

Towards an aims-led curriculum

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brought to bear on what pupils learn?

In 2000 (and not before time) the government laid down aims for the school curriculum. The big question now is: how can these be

There is a problem. The statutory curriculum – the national curriculum plus religious education – was already firmly in place before the aims appeared. It was structured around discrete subjects. What aims it had tended to be those traditionally belonging to these disciplines. With some exceptions, these were often inward-looking and specialist: to train pupils in the ways of thinking required of geographers, mathematicians, visual artists and so on – so as to equip them, if they wished, for more advanced learning in the same field.

When the overall aims arrived in 2000, the old curriculum stayed in place. The aims transcend specialised perspectives. They are chiefly about the sort of person that school learning is meant to foster – someone who values personal relationships, is a responsible and caring citizen, is entrepreneurial, able to manage risk and committed to sustainable development. Some 60 per cent of the items in the extensive statement of aims are about personal qualities like these.

The problem is that there is now a clash between the new, whole-person aims and the introverted aims of most of the school subjects. This is not true of all of them. The two newest subjects – citizenship and personal, social and health education (PSHE) – fit the new aims well. So does another relative newcomer, design and technology, with its stress on autonomous problem solving as individuals and as team members. But the older subjects are

too often prisoners of their past, ill-fitted to look beyond their own confines at how they might contribute to the pupil's well-being and civic engagement.

The new aims could and should revolutionise how we think of the school curriculum. We see this now in terms of chunks of subject matter, each neatly separated from others, each divided into conventional sub-chunks: historical periods, branches of mathematics, areas of science. Taken as a whole, these provide a comprehensive induction into the whole gamut of intellectual culture. We take this way of thinking for granted. But should we?

It's hard to think of any good reason. I'm not denying that some understanding of science, history and geography is an essential part of schooling. The crucial issue is the starting place. If you begin from whole-person aims, it's not difficult to show that to lead a flourishing personal and civic life you need a good grasp of the world around you. But this isn't where we usually begin. We start from chunks, from subjects.

Once there was a rationale for this. You have to dig back a long way to find it, back through the history of middle-class education to the world of the English Old Dissenters and Scottish Presbyterians in the 18th century and beyond. This was a world where personal salvation was thought to depend on having a comprehensive grasp of the nature of God's world. As orderly thinkers, classifiers to the core, these devout educators divided the whole map into discrete logical units and sub-units.

This is where our broad subject-based curriculum originated. Its religious rationale has long fallen away, and nothing defensible has taken its place. Some will say that the pursuit of knowledge – now joined by the arts – is a good reason in itself, needing no further justification. If pupils were not introduced

to intellectual delights at school, many would never know them. There is some truth in this, but hardly enough to justify, say, 11 years of compulsory maths. Discrete subjects are not the only ways of generating intellectual pleasure – if they do at all, that is. With some pupils they seem better at generating boredom.

Other reasons are used to support the traditional curriculum. We may not require a broad range of knowledge for salvation, but we need it, we are told, for a 'successful life'. If success is measured in income, it may well be true that keeping one's head down on simultaneous equations and the gas laws and the Peninsular War is a good route into one of the more prestigious universities and £70K a year. But this way curriculum subjects risk becoming mere stepping stones to wealth. As such, they are in principle replaceable by others. If Sanskrit, formal logic and the history of Persia were made requirements for Oxbridge, many of our more academically resolute young people would buckle down to these instead.

The 'successful life' justification is often as much a turn-off as the pursuit of knowledge – as shown in statistics of youngsters who have had their fill of education at 16 and simply want out. But the link it makes between school learning and 'success' in life is worth retaining. There is everything to be said for seeing 'success' as a major aim of schooling, as long as it is not defined too narrowly. The post-2000 aims are all about pupils being equipped to lead fulfilling lives as individuals and citizens – and what is fulfilment if not successful engagement in worthwhile activities, occupations and relationships?

We need to rethink the school curriculum. The three pages of general aims we have had since 2000 are a good beginning, but they need elaboration. Nettles have to be grasped – including the question: what counts as a 'successful', or 'fulfilled' life? Is it up to individuals themselves to

determine this? Could they be wrong?
Are there objective standards here?

I am confident that a decent, defensible set of aims can be shaped out of the post-2000 statement. They will centre around the kind of people we would like our schoolchildren to become: people who wholeheartedly throw themselves into absorbing relationships and activities of all sorts – not just intellectual ones; responsible, caring citizens; good friends, lovers and work colleagues.

The next step is crucial. It is to work out what kinds of learning best prepare children to acquire these qualities. How does one learn wholeheartedness? Cooperating in a team? Sensitivity to issues of global citizenship? Self-confidence? Being a friend? Good schools know some answers. They work out whole-school policies and thoughtful pedagogies that foster these and other desirable qualities.

Equipping young people for a fulfilling life is many-sided. Without appropriate personal qualities they won't get very far. But they need other things too. Knowledge, not least. They need to know themselves – and not fall victim to self-deceptions and misconceptions. They need to know how other people tick, their different takes on the world, their different beliefs and cultures. They need to know the overlapping social worlds they live in, their economic and technological basis, social composition, how they came into being. For many of these things, they will need a grounding in science, in arithmetic, in writing, in geographical and historical perspectives.

Of course schools have to do with the acquisition of knowledge. We can see from these examples that not all valuable knowledge falls within traditional subjects. They are just one sort of vehicle for getting things across. There are others: themes, individual or collective projects, interdisciplinary activities, class outings.

Government should think harder about its proper role in curriculum-making. Since 1988 it has been obsessed with imposing a certain sort of vehicle – the traditional subject and all that comes with it. But curriculum planning doesn't start with vehicles. It starts with aims and the sub-aims that follow from them. Government needs to make sure that schools and teachers know what they should be about. Its prime responsibility is for a well-worked-out set of aims. How they are realised is to a large extent best left to the imaginativeness and ingenuity of teachers.

Remodelling a system founded on traditional subjects – in curriculum, assessment, teacher education, professional associations – is going to be difficult. But it is not impossible, as the websites below about new aims-directed initiatives indicate. First steps, as in the CCEA scheme for key stage 3, could be to lay down for each subject internal aims which match the overall ones; to expand the proportion of curricular time given to non-specialist areas (for example PSHE and citizenship) in sync with the overall aims; and to encourage schools to move where appropriate from single-subject to interdisciplinary and theme- or project-based learning. Initial teacher education, now so subject-dominated, could be

altered accordingly. Professional associations could also be brought in as partners.

All this will require effort. The most painless way of proceeding, from government's point of view, would be to continue to impose our updated form of the 18th century curriculum. It may be painless, but it is pointless. It is time for a rethink.

Websites

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), Belfast

www.ccea.org.uk

- Click on 'key stage 3/4 review', then 'pathways – proposals for curriculum and assessment at key stage 3'.
- Click the 'teacher's pack' icon for 'the big picture' and the subject strands' layouts.

Queensland New Basics Project

www.education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics/

RSA project: St John's School and Community College, Marlborough, Wilts www.stjohns.wilts.sch.uk/Curriculum/Alternative/home.htm/

Further reading

The national curriculum handbook for teachers in England (Two versions: primary and secondary) DfEE/QCA, 1999 see pages 10–13, also pages 21–25

White, J. (ed) *Rethinking the school curriculum*, Routledge-Falmer, London, 2004

This document can also be viewed or downloaded in PDF format from the website www.qca.org.uk/futures/.

