Authored article

HMCI's commentary: recent primary and secondary curriculum research

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Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, discusses findings from recent research into the primary and secondary curriculum.

What do we understand to be the real substance of education? When we think about what the core purpose of education is, what comes first to our minds? In recent years, we have thought a great deal about the role of leaders and the importance of teaching. We have also given a great deal of our collective time to exam grades and progress measures. These are undoubtedly important. However, at the very heart of education sits the vast accumulated wealth of human knowledge and what we choose to impart to the next generation: the curriculum.

Without a curriculum, a building full of teachers, leaders and pupils is not a school. Without receiving knowledge, pupils have learned nothing and no progress has been made – whatever the measures might indicate. This is why exams should exist in the service of the curriculum rather than the other way round. Exams are our best measure of what has been successfully transmitted to the pupil's cognition. We must not forget, however, that any test can only ever sample the knowledge that has been gained. It is the whole domain that is of matter to the pupil.

A good school achieves a careful balance. Balance is the constant challenge when schools plan. Time is limited. Therefore choices need to be made about what to do when, how much depth to pursue, which ideas to link together, what resources to draw on, which way to teach, and how to make sure all pupils are able to benefit as each new concept, construct or fact is taught.

Most importantly, these decisions must be rooted in a solid consensus about what education should deliver for each pupil. What is the body of knowledge that a child needs so that they will flourish in the future and not be left behind? We know the level of academic achievement that pupils are reaching in some of the Asian economies for instance. These countries are already challenging our competitiveness. It is now three

years since the government's new national curriculum set out ambitious aims for that body of knowledge; it is my view that this represents a set of standards any country would be proud to aim for. That said, within this framework, and for those schools setting their own curriculum, important ongoing decisions must still be made about how the curriculum will be implemented.

Both the new SATs at the end of key stage 2 and revised GCSE and A-level qualifications are a marked improvement on their predecessors and, in my view, are set an appropriate level of rigour. There need be no tension between success on these exams and tests and a good curriculum. Quite the opposite. A good curriculum should lead to good results. However, good examination results in and of themselves don't always mean that the pupil received rich and full knowledge from the curriculum. In the worst cases, teaching to the test, rather than teaching the full curriculum, leaves a pupil with a hollowed out and flimsy understanding.

Earlier this year, I commissioned a research programme to broaden our understanding of how curriculums are implemented in our schools, particularly the national curriculum as a key government policy. This was one of the main research priorities of my first year as Chief Inspector. One of the aims of this work was to challenge ourselves, as well as schools, about whether Ofsted has always recognised what is best in curriculum design, development and implementation. If we have not, I wanted to know whether inspection has played a role in bending the curriculum out of shape.

There has been great interest shown in this work from the wider education sector. I have been surprised and pleased by the level of interest and by how positive people are about this work. In the light of this response, I want to share some of the emerging findings.

We have completed phase one of the review, but the findings I share here are preliminary. Phase one has shown that we have only begun to scratch the surface of this complex area. Phase two of the study will continue into the autumn and spring terms of this academic year. We intend to publish our full findings in late spring.

The first phase of the review has included:

- research visits to 40 schools
- review of routine school inspection reports
- focus group discussions in 5 regions with headteachers of good and outstanding schools
- questionnaire responses from Ofsted's Parent Panel
- desk-based retrieval from school websites

We deliberately approached this first phase in an open-ended and exploratory way so as not to prematurely close down areas of interest. We are using the initial findings and patterns from the emerging data in this phase to develop questions that are more focused. These questions will be explored further in phase two.

Curriculum knowledge and expertise

A striking conclusion that we have drawn from the findings is that, despite the fact that the curriculum is what is taught, there is little debate or reflection about it. School leaders and inspectors discussed the timetable in each school. The timetable is important. It is, however, not the curriculum. Apart from the timetable, there was an absence of other tangible reference points to get to grips with the complex business of curriculum planning. It was evident from these conversations that took place between

inspectors and school leaders that there is a lack of clarity around the language of the curriculum.

For example, the idea of ‘skills’ was liberally used in many contexts. Very rarely was it clear whether the meaning was subject-specific, for example reading skills. Other uses included personal skills, such as the ability to work in a team, cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, or life skills, such as how to pay a bill or apply for a job. There were many other examples of terms where the meaning was woolly, such as progression, enrichment, questioning and repetition.

It is certainly possible that this ambiguity and lack of shared understanding expose competing notions of what curriculum means across the sector. However, the most likely explanation is that this arises from a weak theoretical understanding of curriculum. This was confirmed by school leaders, who said that there was a time (long ago) when teachers were taught the theory that underpins curriculum planning. Over time, this competence across the sector ebbed away. This may be because it was generally not thought to be so important after the establishment of a national curriculum. There has been a move over the last three years to a slimmed down national curriculum focusing on a rich foundation of knowledge. This will, I believe, help to reverse this trend. However, school leaders and teachers have to be supported to seize this opportunity. Ofsted has a role to play here too.

