



IDEAS AND ISSUES ABOUT AND FOR A NEW CURRICULUM IN ENGLAND

A policy proposal from the Curriculum Working Group of
the Fabian Education Policy Group, November 2022

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Contents

Executive summary

Notes on the curriculum

 The rationale for focusing on the curriculum

 Definition / Characterisation of curriculum

 ‘Content’ (forms of knowledge)

 Purposes of the curriculum

 Community focus

 Teaching and learning

 Pedagogical knowledge

 Teaching styles and methods

 Assessment

 Supportive approaches

 Evaluation

 Scaffolding

References

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

We have identified ideas and issues about and for curriculum in order to contribute to Labour party thinking, including the shaping of the next manifesto.

We recommend that a curriculum review in England should be initiated by the next Labour government.

Rationale for our proposal on the curriculum: In order to support a new approach to education by Labour and to respond to the damaging changes implemented by Conservative led governments since 2010 we propose that the next Labour government undertakes a review of the school curriculum in England based on principles of subsidiarity, collaboration and stakeholder involvement at all levels of the system.

Definition / characterisation of the curriculum: A school's curriculum is extremely important as it consists of all those activities that promote the intellectual personal, social and physical development of its students

The purpose of the curriculum: Learning is not narrowly focused but rather has a variety of purposes attuned to what people need in order to play a full role in society and for their personal fulfilment. Equity, inclusivity and diversity are vital. It is positively developed in partnership between expert teachers, parents/carers, employers, inspectors, researchers and others.

'Content' (forms of knowledge): Through our curriculum all students will explore key areas - the sciences, arts, humanities, social science, languages, the personal and the physical – in exciting and engaging interactions with teachers and others.

Community focus: Our curriculum allows people to learn about the things that they need and that matter to them. Learners will work together with a variety of partners, including parents and carers, professionals and others, locally and globally, to achieve positive outcomes.

Teaching and learning: Our curriculum allows students and teachers to work in ways that are engaging, enjoyable and worthwhile, exploring knowledge that really matters.

Assessment: Our approach to assessment actively supports people in their learning and allow young people, employers, and others to know what young people know, understand and can do.

Support: Our curriculum will be supported through collaboration between key individuals and groups to allow for a collegial, world class system of education. Parents and carers, teachers, inspectors, researchers and others will be constructively and positively engaged in an active school improvement agenda. A review of the current curriculum in England is urgently needed.

In what follows, we discuss the ideas and issues that we have considered as we prepared the above statement. The text shown in bold at the end of each sub section of our notes below shows a clear and explicit link with the brief statement that is given above.

Ideas and Issues about and for a New Curriculum in England

The Rationale for Focussing on the Curriculum

What people learn and how they do so is obviously very important. We need to contribute to the debates that surround education for the idealistic purposes of making society better, and we should recognise that voters' views about it are influential on election outcomes.

Since 2010 there have been extremely wide ranging and fundamentally significant reforms to the education system which have had negative impacts (Brighouse and Waters 2022). We need to understand the nature of the damage that has been done through inappropriate and excessive marketisation, centralisation and managerialism and indicate what and how needs to be done to establish, ambitiously and collaboratively, excellence. As a result of what has been done since 2010, schools are underfunded, have been subject to chaotic policy announcements, no longer have the support of local education authorities, work with weakened university departments of education and must compete against each other in a fragmented system subject to punitive inspections and with teachers unfairly criticised. The curriculum is a key feature of the school system, and we need to establish, realistically and positively, the knowledge, understanding and capabilities to which young people are entitled and we need to identify how the achievement of that valuable education that might be enabled. In proposing the need for a review of the curriculum in England, we are adding our support to an established, high profile and growing call for action (e.g., <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/society/education/education-commission> accessed 4 July 2022)

As from September 2022 England became the only one of the four UK nations not to have an aims-based school curriculum (Reiss and White, 2013; White, forthcoming). Wales is the latest within the UK (following Northern Ireland and Scotland) in introducing an aims-based curriculum and is doing so by highlighting four broad purposes: to develop young people as: successful, capable learners; ethical, informed citizens; enterprising, creative contributors; and healthy, confident individuals. "Schools need a clear picture of what they in particular can best do" (Reiss and White, 2013, p.1) and in sharing that with parents and others may avoid the negative consequences that arise from the assumption that a dozen or so discrete subjects must be in place irrespective of the needs of young people.

