculum. The third shock was the proposal for testing at the end of each key stage. The grammar school selection test had been seen as stressful and divisive, and primary school teachers, freed from it in the late 1960s, had rejected formal testing as detrimental to children's learning. The proposal was to have national testing in all ten of the subjects. The government's entry into the 'secret garden' of the curriculum looked like breaking down the gate and tearing up the flower beds to plant rows of carrots and cabbages. The response of the profession was typified in a publication by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers with a title addressed to the Secretary of State: *Take Care, Mr Baker* (Haviland, 1988).

The subject-based curriculum demonstrates 'neo-conservative' thinking in the Conservative Party: the desire to 'conserve', or to return to, the traditional model of the curriculum which those powerful members of the government had experienced in their public or grammar schools. Typical of the right-wing Hillgate Group (1989) which had the ear of the Prime Minister and Secretary of State, it was an explicit rejection of professional thinking about the curriculum and was criticised by academics for the lack of any proper epistemological basis (White, 1990). Another matter was that none of the ten subjects included anything about politics, the study of society or philosophy. It was to be a safe and C/conservative curriculum: facts and skills with nothing to question or challenge society as it exists.

Neo-conservatism came with a mixture of naivety and cynicism. It was naive in the sense that the civil servants at the DES who drew up the document seemed to be simply unaware of alternative possibilities for knowledge and the curriculum. It was also naive in its assumptions about national testing; the idea that every subject could be assessed on a national basis at the end of each key stage showed ignorance of what would be involved. The cynical action was to send the document out as a 'consultation paper' in July with responses required by 1 September, a short period when teachers were on holiday. Resistance to the proposals were clearly not welcome and they were indeed

limited; the decision on the ten subjects was taken summarily by Baker after the 1987 consultation paper.

The next document to arrive was the Report of the Task Group on Attainment and Testing (TGAT, 1988). That the work on assessment was done before the curriculum indicates the priority which the government gave to testing in the national curriculum scheme. Chaired by Paul Black, an academic expert on assessment at King's College, London, the report was intended to set the framework for each subject in the curriculum. It designated the term 'attainment targets' which were to be the strands of each subject to be assessed, such as 'Speaking and Listening', 'Reading' and 'Writing' in English. Black visualised the difficulty of national tests for each of ten subjects in each key stage and was conscious of primary teachers' dislike of sitting their children down to pencil and paper tests. He proposed national SATs and it is interesting that the term was first defined as 'Standard Assessment *Tasks*': they should be classroom activities, such as building a model lighthouse. The activity would be observed to assess pupils in a variety of subjects such as Science, Technology, Art and Design, as well as *speaking and listening* in English. They were intended to avoid a large number of separate tests and children hardly needed to know that they were being assessed. Of course, Black's proposal was never implemented – testing became pencil and paper assessments in the core subjects only, and the 'T' in SATs came to stand for 'test'. This is another example of the conflict between a professional and a government view of assessment. Black's model was based on a complex and sophisticated judgement about children's learning. The government's view was based on simple data to compare pupils and schools. Black (1992) later revealed his anger at the way his work had been treated, saying 'those who gave dire warnings that the Act would be an instrument of Government control have been proved right'.

If assessment was controversial, decisions about the content of the curriculum were even more so. The 1988 Act gives the sole power of decision about the content of the school curriculum to the Secretary of State. However, the legislation requires that s/he should 'consult with' interested parties and, from late 1988, the consultation process for the ten subjects began. For each subject a 'working group' was set up and asked to draft a proposal for attainment targets and programmes of study based on the TGAT Report. The groups, beginning with English, Mathematics and Science, had to work quickly because Baker was determined to get the National Curriculum up and running in September 1989. It was another naive notion that an agreed curriculum could be created in that time. The groups were sent off to stay in hotels for three or four weekends and to produce draft attainment targets and programmes of study. The National Curriculum Council (NCC) was set up to manage the process on behalf of the government.

