What is wrong with the new National Curriculum?
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The following notes cover centralised control, a lack of civilised aims and values, rigid subject divisions, a lack of breadth and balance, and (last but not least) targets which are inappropriate to the age and development of younger children. They are based on work in relation to the ‘Charter for Primary Education’. A powerpoint is also available for use by speakers.

Centralised control
Most countries have some form of national curriculum, but they vary in terms of detailed prescription (how much flexibility they leave to teachers) and formation (whether there has been any democratic involvement in forming it.) Gove’s curriculum is extremely prescriptive for English, maths and science. Having alienated his panel of curriculum experts by disregarding their advice, leading to their resignation, it represents the autocratic decision of the Secretary of State.

The lack of broad aims
It is normal to begin with broad educational aims (social, cultural, ethical etc) giving a sense of direction to what follows, and also to consider the aims of subjects. National Curriculum 2014 (NC2014) has just two paragraphs 2.1 and 3.1, both extremely vague (‘spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development’; ‘prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life’; ‘essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens’ ‘appreciation of human creativity and achievement’).

By contrast, Finland’s curriculum* has a democratic vision (‘human rights, equality, democracy’) recognizing diversity (‘tolerance and intercultural understanding’) and sustainability (‘natural diversity, preservation of environmental viability’). Rather than simply teaching young people to fit in, it speaks both of ‘transferring cultural tradition’ and ‘to create new culture, revitalize ways of thinking and acting, and develop the pupil’s ability to evaluate critically.’ This is developed in the subjects.

A rigid division into subjects / neglect of cross-curricular themes
NC2014 is divided rigidly into subjects, neglecting interdisciplinary perspectives. Though it recognises that literacy and numeracy are developed in other subjects, ICT has lost its cross-curricular emphasis, and themes such as environment, democratic citizenship, global perspectives or human rights are ignored. Subjects are discrete from the start, rather than e.g. environmental studies gradually separating into sciences and geography.

Lacking breadth and balance
NC2014 is dominated by 3 subjects English, Maths and Science – or rather 2½ since spoken English is almost absent. This can be seen in the pages for each: English 87, Maths 45, Science 32, Computing 2, Geography 3, etc. Within English, spoken language has 2 pages, reading and writing 20 plus 25 for spelling and 18 pages of grammar and terminology. Drama has one paragraph, modern media has disappeared.

* References to Finland are made not to idealise it, but to demonstrate that high standards are perfectly compatible with enlightened educational values.
It is not age-appropriate

Formal schooling in England begins a year earlier than many high-achieving countries, and two years younger than Finland whose 5-7 year olds learn informally in kindergartens.

The targets have been deliberately set early, in the attempt to outdo potential economic competitors. Often demands are placed on children a year or two younger than in the highest achieving countries globally. (Examples in English, Maths, Science).

In doing so, there is no recognition of children’s readiness. There is no sense of play, even in Y1-2. Little thought has been given to young children’s potential interests (compare Finland where early Environmental and Natural Studies relates to children’s health, the local environment, and a practical introduction to maps and experiments).

There are serious cognitive, and psychological, problems in making demands at too young an age. Teachers are likely to feel pressured towards rote learning, so poor foundations will be laid. Ironically, this high-pressure regime (‘battery farming’ children) is likely to be counterproductive in terms of long-term development, including PISA at age 15.

Pressure on schools

The accountability system is set up to fuel competition between schools, with serious consequences for the losers (especially schools serving disadvantaged neighbourhoods). This makes it even more difficult for teachers to steer their own course and relate learning to the children’s interests and needs.

Ironically, the new National Curriculum does not apply to academies or free schools, suggesting perhaps that the main reason for its stringent targets might be to label many primary schools as ‘failing’ and drive them to closure and academisation.

Some issues to explore

How to respond to the imbalance and lack of breadth?

How will schools cope with ‘too much too young’, especially given pressure from Ofsted? How can they protect children, especially the more vulnerable?

How can schools provide for holistic child development?

How can creativity be sustained?

Where is the space to engage young citizens?

How can we avoid rote learning supplanting problem-solving and critical understanding?

What will happen to modern technologies and genres?

Is the new curriculum ‘Not right for our children’ or could it be damaging to all children?
Subject details

English

Spoken language is marginalised. There are some references to speech as performance, or as an adjunct to literacy, but no serious thought to developing children’s ability to communicate or language to develop thinking.

The aims are mainly expressed in terms of technical competence e.g. ‘write clearly, accurately and coherently’, ‘making formal presentations, demonstrating to others and participating in debates’.