The process of reform, on which our proposal for a review of the curriculum in England depends, highlights the need for partnership. A proper, inclusive collaboration has unfortunately been sadly

lacking in recent years. In describing the background to the reform in Wales, Donaldson (2020) draws attention to a unique feature of the Welsh approach in its commitment to principles of subsidiarity involving a co-constructive approach to the development of the curriculum. Such subsidiarity requires scope for significant decision making at successive levels in the education system. Decisions are not passed down as requirements to be delivered but flow from a clear understanding of respective roles and responsibilities throughout. Collaboration and respect are key features of subsidiarity in a learning system. In governance terms, the Welsh Government retains the key leadership role but is discharging that role through more emphasis on facilitation and support rather than direction and control as a “learning organisation” (OECD, 2018).

Summary statement: In order to support a new approach to education by Labour and to respond to the damaging changes implemented by Conservative led governments since 2010, we propose that the next Labour government undertakes a review of the school curriculum in England based on principles of subsidiarity, collaboration and stakeholder involvement at all levels of the system.

Definition / Characterisation of Curriculum

Government education policy since 2010 has promoted an ill-defined so called “knowledge-rich” curriculum. This has involved damaging political pressure¹ on the system to narrow the curriculum by over-emphasising factual knowledge, memorisation and rote learning (see Hudson and Shelton, 2020, p151) at the expense of creative know-how and practical skills. Furthermore Matthews (2020, p21) highlights the need for a balance between knowledge and 21st century skills and what are commonly referred to as the 4Cs of “Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking and Creativity”. In earlier work (Matthews, 2017, p238) he draws attention to the way in which these “soft skills” depend on emotional literacy and the ability to empathise. Just as importantly, he argues is the need for young people to develop skills that help them cope with pressures and stresses as well as contributing to making society more just and equitable. A similar call for a greater emphasis on skills comes from the CBI Report “Skills for an Inclusive economy” (CBI, 2021).

Against this background, we need some clarity over whether, very generally, we want breadth (considering the substance and process of intended, enacted and achieved learning) or narrowness (simply indicating what is or should be taught). There are very many ways of clarifying the nature of curriculum and we propose a more expansive approach. We show below an extract from a 1985 document produced by HMI:

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/nick-gibb-teach-children-important-facts-not-joyless-processes-minister-urges-a6859401.html>

11. A school's curriculum consists of all those activities designed or encouraged within its organisational framework to promote the intellectual, personal, social and physical development of its pupils. It includes not only the formal programme of lessons, but also the 'informal' programme of so-called extracurricular activities as well as all those features which produce the school's 'ethos', such as the quality of relationships, the concern for equality of opportunity, the values exemplified in the way the school sets about its task and the way in which it is organised and managed. Teaching and learning styles strongly influence the curriculum and in practice they cannot be separated from it. Since pupils learn from all these things, it needs to be ensured that all are consistent in supporting the school's intentions.

Department of Education and Science (1985)

In considering the nature of curriculum frameworks the UNESCO International Bureau of Education² also draws attention to the distinction between the intended, enacted and experienced curriculum and highlights the hidden and null curriculum also. The former refers to student experiences of school beyond the formal structure of the curriculum, and in particular the messages communicated by the school or education system concerning values, beliefs, behaviours and attitudes. These messages may complement the intended and enacted curricula, or they may undermine them. The latter refers all those areas and dimensions of human experience which the curriculum does not specify, and which are not addressed through teaching.