The subject working groups comprised some academics as experts in the subject, representatives of industry, commerce, the media and parents. Another snub to the profession was the small number of teachers included, a primary and a secondary representative on each group. Baker selected

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chairs of the groups who would take an anti-professional line. For example, the chair of the English Working Group was none other than Brian Cox of the 'Black Papers'. Cox was a figurehead of anti-progressivism who, Baker expected, could be relied upon to take a right-wing, traditional position. Despite Baker's manoeuvring, things proved not to be as straightforward as he had expected. There was trouble in the groups with angry debate reflecting strongly held viewpoints and the tensions between the political and the professional (Coulby, 1996).

The chair of the Mathematics group, Professor Roger Blin-Stoyle, resigned after the first report received a hostile reception from Baker. This delayed matters and caused problems. The next surprise was to come from the English group which had decided on three attainment targets for English: 'Speaking and Listening', 'Reading' and 'Writing'. When Baker received the report he was unhappy that Speaking and Listening was a target not just for primary pupils but for secondary too. His neo-conservative, traditional view of the curriculum saw English as the study and writing of literature; conversation, discussion and role-play are only suitable for young children; secondary pupils should be reading Shakespeare and writing correctly. But the arch-conservative, Cox, through discussion with the professionals, had been converted to the importance of oral language for older pupils. When Baker resisted the proposal, Cox threatened to resign. After the Blin-Stoyle resignation this would have been too embarrassing for Baker and would have delayed the timetable. Baker had to yield and accept speaking and listening for secondary English pupils. Like Black, Cox later published his own angry account of the politicisation of the curriculum and the way that the consultation process had been cynically managed (Cox, 1991).

There was no doubt that Baker had tried to implement a consultation process which, in itself, could have been democratic and involved everyone's views. The system was that the first working party report was sent to the Secretary of State for his views, then sent out for wide consultation. The group was then to meet again to make revisions in the light of feedback and produce another report. If that was accepted by the Secretary of State it could go to Parliament for approval and become statute. It meant a flurry of documents, multiplied by ten for each of the subjects. All documents were sent to all schools and were available free to anyone who contacted the DES. It was an enormous paper exercise and the debate was not restricted to the educational world with several cases of widespread discussion and protest.

An example was the proposal for the Music curriculum (DES and Welsh Office, 1991a). It proposed two attainment targets: 'Listening and Appreciation' and 'Performance and Composition'. For years music teachers in schools had worked to develop music beyond simply listening to music and singing to the teacher's piano-playing. The development of composition in the Music GCSE had been particularly successful, showing that all pupils were able to perform and compose music, just as they can draw, paint and write (Glover and Ward, 1998). The proposed attainment targets reflected these professional advances in music. By this time, Kenneth Baker



had been replaced as Secretary of State by Kenneth Clarke and his response to the proposal reflected the same neo-conservative traditionalist view. He objected to performance and composition, saying that performance, and particularly composition, could only be for selected 'gifted' pupils, and proposed deleting performance and composition. This angered music teachers, and was taken up by the famous orchestral conductor, Sir Simon Rattle, who, at the beginning of each of his concerts, turned to the audience and deplored the actions of the Secretary of State in removing performance from the curriculum, warning that it would threaten the existence of future orchestras in Britain. Clarke climbed down to accept the two attainment targets.

He lost that battle, but won against the History working group. They had proposed that History should include the study of recent events to make it interesting and up to date (DES and Welsh Office, 1991b). Clarke ruled, however, that anything in the History curriculum must be at least thirty years old. So pupils would not be able to study the then recent Falklands War of 1982 and the controversial sinking of the Argentine ship, *Belgrano*. Pupils were to be kept from anything which might make them reflect upon the political or social status quo. They should know about the kings and queens of England and be reminded of Britain's greatness in the world: a *nationalist* curriculum as well as a national curriculum (Coulby, 2000). This was consistent with the neo-conservative view of knowledge to be learned and not questioned, and the exclusion from the National Curriculum of anything about the study of society or politics.