(cf Finland: ‘a community-oriented view of language’, ‘builds his or her identity and self-esteem’ ‘becomes an active and ethically responsible communicator and reader who gets involved in culture and participates in and influences society’).

Reading: overwhelming emphasis on the role of synthetic phonics, neglecting complementary strategies needed for comprehension. (This despite the DfE admitting there is no research evidence to show that a rigorous synthetic phonics program improves comprehension, as opposed to reading aloud.)

Writing: focus on accuracy to the neglect of expression. Writing is seen as an artificial process of combining the linguistic bits (rules, sub-skills etc.) into a text, to the neglect of imitating inspirational models.

The insistence on accuracy and technical terminology exceeds, for many children, their real stage of literacy or language development, eg

Y1: capitals of proper nouns and I; using ‘plural, sentence, suffix, clauses, personal pronoun’ when speaking about their writing; spelling days of the week accurately (Tuesday, Wednesday!)
Y2: there / they’re / their, quite / quiet,
Y3: distinguish accept / except, affect / effect

Mathematics

KS1-2 largely arithmetic fluency, with a little geometry and statistics (algebra quickly introduced Y6). Contradictory about pace: ‘the majority will move through the programmes of study at broadly the same pace’ + ‘decisions about when to progress should always be based on their readiness to progress to the next stage’.

Very rapid progression expected re fluent calculations. Little encouragement to relate symbols to reality.

Y1 ‘instantly subtract 7 from 16’
Y2 ‘count in steps of 2, 3, 5 and 10, forward and backward, count in quarters up to 10
Y3 mental calculation s with large numbers eg 12,462 – 2,300 =
Targets are set younger than the most advanced performers internationally! eg

Y2 expected to manipulate fractions eg 5/7 – 2/7 = 3/7 while foundations are laid more carefully in Finland, relating symbols to reality: at the same age, ‘know simple fractions, such as one half, one third and one quarter, and know how to present them by concrete means’

or Y5 shift between different representations of fractions $24\frac{1}{2} = 24.5$ while Finland’s children allowed two more years to relate fractions to decimals to percentages.
Science

The most professional section because the subject association (ASE) were allowed two weeks involvement, due to pressures from the science and engineering lobby. Consequently, includes many good ideas on how to teach. However, no chance to verify whether the content could be covered properly in the available time, or whether expectations are age-appropriate.

May be so heavy on content that teachers will resort to memorising facts by rote learning, eg Y4 includes:

- classification of living things;
- risks resulting from changing environments, nature reserves, overpopulation and deforestation;
- the human digestive system;
- teeth of animals with different diets;
- various food chains;
- solids, liquids, gases and change of state (temperatures);
- evaporation and condensation in the water cycle;
- sound – pitch, transmission of vibrations, musical instruments, insulation;
- electricity – appliances, constructing a circuit, switches, conductors and insulators, safety.

Extremely high targets for upper primary, eg Y5:

compare and group together everyday materials on the basis of their properties - hardness, solubility, transparency, conductivity (electrical and thermal), and response to magnets; demonstrate that dissolving, mixing and changes of state are reversible changes

explore reversible changes, including, evaporating, filtering, sieving, melting and dissolving, recognising that melting and dissolving are different processes. Pupils should explore changes that are difficult to reverse (eg burning, rusting) and other reactions (eg vinegar with bicarbonate of soda). They should find out about how chemists create new materials.

NB primary science in Finland is Environmental and Natural Studies, relating to children’s health, local environment, and a practical introduction to maps and scientific experiments. In Singapore, science begins at grade 3 (same age as our Y4). The requirements are much easier, e.g. grades 3-5 (=Y4-6) ‘metals are good conductors of heat but wood and plastic are bad; state the functions of leaves, stems and roots; list some common sources of heat.

Other subjects

The Government’s promise to slim down content has only been carried out where it was least needed – programmes of study which were already very short have been cut back further, risking marginalising these subjects.

Sometimes this is through a more concise summary, but activities which the present government might believe too modern, progressive or creative (even enjoyable) appear to have disappeared.

Also an ideological shift, eg away from a multicultural perspective, and more exploratory and creative approaches are dismissed. For example:

Art

new aim: ‘Art and design contributes to the wealth of our nation’

KS1 a more purposeful, less exploratory tone (no more ‘try out’ or ‘investigate’)

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a narrower range of activities (collage, print making, digital media, textiles, photographers have gone)

KS2 ‘The roles and purposes of artists, craftspeople and designers working in different times and cultures’ has become ‘great artists, architects and designers in history’

Similar reduction of activities as KS1 – narrowed to ‘drawing, painting, sculpture’

Citizenship now gone from primary, losing activities such as ‘share their opinions on things that matter to them’, ‘consider social and moral dilemmas that they come across in everyday life’

Computing a switch from creative application to techniques of programmes, often in ways which are not appropriate to children’s age eg KS1 ‘understand what algorithms are’, ‘create and debug simple programs’, ‘use logical reasoning to predict the behaviour of simple programs’.