Summary statement: **A school's curriculum is extremely important as it consists of all those activities that promote the intellectual, personal, social and physical development of its students**

Purposes of the Curriculum

Ross (2000) argues that there are 3 drivers behind curricula. There are those who base their arguments principally on 'content'. This is often associated with philosophers such as Hirst (1965) who argued for the mathematical, physical scientific, religious, literary and artistic, human (social) scientific, philosophical and historical. This is often represented as an approach which looks for a critical liberal examination of the best that has been thought, said and done. Secondly, there are arguments for 'objectives'. This is a broad field and cover those who wish to promote (separately or together) a variety of things such as knowledge and skills for the economy, for social justice etc. A

²http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/COPs/Pages_documents/Resource_Packs/TTCD/sitemap/Module_3/Module_3_1_concept.html

wide range of philosophers are supportive of this position (e.g., Dewey (1916/1966)). Thirdly, there are those who argue for 'process'. Again, this is a broad field but has become associated fundamentally with Rousseau's *Émile*, and also the progressive child development movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which in some forms may still be seen in some primary school contexts and elsewhere. Sandel (2009) links these educational processes to political perspectives.

The tensions between these 3 areas allow us to reflect on the nature of curriculum debates. It is rarely (if ever) the case that one perspective is completely dominant. There may, however, be key links with certain positions about the wider purposes of schooling – e.g., the perceived need for leaders to have command of 'higher' levels of knowledge; the supposed need for workers to have 'skills' or competencies to serve the economic purpose of schools. Often that narrow approach is not adopted and instead arguments about the curriculum include a blend of all 3 purposes that emerge from and are applied to particular contexts by politicians, academics, professionals and the wider public. Those debates are played out all the time across all aspects of a school (and elsewhere) and can be seen in debates over the nature and type of controversies in each subject or area of study. By way of an example, we are convinced that there is currently a lack of knowledge about, participation in, and even interest in the democratic process and that the damaging consequences of that needs to be addressed by full and proper academic and professional attention to citizenship education for which there is already considerable evidence of success (e.g., Ofsted 2013; Whiteley 2014). But, as we would expect, it is helpful to have positive and constructive critical debates which in the case of citizenship education include whether or not it is a 'subject', what sort of knowledge it has for what purpose, how we know whether or not it is successful, and how it may be thought about and developed, see, for example, Lighthill 2017; Davies, Ho, Kiwan, Peck, Peterson, Waghid 2019; McGuinn, Ikeno, Davies, Sant 2022). It is important to argue for a dynamic approach if we are to avoid many unhelpful positions (e.g., the unthinking assumptions about vocational education – an area which is thought to apply to a few generally lower status students but actually should be thought of as characterising all 'subjects', including science, medicine, history, languages etc; or, the references that are at times made to character which should recognise the positive potential of such an approach, does not neglect the fierce controversies associated with it (Jerome and Kisby 2019), and considers the ways in which it may be positively developed (Peterson 2020). But within that carefully positioned approach is based on equity, inclusion and diversity and includes commitments to individuals and communities of race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality, social class, ability and other characteristics.

The development of a new curriculum in England based on a review of the purposes would be very timely. As described by Donaldson (2020), these purposes are more than simply statements of intent but are explicit expectations that will drive decisions about content, pedagogy, and assessment.

Summary statement: **Learning is not narrowly focused but rather has a variety of purposes attuned to what people need in order to play a full role in society and for their personal fulfilment. Equity, inclusivity and diversity are vital. It is positively developed in partnership between expert teachers, parents/carers, employers, inspectors, researchers and others.**

'Content' (forms of knowledge).

We need to clarify (briefly) the ways in which we wish to think about, present and work within the curriculum. Again, the DES (1985) statement is of some use:

12. The curriculum should aim to be broad by bringing all pupils into contact with an agreed range of areas of learning and experience. It should also be balanced in that it allows the adequate development of each area. In addition, each major component should have breadth, balance and relevance and should incorporate a progression in the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. The various curricular areas should reinforce and complement one another so that the knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes developed in one area may be put to use and provide insight in another, thus increasing the pupils' understanding, competence and confidence.