Religious Education had been the only compulsory school subject since the 1944 Education Act, and it became the only subject *not* to be part of the statutory National Curriculum in the 1988 Act. The subject was still compulsory in that it had to be offered by schools, although parents were able to withdraw their children from it. The Act states that Religious Education should 'reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian'. The assertion ignored the multi-faith nature of the population. However, there was a concession: the content of the curriculum was to be defined locally by the LEA through a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). This was intended to allow areas with different religions to define the curriculum to include other faiths. As Cush (2004) points out, it was 'an uneasy compromise' between the two lobbies: the traditional Christians versus those who saw RE as the understanding of religious world views. It was symptomatic of the continuing powerful influence of the Church of England on education policy. While the detailed curriculum content was still in local hands, in 2004 the DfES published national – but non-statutory – guidelines for RE which recommended a stronger multi-faith approach (DfES/QCA, 2004).

There was an acknowledgement of the need for a culturally different curriculum in Wales and a separate curriculum was devised by the Welsh Office, in collaboration with, but separate from, the Department for Education and Science in London. The curriculum for Wales included all the subjects with the addition of the study of the Welsh language and other variations in the

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subjects. However, apart from this concession, the National Curriculum was to apply to all children of all cultures and, at the time, there was no attempt to consider the cultural values of minority groups in society. The curriculum was to be one which defined British culture.

After all the debate and the papers, the National Curriculum arrived in schools in the form of ten A4 ring-binders, one for each subject, covering attainment targets and programmes of study for all four Key Stages – not difficult for secondary subject teachers who would have one, or possibly two, but primary teachers grappled with nine folders to find the curriculum they were to teach. There was ‘help’ with a series of ‘Non-Statutory Guidance’ documents published by the National Curriculum Council; one (NCC, 1989) was intended to guide primary school teachers in making the subjects work together, suggesting that they might even integrate some subjects, and this seemed to be a conciliatory gesture to primary teachers: the new National Curriculum might not be quite so subject-centred as it appeared (Ward, 1990). There was also training in the new curriculum for teachers, although it was patchy and limited. It is important to remember that, at the same time as introducing a new national curriculum, the 1988 Act also brought in local management of schools (LMS) making head teachers into business managers, as against their previous role as the senior teacher. In primary schools head teachers found themselves distracted from the strong academic leadership needed for the new curriculum and assessment (Coulby and Bash, 1991).

It was obvious to many that the new National Curriculum, while missing some critical content in politics and social sciences, was too fat. The teacher's stack of ring binders was both the symbol and the reality of overload and over-prescription. Overload was inevitable in the way it was constructed subject by subject. A working group of experts in each subject was bound to make sure they ‘get it all in’, leaving a collection of ten full folders of content. Another way to proceed would have been to develop the subject proposals then, in another phase, consider the overall curriculum required for each key stage to ensure that it was balanced and coherent. But it would have taken longer. The process was rushed, disorganised and, therefore, undemocratic (White, 1990). The chaotic knowledge war was played with real bullets, because this was government statute; for a teacher not to follow the National Curriculum orders was to break the law. The bitterness and acrimony of the time was summarised in another account of the process. Duncan Graham took over as chair of the Mathematics Working Party after Blin-Stoyle's resignation and later became chair of the NCC. He was one of the professionals committed to the ideal of a national curriculum, but in his book, *A Lesson for Us All*, (Graham and Tyler, 1993) he writes of his sense of betrayal by self-seeking politicians and civil servants.

