

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:

- 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.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-gove-will-bury-pupils-in-facts-and-rules-8540741.html>

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.