Primary school leaders reported that recruiting staff who could design a curriculum was becoming increasingly difficult. Some headteachers thought that too much of what trainee teachers currently learn is focused on teaching to the English and mathematics tests. Little attention is given to developing more rounded curriculum knowledge. Indeed, a couple of headteachers indicated that they could divide their staff into those who were strong in curriculum planning – those who trained a fair time ago − and those who were not. Some schools leaders said that it was difficult to deliver continuous professional development (CPD) related to curriculum design because of the current financial climate. These leaders also identified reduction of local authority support services as playing a role. However, these factors cannot account for the decline in expertise, as some multi-academy trusts clearly place a high premium on thoughtful, comprehensive curriculum planning.

We have seen 3 important consequences of a reduced understanding of curriculum.

1. First, the primary curriculum is narrowing in some schools as a consequence of too great a focus on preparing for key stage 2 tests.
2. Second, leaders have often misunderstood the purpose of key stage 3 and the new GCSE assessment criteria.
3. And third, the intended curriculum for lower-attaining pupils in some secondary schools was often associated with the qualifications that count in league tables but not with other knowledge they should be acquiring.

It seems unlikely that any school has prioritised testing over the curriculum as a deliberate choice. It is likely that, in some quarters, testing has come inadvertently to mean the curriculum in its entirety. If it is true that curriculum knowledge has weakened across the sector over time, it would explain why there has been a merging of the concepts of testing and the curriculum. If this is the case, it is despite the concerted efforts of the Department for Education (DfE) to make performance measures more nuanced, with the development of Progress 8 and the EBacc, for example. Inspection may well have unintentionally contributed to the shift by reinforcing the focus on measures. Measures only ever provide a partial picture: inspection should complement, not duplicate, that picture.

Narrowing of the primary curriculum

I have previously commented that where school leaders and teachers have an overt focus on performance tables, this can lead to mistaking ‘badges and stickers’ for learning and substance. Acing the test trumps gaining the knowledge. In addition, where there is little shared curriculum thinking among staff, it becomes increasingly difficult to moderate the influence of the test syllabus on primary curriculum design.

Making sure that young people master the basics of English and mathematics must be the focus of primary school and the public have a right to know that this is happening. In this respect, I believe the new SATs play an important role in highlighting how well schools are delivering the primary curriculum. But that means schools should view the tests as existing in service to the curriculum, rather maximising test scores at the expense of children’s learning.

Fourteen of the schools we visited were primary schools. Leaders of 11 of the schools were explicit that they carried out some form of preparation for SATs. Preparation time for the tests varied between a few weeks in the lead up to the exams and a longer sustained period, typically from the end of the Easter holidays, but sometimes from Christmas. The leaders of one school informed inspectors that their pupils sat test papers every week in Years 5 and 6. Testing in school clearly has value. This kind of test is intended to measure the child’s ability to comprehend. However, the regular taking of test papers does little to increase a child’s ability to comprehend. A much better use of time is to teach and help children to read and read more. Additionally, the books that teachers read to children need to be more challenging than those the children are picking up themselves.

Generally, primary school parents said that preparing for tests was cutting into their child’s learning time. Around half of the parents who responded to our questionnaire (n=163) believed that test preparation had reduced the teaching time available for the other foundation subjects or for reading for pleasure. Furthermore, a small proportion of parents suggested that, in their child’s school, the focus on past papers, booster sessions and test-related homework was too high. In a few cases, this demotivated their child.

A few of the leaders we spoke to suggested that the scale of change in the sector was particularly difficult to keep up with. To cope with workload issues, they had chosen to push curriculum development down their list of priorities. For instance, leaders indicated that preparing staff to teach to the tougher assessment criteria for new SATs was more pressing. It remains to be seen whether this is a short-term fix to manage the introduction of the new testing arrangements.

This is not the first time we have seen evidence of a narrowing curriculum in primary schools. As far back as 2001, we reported that the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, along with increasingly demanding performance targets, had adversely affected the breadth of the primary curriculum. Our subject reports on art and design and history similarly raised concerns.

Reduction of key stage 3

A more recent phenomenon in secondary schools is a curriculum shift in key stage 3, particularly since the removal of key stage 3 SATs. We have previously raised concerns about teaching and progress in our report Key stage 3: the wasted years?. Ten of the 23 secondary schools visited for this current survey were reducing key stage 3 to just a 2-year period of study. We also collected data from the websites of 171 schools to identify when pupils selected their options for GCSE. This showed that in around a quarter of these schools options were being chosen at the end of Year 8.

This inevitably means that a considerable number of pupils will be experiencing only 2 years of study before dropping, for example, history or geography or a language, possibly never to study these subjects

again. And for most children, the end of key stage 3 is the last time they will take art, music, drama or design and technology. Where key stage 3 is curtailed, this means ending study at age 13 rather than 14. Furthermore, access to these subjects is sometimes restricted by how schools set options choices. In some of the schools we visited, and in further evidence from routine inspections this year, improving GCSE performance was offered as a rationale for this decision.