Plagued by conflict and discord, the first years of the National Curriculum saw various levels of discontent among professionals. Some welcomed the prescription given to them by the new curriculum, others resented it and there was continuing complaint about the pressure both on teachers' workload and the effects of testing on pupils. In 1992 the NCC introduced revisions to the curriculum orders. This brought not a reduction, but more prescription. One of the changes was stronger intervention in the English curriculum with the imposition of a 'canon of great literature': specified texts, including Shakespeare plays, which pupils should study. It was also argued that insufficient attention was being paid to phonics in children's early reading (see Chapter 6). By 1993 the teaching unions were up in arms: taking away English teachers' choice of books to be studied, coupled with concerns about the overload of assessment at Key Stage 1, brought the National Union of Teachers (NUT) out on strike.

The conflict between the political and professional views of the curriculum can be traced through the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s conflict between the politicians in power and the professionals in practice was the hallmark of the National Curriculum, with the professionals marginalised. Secretaries of State varied in their sympathy with the professionals. Kenneth Clarke, who succeeded Kenneth Baker, was determined to maintain a distance from the professionals, fearing that he would be enticed by their arguments and would abandon the neo-conservative right-wing line. He refused to visit schools or to talk with teachers. His successor, John Macgregor, was judged to be too close to the professionals and was replaced in 1993 by the unremitting right-winger John Patten. He railed against primary curriculum integration and teachers' opposition to the tests in inflammatory speeches and articles (Patten, 1993). He stood firm against the teachers' protests and the summer of 1993 brought a climax to the conflict. Patten was finally replaced as Secretary of State by the former schoolteacher Gillian Shepherd.

Shepherd's appointment as Secretary of State was in itself a climbdown by the government, now led by John Major. In 1990 the Conservative Party had replaced its uncompromising radical party leader, Margaret Thatcher. Her right wing neo-liberal ideology had pushed the Conservatives into an unelectable position with the highly unpopular poll tax. Major, a pragmatic and less ideologically driven politician, had succeeded against the odds in winning the Conservatives the general election in 1992. As a pragmatist, he was able to see that face-to-face conflict with the professions could not continue and appointing Shepherd, a former professional, was to bring compromise. She appointed Sir Ron Dearing to chair the NCC and bring about a workable curriculum and a better relationship with teachers. He had no political affiliations and, as former Chair of the Post Office, was known to be good at resolving conflict. Dearing (1993) drew up a set of guidelines for the revision of the curriculum, slimming it down to occupy only 70 per cent of children's time in school. In fact, Dearing's changes made little difference: there were still ten subjects with attainment targets and programmes of study. The main

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effects were in the packaging, with a single document (DfE, 1994) with all the subjects included for primary teachers, and with pictures. The overall process with the kindly Sir Ron and better documents made the whole thing more palatable for teachers.

### Reader tasks

- The National Curriculum brought the government and professionals into conflict. Do you think this was necessary?
- What is your view of the way the National Curriculum was created?

## New Labour and the Modernisers

The New Labour government elected in 1997 had no ideological commitment to the neo-conservative National Curriculum, but there was little appetite for radical change. Labour had no real policy on the nature of the curriculum, with one exception, to include something which made young people politically aware and informed about the nature of society. This is a left-wing idea: if people understand society, they are more likely to believe that society should be changed to be more equal; it should also mean that they are more likely to take an interest in politics and to vote. So the new Secretary of State, David Blunkett, commissioned his old university professor of sociology, Bernard Crick, to draw up a curriculum for Citizenship to be included in the National Curriculum (QCA, 1998). Crick proposed three elements: 'Social and Moral Responsibility', 'Community Involvement' and 'Political Literacy'; these underlie the statutory Programme of Study for Citizenship in secondary schools and the optional primary Guidelines for PSHE and Citizenship. The latter were revised by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 2007) for the economic and global dimensions of learning. It introduced the potential for teachers and pupils to reflect on the nature of society and brought in explicit values rather than the implicitly nationalist values of the rest of the curriculum. It lays emphasis on individual responsibility and civic duty and is portrayed as the means to make young people into active global citizens. However, critics have suggested that the current Citizenship curriculum is unlikely to achieve this in the present political and economic climate (Gibson and Harrison, 2008).