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33. The curriculum of all schools should involve pupils in each of the following areas of learning and experience:

aesthetic and creative

human and social

linguistic and literary

mathematical

moral

physical

scientific

spiritual

technological.

These are not suggested as discrete elements to be taught separately and in isolation from one another. They constitute a planning and analytical tool. Nor are they equated with particular subjects (for example, pupils may gain scientific or mathematical experience from art, and aesthetic experience from mathematics), although inevitably individual subjects contribute more to some areas than to others. Issues such as environmental education and preparation for the world of work are a feature of all or several of the areas, although the emphasis and nature of such work will differ from area to area.

There are references in the above statement from DES about subjects and areas of study. We do not think it is worthwhile to spend too long worrying about the precise distinctions between these 2 labels. But generally, it is important to use some of the work that was undertaken a long time ago by Bernstein (1971) who argued that the degree of specificity about classification (i.e., the distinctions between areas/subjects) and form (i.e., the fixity of the relationships between those involved in a teaching/learning process) would need to be carefully positioned so as to allow for creative dynamism. As such, the arguments about disciplinary, interdisciplinary, cross disciplinary and multi-disciplinary work become rather redundant. All areas, in order to be valid in a positive learning environment, need to be both sufficiently distinct to allow for coherent meaning and sufficiently plastic to allow for creativity. In making this argument, we are suggesting that all subjects are to some extent meaningful entities that carry status and also exist as hybrids. History, for example, in its current form in schools is recently established and draws from many other areas such as economics, philosophy, economics, sociology etc (Davies 2017); IT, surely an essential area of learning as well as a process that allows for learning, may be characterized as a subject and/or the means through which subjects are learned depending on a range of factors that are in part logistical as well as linked to beliefs about learning (Hew and Tan 2016); and for all students the vital importance of literacy and numeracy taught within and across all areas of learning.

Summary statement: **Through our curriculum all students will explore key areas - the science, arts, humanities/social science, languages, personal and physical – in exciting and engaging interactions with teachers and others.**

Community Focus

Closely associated with any consideration of the purpose of the curriculum is its focus. Of course, the debates over the relationship between community/ies and education/schooling are highly complex, and we should not assume that a communitarian perspective is necessarily just. However, in all matters to do with curriculum, partnership is vitally important and as such it is necessary to argue

for something that allows for engagement with local, national, international and global agendas. This geographical focus is also necessarily indicative of 2 other aspects: the dependence on partnerships with people based in a range of places and engagement with ideas that are important in those places. This allows for a range of benefits involving for example establishing simple partnerships in local communities (making the curriculum immediately relevant, making those fundamentally important links with parents/carers and people with a range of skills that are useful to learners) as well as raising the potential for wider possibilities (e.g., making sense of the nature of knowledge that, broadly, sees a simplistic emphasis on critique that, unhelpfully, can avoid the necessary achievement of understanding, and a superficial approach to knowledge that can avoid the essential element of critical analysis). The dynamism we are arguing for also allows for the role of the school to include the whole child in an integrated manner recognizing the vital role of parents and carers (and as such building on the positive moves that were made by Labour in a variety of policy initiatives, including especially 'every child matters' (ECM) (HM Treasury 2003). Initiatives such as ECM allows the curriculum to be more than just a list of distinct arcane academic areas or a series of fragmented single interests. The consideration of focus allows for particular policy priorities to be declared. The valuable work of Sure Start could be to some extent revived in ways that are relevant to curriculum debates by, for example, linking it to FE and ESOL and other education. These are ideas for which there is already consensus (see, for example, HM Government 2022 report in which good suggestions are made for the best start in life).