In a few of the schools visited, inspectors noted that their recent curriculum changes were informed more by the desire to cover the new GCSE content rather than an intention to benefit pupils by exposure to the richness of the 2014 national curriculum for key stage 3. The GCSE tests are designed to cover 2 years' worth of content. It is hard to see how taking longer than 2 years could expose pupils to more knowledge and not more test preparation. One exception may be the new mathematics GCSE. Here, there was an explicit policy intention to cover more ground than the previous qualification and therefore, for a transitional period, a longer period of study seems reasonable. More generally, there is scope for intelligent 'backward planning' to achieve a coherent curriculum sequence from age 11 to age 16, especially in subjects that are taken by all to age 16. But this should not come at the expense of key stage 3 curriculum breadth and depth: 11/12-year-olds should not be taught to GCSE assessment objectives.

We have not yet seen any analysis of the consequences of a shortened key stage 3 in terms of what pupils are learning. Are we all clear about what is being lost from that missing year and are we happy to lose it?

Improving the outcomes of lower-attaining pupils

Finally, I'd like to address the current debate about the curriculum for pupils with low prior attainment.

I would like to challenge a view voiced by many school leaders and particularly those leading schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils. Leaders told us that they view the latest performance measures as a constraint. This is also indicated in recent research published by the DfE, where school leaders often identified that Progress 8 has removed the flexibility for them to cater for the needs and interests of all their pupils.

This debate relates to certain vocational qualifications being removed from the performance tables. Most leaders had previously considered these qualifications to be part of their curriculum offer for lower-attaining pupils. They suggested that it was becoming very difficult to offer 'good' alternative qualifications, like BTEC science, to this group of pupils because of the lack of parity it now has with GCSE qualifications. This means that it could have an impact on their Progress 8 score. Some leaders perceive this as narrowing the curriculum for lower-attaining pupils by forcing them onto a less appropriate academic track.

The evidence we have shows that these alternatives were not equivalent (see Ofsted's previous economics, business and enterprise report and ICT report). That aside, the focus here should be on what these pupils should be learning and what they need to do to progress. It should not focus solely on the qualification they are taking. This leads us back to school leaders mistaking 'badges and stickers' for learning and substance.

It should also not be taken as read that higher scores for the school always means a better deal for pupils. If a pupil gains valuable knowledge, for instance in history, but does not get a grade 4, they will still be better educated for having studied it.

What was equally absent when discussing low-attaining pupils was any reflection on how to achieve balance for them. Their access to the breadth and depth of the academic curriculum is limited by starting behind their peers. These pupils also typically have a shorter length of time before they leave school. In the

schools we visited, improving English and mathematics was rightly a priority for lower-attaining pupils. This was particularly true in key stage 3, where intervention models were developed for low-attaining pupils that took their starting points into account. Yet, access to other national curriculum subjects, such as arts and some EBacc subjects like modern foreign languages, was often restricted. Indeed, in a few of the schools visited, lower-attaining pupils did not have any opportunity to study a language or some arts subjects, as the school directed them onto a pathway that excluded the subject as an option, in some cases from the age of 12.

It is a risk to social mobility if pupils miss out on opportunities to study subjects and gain knowledge that could be valuable in subsequent stages of education or in later life. Restricted subject choice for low-attaining pupils disproportionately affects pupils from low income backgrounds.

The government has set a target of 90% of pupils studying the EBacc. This is the direction for all schools. I believe studying a full set of EBacc subjects is a desirable and achievable prospect for all but a small minority of pupils. This is true whether a child is going on to pursue an academic or vocational pathway. We need the same level of energy that is given to qualifications to be devoted to the relative merits of different ways of sequencing and organising subject content to take account of different starting points. Low-attaining pupils need basic skills, as all pupils do, but they shouldn't as a consequence be shut out of parts of the essential body of knowledge for any pupil.

Next steps

Phase one of this work has revealed the depth of the challenge. There is a serious risk of schools not fulfilling the promise and potential of the 2014 national curriculum or of academies not using their freedoms to achieve the same. School leaders need to recognise how easy it is to focus on the performance of the school and lose sight of the pupil. I acknowledge that inspection may well have helped to tip this balance in the past.

I have met many people who agree that the expertise in and focus on the curriculum has waned. On a more positive note, I have also met just as many people, or more, who have a vibrant enthusiasm for revitalising the debate about the curriculum. I know that many school leaders are aware of the concerns discussed here and are already working to revitalise curriculum thinking to ensure that the content of young people's learning takes precedence over performance tables. I particularly welcome the work of Association of School and College Leaders' commission on ethical leadership in this regard.

The substance of the curriculum is a matter for government policy. Ofsted has a role in judging how well schools reflect the government's intentions and don't distort the aims that have been set. This is complex and is why this is a long-term investigation for us. It is one that I have no doubt will shape how we inspect in future.

I would like to thank the leaders, staff and pupils of the schools visited for participating in these research visits. We will publish a full account of the findings once phase two is complete next year.

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