The period following the 1997 election saw a narrowing of the primary curriculum. As we see in Chapter 6, in 1998 New Labour introduced the Numeracy and Literacy Strategies, with the requirement of one hour's teaching of each per day. The strategies marginalised the time for the other foundation subjects in the primary school day: the two hours effectively took up most of the morning, leaving the afternoons for the rest of the curriculum. It was, though, not just a matter of time. Teachers' energies and resources were consumed by the new priorities and, while efforts were made

to try to integrate other subjects, like History, into the literacy hour, the high level of prescription in the strategies meant that much of the other curriculum, in particular music and art, tended to be neglected. It is important to understand why New Labour was to sacrifice curriculum breadth for the priorities of numeracy and literacy. As part of their training for the Literacy Strategy, all primary teachers were shown video-taped guidance and examples of good teaching (DfEE, 1998). The first video began with an introduction by the Secretary of State emphasising the need to improve literacy so that Britain can compete in the global economy. Built into the assumption is that working-class people's lives will be improved through education and that they need first and foremost, not a broad and balanced curriculum of the arts, humanities and science, but the 'basic skills' of literacy and numeracy. So New Labour effectively brought a return to the nineteenth-century elementary school curriculum of the three Rs. The tendency to emphasise numeracy and literacy in the curriculum is an international phenomenon, stimulated by the global economy and government's perceived need to ensure that education fulfils the requirements. Coulby (2000), however, points out that, in the global knowledge economy, it is not basic literacy and numeracy that are needed. With the challenges of advances in technology and information, economies need workers with a wide range of skills, particularly in ICT, but also in creativity, imagination and innovation. In the knowledge economy services have replaced goods; problem-solving, adaptation, understanding customers' needs, entrepreneurialism and flexibility are required.

The government maintained its commitment to the core subjects at the centre of the curriculum by retaining SATs tests and league tables in a competitive market. However, Labour did move to engender a more flexible curriculum to encourage the 'creativity' required by the global economy. It was attempted with efforts to revitalise the arts curriculum with a report on the arts in schools (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999) and a speech by David Miliband (2003), the Standards Minister, calling on schools to remember that 'creativity' is essential to a good education for industry. In 2007 the government launched an initiative requiring schools to provide all pupils of school age with five hours per week of high-quality cultural experience: listening to music, visiting art galleries or theatres, or seeing performances from visiting theatre workshops or artists (Creative Partnerships, 2007). The introduction of Modern Languages into the primary curriculum in 2011 is another broadening feature. A government review of primary education led by Sir Jim Rose (2008) published an interim report in December 2008 which appeared to reintroduce the integrated curriculum. While not abandoning the National Curriculum subjects, it suggested that alongside them should run six 'areas of learning':

- Understanding English, communication and languages;
- Mathematical understanding;
- Scientific and technical understanding;

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- Human, social and environmental understanding;
- Understanding human physical health and well-being;
- Understanding the arts and design.

While this is not a return to Plowden's critique of subjects being inappropriate vehicles for children's learning, it is a recognition of the need for a more flexible approach to the epistemology of the curriculum and designed to offer more freedom to teachers. It is interesting that Rose's review is entitled *The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum*, when in fact it is a government-sponsored activity and a response to the Cambridge Review (Alexander, 2007) which was largely critical of state policy. Like all the initiatives on the curriculum it was likely to become a requirement on schools.

### The Secondary Curriculum

In secondary education New Labour's influence on the curriculum took longer to take shape. After the inclusion of Citizenship, the real changes have been in liberalising the secondary curriculum. The first was the need to free up space caused by the crowding of too many subjects, and the 2002 Education Act gave pupils the opportunity to drop the study of a foreign language. The second was the attempt to initiate creativity and innovation in the curriculum through privatisation in the academies (see Chapter 4).