The consideration of communities also raises a vitally important and challenging issue regarding the relationship between the curriculum and the structure of schools. This raises a number of matters including, for example, the vital importance of transition across phases of schooling with all that implies for significant shifts in the structures that are implemented for learning (essentially, the current sharp break between the integration of the primary school and the specialist focus of the secondary school); the place of the National Curriculum (which most schools now, legally, do not have to follow, thus providing opportunities for innovation and also injecting a strong degree of enterprise which may not always work to the advantage of all students in all communities); and, by extension and perhaps most challenging of all, whether all schools should become academies and whether we accept free schools which exist in a government supported quasi market operating outside of the democratically elected local authority. It may be too late to turn the clock back to a time when free schools did not exist, and we must be alert to - and accepting of - the advantages that some of them may bring. We need to carefully monitor the ambitions and achievements of such varying small institutions as, for example, the XP network (<https://xpschool.org/>) and see the extremely significant differences between others such as the West London Free School

<https://www.wlfs.org/index.asp>). If one of these schools is allowed to exist, then the other almost certainly will – the community rationale of one and the market and elitist base of the other exist within the same broad policy structure. In policy terms this is perhaps one of the most challenging issues for a Labour party to grapple with as it speaks to our responsibilities to all – being inclusive and diverse - and not just to those who have been able to identify and secure the freedoms available in particular contexts.

Summary statement: **Our curriculum allows people to learn about the things that they need and that matter to them. Learners will work together with a variety of partners, including parents and carers, professionals and others, locally and globally, to achieve positive outcomes.**

Teaching and Learning

Pedagogical Knowledge

Debates about pedagogical knowledge are extremely far reaching. We make a few comments here about only 2 ways in which the curriculum is approached and to do so we have simplified many key ideas. Whereas Piaget (Inhelder and Piaget 1958) argued that higher levels of subject understanding are only accessible to the older and more able student we prefer the view put forward by Bruner (1960) that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development. Bruner essentially is presenting a challenge to the behaviourism that often lurks behind debates over skills. It allows for the characterisation of the curriculum in a conceptual framework. Disciplines (or ‘areas of study’ or ‘subjects’ – for our current purposes we do not need to provide very precise distinctions between these terms) should be classified and framed in ways that allow for creative dynamism in learning. That does not mean that anything goes. Far from it. Rather there is a need to identify the substantive concepts (what is this ‘subject’ about?) and procedural concepts (how must this ‘subject’ be studied in order to achieve learning?) (See Hudson and Shelton 2021). Although it is the case that not all ‘subjects’ are framed in the same way (there are distinctions, for example, between those that are more linear than others) it is important to characterise what is done and how it should be done. A substantive and procedural conceptual framework is what is used in many subjects (e.g., history in schools is very far from the caricature of rote learning about dates and instead abjures a rather inert approach to skills by exploring procedural concepts of significance, evidence, chronology and so on). This valuable approach is based on research evidence and already accepted by Ofsted (2021). Successful approaches to the achievement of learning occur through a recognition of the meaning of knowledge and “the recognition that curricular structures flow from the bodies of knowledge to be studied rather than from arbitrary themes, topics or products” (Pountney and Said 2018). Whether we call that –

'subjects', 'disciplines', 'powerful knowledge' or something else (Muller and Young 2019; White 2019) is less important than the recognition of the vital importance of purpose (see above) and the connection that we must make – theoretically and practically - to our characterisation of knowledge (Pountney and McPhail 2017).

Teaching Styles and Methods

Teachers must be recognised as having expertise in a constructivist approach that allows for partnership in which communities are enriched and students empowered. The teacher's expertise emerges from and is applied to several discourses. They are experts in their academic field and in ways of working with others. As such, knowledge and understanding and capability are enacted between a range of individuals and groups. A wide variety of approaches will be used that are contextually dependent and rely on wide-ranging partnerships. This is a very particular argument for recognition of the teacher's role as being different from exclusively that of a facilitator, a social worker, an assessor, an academic in a specialist subject. It is an argument for teachers to be recognised as educationalists who are able to understand and enact learning in partnership. In relation to these aspects, we draw particular attention to examples of innovative pedagogical practice that are worthy of careful consideration and support (e.g., see <https://www.fabianeducation.com/journal>) and included in the publication arising from the Hidden Histories/Curriculum Renewal working group of the Fabian Education Policy Group (Harris, 2021).