Design and technology Entire tone has changed, from ‘They explore how familiar things work’ to rigorous formal demands ‘design purposeful, functional, appealing products based on design criteria’ (KS1)

Geography Previously KS1 began with children’s local experience eg ‘What is it like to live in this place? identify buildings in the street, a pedestrian crossing near school gates’ and from there, contrasts with another UK or overseas locality. Now, priority on accumulating facts ‘name and local the 7 continents and 5 oceans; name, locate and identify characteristics of the 4 countries and capital cities of the UK’. “

Similarly, KS2 ‘Russia, North and South America’ ‘UK counties’

History is the one subject where Gove had to back down from a narrow nationalistic study (English history to 1700 in great detail in KS1-2). This now runs to 1066, and international elements have been restored (Ancient Greece, an early civilisation, a non-European society). Some of the detail has been removed, and some thematic studies added (local history; an aspect such as crime and punishment to extend beyond 1066).

Even so, the new version is less child friendly (no more ‘changes in their own lives and that of their family’, ‘people in the most distant past who lived in the local area’).

A failure to think in terms of age of the child: how will KS1 children understand the ‘national significance’ of the Great Fire of London?

Music Still quite practical, but some enjoyable elements removed eg rehearse and perform with others; movement, dance and expressive musical language, listening to music from different times and cultures.

PE Similar shifts eg exploratory aspects of movement are curtailed to ‘perform dances’; ‘explore basic skills, actions and ideas’ has become ‘master basic movements’.
Historical background to the 2014 National Curriculum and its predecessors

The Education Reform Act of 1988 introduced the first National Curriculum policed by new systems of control (SATs, league tables, OfSTED). One of the key reasons for standardising the curriculum in this way was to establish a quasi-market of competition between schools: schools would need to teach the same curriculum so that results could be compared statistically and through inspection.

Before then, the only constraints on the curriculum taught in classrooms were exams at age 16 and 18, and the influence of the textbooks which a school had purchased. By 1992 England had a highly centralised system. (Paradoxically, headteachers had been promised greater freedom from local authority control, under Local Management of Schools or LMS, but this was mainly limited to finance and administration.)

Even the first National Curriculum brought problems, largely because each subject was designed by a separate working party of ‘experts’ (involving very few teachers). Their enthusiasm for the subject led to an overcrowded curriculum which soon had to be cut back (the Dearing review). There was a major emphasis on technical and scientific subjects from Year 1 onwards (Maths; Science; the new Design and Technology; IT – later known as ICT). There were ideological tensions.

The Conservative Government in 1988 (Margaret Thatcher was prime minister, Kenneth Baker in charge of education) promised that, while the government would decide what was taught, teachers would decide how to teach it. This didn’t last long. The incoming Labour Government (1997) decided they knew better than teachers how to teach reading and introduced a Literacy and Numeracy hour, organised to a particular plan. This stereotypical organisation was later extended as the “three part” and then “four part lesson” to other subjects. Although officially the Labour Government had to admit that particular ways of teaching were not statutory requirements, they used all kinds of pressure to hinder alternatives. Gove’s curriculum steers teachers towards rote-learning through impossible lists of spellings, grammar rules etc. in the expectation that teachers will be too intimidated to use their professional judgement.

This attempt to make literacy and numeracy teaching “more effective” had limited success. Mary Hilton (Cambridge) demonstrated that the Reading SAT at KS2 had been simplified to give the impression that standards were rising due to the Literacy Strategy. (Less inference and interpretation was required, and good levels could be obtained by literal comprehension.) Following the Rose review, the four-part Literacy Hour was replaced by Synthetic Phonics, despite flawed and limited evidence.

Between 1992 and 2010 there were several revisions of the National Curriculum but none of these were fundamental. For example, Citizenship was introduced, and opportunities for cross-curricular application of literacy, numeracy and ICT were highlighted. However the 1988 Education Reform Act had given the Secretary of State for Education individual decision-making powers over the curriculum, and Michael Gove was determined to use them. The development of Curriculum 2014 has been marked throughout by political arrogance, as Gove has refused to listen to the advice of his hand-picked advisers. The three leading academics appointed to advise on English, Maths and Science resigned in summer 2012; one of them Andrew Pollard publicly condemned the reform as ‘fatally flawed’, arguing that:
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- The new curriculum is highly prescriptive in the core subjects – even including spelling lists – and denies teachers the scope to exercise professional judgement.
- It is inflexibly linear, assuming a particular sequence.
- It fails to acknowledge that children learn at different speeds.
- Expectations are pitched too high and will produce a sense of failure.
- The amount of detail for English, Maths and Science would result in a curriculum which lacked breadth, balance and quality in children’s learning.

http://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/jun/12/michael-gove-curriculum-attacked-adviser

At every stage, the new curriculum has come under attack from teacher unions, lecturers in teacher training, subject associations and even the CBI. For example, a letter from 100 academics made the front page of the Independent and Telegraph in March 2013.