There was a view that the post-16 curriculum was too narrow, with most students studying only five AS and three A levels, and that it was insufficiently related to employment. In 2005 the government commissioned Mike Tomlinson, former Chief Inspector of Schools, to review the curriculum and examinations framework for post-16 education. Tomlinson (2004) had recommended the abolition of GCE A levels and replacing them with a broader-based diploma. This would be for pupils at all levels, including those who had previously been excluded from A level study. However, apparently under the instruction of the Prime Minister Tony Blair, the proposal was rejected by the then Secretary of State Ruth Kelly. Blair seemed reluctant to give up the so-called 'gold standard' of A levels and was an example of conservatism: wishing to retain a system which had been successful in the past for an elite.

The government also tried to deal with the issue of vocational education to meet the needs of the economy. The first strategy in 2002 (QCA, 2002b) was to introduce vocational GCSEs offered in the following subjects: Applied Art and Design, Applied Business, Applied ICT, Applied Science, Engineering, Health and Social Care, Leisure and Tourism, Manufacturing. This was extended to the post-16 curriculum in 2008 with the introduction of 14–19 Diplomas, to be available to all pupils. The Diplomas were to be phased in for the following subjects (so-called: 'Diploma lines') from 2008: Construction and the Built Environment, Creative and Media, Engineering, Information Technology, Society, Health and Development; from 2009: Business, Administration and Finance, Environmental and Land-based Studies, Hair and Beauty Studies,

Hospitality, Manufacturing and Product Design; from 2010: Public Services, Sport and Leisure, Retail, Travel and Tourism; and from 2011: Humanities, Languages, Science. The last three are from the traditional subject list, indicating that the Diplomas were to be seen as crossing the academic/work boundary and not as discrete 'vocational-only' subjects.


The 14–19 Diplomas were a compromise solution to sit alongside GCSEs and A levels instead of Tomlinson's inclusive diploma system. They were intended to ensure that all young people stayed in education or training until the age of 18 and to offer curriculum content which would be of direct interest to pupils entering the workplace. The features were to be a focus on the basic skills of English and Mathematics, together with a work placement and an extended project study of the student's choice. The Diplomas were not intended to be vocational awards in themselves, but academic study to prepare young people for future employment. Again, the emphasis on English and mathematics runs through all the government's proposals. An interesting point is the introduction for the first time of 'new' curriculum subjects, such as Leisure and Tourism, and a break from the traditional list of grammar school subjects in the National Curriculum.

The Diplomas were the latest efforts by a government to make the English education system focus on business and commerce. Hutton (1995) describes the difficulties which Britain has always had in making a link between education and commerce. The German education system receives direct funding from industry and a technical education, in engineering for example, is seen as high status and desirable. Hutton describes two features which seem to have operated in Britain to the disadvantage of its industrial base. First, industry has not invested in rewarding apprenticeships for well-qualified and talented students in the way that Germany and France have done. It is as though industrialists want educated people but won't actually make the investment of capital in education and training. This, Hutton suggests, derives from the way capital has operated in Britain to hold land and property, or to invest in quick-profits share-dealing, rather than in long-term investment for industry. The second factor is the class-consciousness in Britain which sees technical employment as low-status: the highest achievers go on to do non-vocational 'academic' subjects. Vocational education has been seen as something suited to low attainers, as Wolf (2002: 56) says, 'a great idea for other people's children'. Attempts were made by the Conservative government in the 1990s to introduce National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ). But these have proved to be only partially successful and the recent 14–19 Diplomas are another attempt to 'vocation-alise' the curriculum.