Summary statement: **Our curriculum allows students and teachers to work in ways that are engaging, enjoyable and worthwhile, exploring knowledge that really matters.**

Assessment

For a considerable period of time period of time (see Black and Wiliam 1998 for their influential and early statement on assessment) clear distinctions have been made between different types and purposes of assessment. Whilst summative testing (or, assessment *of* learning) may be useful in certain circumstances, teachers for the most part in their day-to-day work rely heavily on assessment *for* learning, using insights from their students to hone their impact on learning. Teachers usually have an integrated understanding of norm referencing (assessing students in the context of other students), criteria referencing (assessing using particular objectives) and ipsative referencing (assessing individual and groups of students against the progress that they themselves have made). They have that understanding as a result of using a wide range of tasks and interactions and they communicate about such matters by reporting to various audiences using different styles. This is already a positive reality in and across most schools. We are a very considerable way from the

simple testing of information that is at times unthinkingly referred to by commentators in the media. That said, there are significant dangers in ideas about assessment that rely on a form of meritocracy that ignores valuable learning and denies the common good (Sandel 2020), devalues the role of the teacher in assessing coursework and impacts negatively on student health (Lee and Larson 2000). The positive value of much current work needs to be recognised in the development of a coherent curriculum that is progressive and differentiated (i.e., increasingly challenging in ways that are appropriate for the full range of learners). The need for equity will mean a system open to all with a necessary and appropriate degree of differentiation and flexibility about when and how assessments are experienced.

Summary statement: **Our approach to assessment actively supports people in their learning and allow young people, employers, and others to know what young people know, understand and can do.**

Supportive Approaches

Evaluation

The appropriateness of a curriculum will always need to be kept under review. It should emerge from expert and stakeholder insight and be subject to change as a result of reactions to what has been developed and the perceived impact it has. This will mean 2 important considerations should be met: the role of research is vital; the dialogue with a wide range of bodies is essential. It would be naïve to imagine that a simple consensus will ever emerge. But a framework needs to be agreed and then those engaged with its development need to be supported. This would allow for a very different framework than that which we currently have. If a more collaborative process between schools were to be developed and a stronger link to be made between inspection and improvement then it would be possible to develop a more mature, collegial, professional and democratic process.

Scaffolding

The curriculum is dependent upon supportive structures. Engagement with policy makers is obviously essential but risky. Education is always political, but the nature of party politics may in substance and in wider appearance be harmful to the development of a professionally focused and engaged citizenry. The imposition of one party's pet projects and then replacement by another set following a change of government is deeply unhelpful. A distinctive curriculum that is at the same time operationalised within a broadly supported consensus and which is open to change is necessary. We have emphasised throughout this paper that our proposals are practical and already accepted across a wide range of stakeholders. Universities (especially departments of education for

teacher training and research), subject associations, exam boards, employers, parents and carers, young people and professionals, community-based and community oriented, are all key players in this approach. If partnership is not practised, then little will be achieved (there may be a need for some sort of organisational structure to allow for this to take place). Labour party policy needs to be distinctive, and it needs to be based on wide ranging consensus. The policy itself needs to be coherent and sufficiently dynamic to allow for agency by schools and teachers and to meet the needs of individual learners and groups of students.

Summary statement: **Our curriculum will be supported through collaboration between key individuals and groups to allow for a collegial, world class system of education. Parents and carers, teachers, inspectors, researchers and others will be constructively and positively engaged in an active school improvement agenda. A review of the current curriculum is urgently needed.**

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