This letter criticised the new curriculum for expecting ‘too much too young’; rather than raising standards, it would lower them by driving teachers towards rote learning. Gove’s response was simply to attack the 100 academics as “bad academics”, a left-wing conspiracy and “enemies of promise”. Within a week, the annual conferences of all three teacher unions (NUT, NASUWT, ATL) passed motions of no confidence in Gove as Secretary of State for Education.
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PISA, Finland and other international comparisons

Government rhetoric around international competition continues to be powerful, and has been heavily deployed by Gove to support his narrow-minded vision of education.

Firstly, there is a problem in basing curriculum design on scores in international tests. The tests are limited to three subjects: reading, mathematics and science. Education systems vary in the emphasis they place on these. An over-anxiety about these test scores narrows the curriculum by marginalising everything else.

Secondly, it is wrong to assume that the economic development of a country depends on these attainment levels. Many other factors are involved. We cannot allow economics to determine education. We need to emphasise the professional responsibility of teachers to resist the narrowing and debasement of education.

Thirdly, as recent news reports have shown, countries can rise to the top by oppressing children. Children in Korea typically work a 12-hour day, including two or three hours cramming every evening at tuition centres. Tutoring and long hours are also a feature of Shanghai. (NB Incidentally, the main reason why Shanghai has come top in PISA is that half the child population disappear before they reach age 15: the children of the poorer half of the population, doing all the menial work, have to return to rural areas of family origin if they wish to continue school beyond age 14. This is because they do not have citizenship of Shanghai.)

Finally, many hidden factors are at work in international tests. England does well in some tests, but not PISA which demands better problem-solving capacity. This has not been well emphasised in a test- and Ofsted-dominated system for many years, and Gove’s curriculum is simply making matters worse by driving teachers to use rote-learning methods. Social inequality is also a major reason for England’s poor performance.

One good reason for highlighting Finland in the powerpoint is because children there are not overworked. Its education system operates without tests or inspection, but pupils who begin to fall behind receive a lot of support. Because it listens to teachers, it has a broad and balanced curriculum, not too detailed, and appropriate to the age of the child. Teachers receive a lot of professional support from local authorities and are encouraged to work together to improve teaching – as in England before the 1990s. Finland has consistently scored very high since 2000, and, though a little lower in 2012, was positioned 6th, 3rd and 2nd among countries for maths, reading and science.
A powerpoint is available at

This has been designed so that it can be used easily without special expertise. It could be used by union reps or headteachers explaining to staff meetings or to parents. Most of the information is on the slides.

The powerpoint also provides arguments to help teachers speaking back to Ofsted inspectors, many of whom will not have thought through the implications of the new curriculum.

The slides highlight the major changes and points out the problems but also makes some international comparisons, specifically with Finland. (See especially slides 2-9, 13, 25-7, 32.) We have done this because Michael Gove repeatedly argues that his new curriculum is intended to bring England into line with this high-achieving country. The reality is very different. We are not trying to put Finland on a pedestal, but to show that a worthwhile education does not depend on rigid central control or punitive regulation.

NB quotations are shown in italics

Slides 3-10 Major characteristics of the new National Curriculum, including its treatment of educational aims, the lack of breadth and balance, its failure to relate to the development of young learners,

Slides 11-21 (mainly green background) English

Slides 22-27 (mainly pink) Mathematics

Slides 28-32 (mainly yellow) Science

Slides 33-46 (purple) Other subjects

Some issues for discussion

Slide 47 provides some suggestions for discussion. It would be better to treat this as an open agenda, allowing participants to add their own issues and also to concentrate on issues which concern them most. It would be helpful to provide a paper copy of these issues, so that you can return to earlier slides.

Although some of the questions are expressed in terms of ‘how can we cope’, they imply a stance of resistance, whether covert adaptation or overt rejection. We acknowledge that this is being made very difficult and that government control has become more rigid. However, we believe that parents will support teachers’ attempt to protect children from this damaging curriculum, if the issues are properly explained.