The announcement about the Diplomas was made in a DCSF (2008) briefing in January. It was a 'top-down', government initiative, with limited involvement of the professions in the planning, and to be implemented very quickly. The DCSF argued that the diplomas were popular with schools and pupils, but this was contradicted by reports in the *Times Educational Supplement* (Mansell, 2008). Many teachers were said to be doubtful about the curriculum and whether pupils

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would want to take them. In June 2008 serious criticisms were voiced that the curriculum had not been thought through properly; for example, it was noted that the period of work experience need not be in the area of the subject, so that someone taking the construction diploma could succeed without ever setting foot on a building site. Alan Smithers (in Mansell, 2008: 12) described the diplomas as 'a disaster waiting to happen'. They were another case of the government acting rapidly to meet a political imperative with insufficient consultation with professionals. There was general disappointment in schools about Blair's rejection of Tomlinson's recommendations for an inclusive and broad-based diploma. This, together with the concerns about the 14–19 Diplomas, has made some secondary schools turn to the International Baccalaureate (IB) to give a wider curriculum option to post-16 students. The IB is run by a non-profit-making independent organisation which enjoys international recognition of its awards (International Baccalaureate, 2008). It is an indication of the profession making some resistance to the government-directed content of the 14–19 Diplomas.

 Reader task

Consider whether the 14–19 Diplomas are the right direction for the education system in the early twenty-first century.

## The Early-years Curriculum

It was early-years education that saw the developments in educational practice with child-centred methods of learning and teaching in the first part of the twentieth century. The National Curriculum was addressed to statutory school aged children only, and so nurseries and playgroups were safe to continue with the curriculum and methods which they had always used, according to their professional judgements. Many nurseries are not within the maintained state provision, but are in the private sector, making it difficult for the government to have a direct effect on their curriculum. However, when New Labour came to power in 1997 the nurseries were not to be left alone. The year 2000 brought the first government attempt to influence the pre-school curriculum with *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000). These were not statutory requirements on nurseries, but rather 'advisory goals'. The document was carefully worded to avoid looking like a prescribed national curriculum for nurseries, although the National Curriculum subjects are behind the goals for the five categories of learning:

- Personal, social and emotional development
- Communication, language and literacy
- Mathematical development
- Knowledge and understanding of the world
- Physical development
- Creative development.



Things were not to stop there. The 2002 Education Act brought the requirement for the assessment of young children through the *Foundation Stage Profile Assessment Arrangements* (DfES, 2003), while 2008 saw the introduction of the new Early Years Foundation Curriculum (EYFC) which was no longer 'guidance', but a 'curriculum'. The change from the former guidance was that there were to be specific, and demanding, targets for literacy. By the end of the Foundation Stage (age 5) children should be able to write their own name and read sentences (DCSF, 2008). It was another attempt by the government to ratchet up attainment in literacy – back to the old standards agenda – but this time with the youngest children as the target. The EYFC was judged by many early-years experts and practitioners to be too demanding and a distraction from the play and creative activities which should properly engage children of this age. It provoked further tension between government and the professions. Although the *Times Educational Supplement* (Ward, 2008) reported in their survey that the majority of early-years staff were satisfied with the content of the curriculum, the same edition reported objections from academics and early-years experts. Sue Palmer, who had long been an advocate of the formal teaching of literacy to young children, warns of the danger of professionals' optimism about government initiatives:

People are innately optimistic. They like to look at the good side. I was one of those people when the National Literacy Strategy was introduced in 1988. There is a surge of optimism when you're working on something new; you think this could really work. But when you realise several years later it's not making the differences you'd expected, you start out trying to make children literate and end up training them to take tests. That is why I felt passionate – because I was fooled and I won't get fooled again. (p. 13)

### Reader task

Examine the current National Curriculum and reflect on whether it is suitable for today's economy and society.

## Conclusion: A Critique of State Definitions of Knowledge

The curriculum is a selection of knowledge from all that is available. It is also, as sociologists Berger and Luckman (1967) would say, a definition of what *counts* as knowledge. In this chapter we have examined the way decisions about the school curriculum, and the definitions of knowledge, have passed between professionals and the state. We saw how state education began with a tightly defined curriculum in the nineteenth century, then passed to the hands of teachers and professionals

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during the greater part of the twentieth century. The period from the 1980s saw the government wrest control and definition of the curriculum from the professionals, and largely to succeed with the National Curriculum and testing. The late 1990s saw a narrowing of the primary curriculum with a re-emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Recent years have brought some loosening of the curriculum in state schools with more choice for secondary pupils, more 'creative' subjects and the encouragement of curricular initiatives in the academies. However, while the statutory curriculum may have become less tightly controlled, what is taught in schools is now defined by the state through government guidance and direction, and closely monitored through its agents, the QCA and Ofsted. We conclude by considering whether this matters: should the state define and control knowledge?

### The Entitlement Curriculum

One rationale for a statutory national curriculum is the ethical one of children's *entitlement*. All children should be entitled to an education which gives them equal access to knowledge. Their access to knowledge, it might be argued, should not be dependent on parents' wishes. Parents might have limited aspirations for their children, believing that education is of little benefit and that children should begin work as soon as possible. Religious beliefs at odds with liberal education might limit the aspirations of girls. Nor, it can be argued, should knowledge be determined by the preferences of individual teachers. In this sense the state-defined National Curriculum is a liberating force for good. All children, not just boys, are now taught science, all are able to learn a foreign language, not just those judged to be 'capable', and social class, formally at least, has been removed from the distribution of knowledge within the state system. Children with special educational needs are entitled to as much of the curriculum as possible, with 'disapplication' only where absolutely necessary. So while the curriculum might not be 'the right' curriculum, and there may be reasons for it being different, at least it gives equality of access to all in state schools.

Another argument in favour of a state curriculum is that knowledge should be determined democratically. The idea is that the government is democratically elected, so the way it determines the curriculum is thereby democratic: what the majority of people have voted for. But there are problems with this. First, is the curriculum that everyone votes for the 'right' curriculum? Does the majority know what is best for children and for the future, or does it need the expertise of professionals to determine what is best? The second issue is how democratic decisions about the curriculum really are. The 1988 Act set up a supposedly democratic consultation process for determining the content of the National Curriculum, but there was political manipulation intended to bias the direction of decision-making and marginalise the professionals. We have also seen that the main

direction of government policy on the curriculum has been to relate it to the economy and employment.

### Curriculum as Critique

Some would argue that education should give pupils the opportunity to understand a wider range of knowledge and experience and to have a critique of industry and commerce. Apple (1996) points out that the state definition of knowledge is intended to create a 'national culture': a set of beliefs and ideas to which everyone subscribes. A right-wing view of culture is that it is singular, common and national, rather than multifarious and diverse. It leads to a false consensus about what counts as knowledge. A national curriculum, Apple says, tramples on cultural differences. It is not something which should be taken for granted and 'given'. It needs to explain itself and acknowledge where it is coming from. A 'hegemony' is a set of beliefs and ideas to which everyone subscribes unquestioningly – a mechanism which allows the powerful to control and oppress the weak and poor. The current hegemony in the West is free-market capitalism, and Apple argues that education should provide a critique of the existing hegemony in order to empower social cohesion:

Cultural politics is ... profoundly ... about the resources we employ to challenge existing relations, to defend those counter hegemonic forms that now exist, or to bring new forms into existence. (p. 21)

He writes of the USA, but the same argument might be employed for the UK, which is also a multicultural society. As Apple would say, in England the National Curriculum and its assessment differentiate pupils along national norms, adding to the disadvantaging of working-class and ethnic minority pupils. It operates as an instrument of market forces rather than a means to achieve social cohesion (see Chapter 9).

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Apple gives a good critique of state knowledge.
- Coulby, D. (2000) *Beyond the National Curriculum: Curricular Centralism and Diversity in Europe and the USA*. London: RoutledgeFalmer. Coulby argues that the National Curriculum with its core subjects is inadequate for the global knowledge economy of the twenty-first century.
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Whitty explains the school curriculum in terms of the sociology of knowledge.
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