

# Can there be an alternative to the centralised curriculum in England?

## Abstract

Schools and teachers in England have found themselves coerced into a situation where high-stakes testing, scrutiny of 'performance' and the generation of data for competitive league tables have dominated the educational experience of young people. There is a growing recognition from all quarters that this model is failing and that alternative – and more creative – approaches are needed. The paper examines whether there is sufficient professional confidence and autonomy to challenge the current hegemonic position.

Key words: alternatives; creativity; professional autonomy; confidence

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School teachers in England could be entirely exonerated if they were to regard anything that comes out of official channels with anything but the deepest scepticism. For the last ten years at least, schools have been bombarded with glossy folders, videos and DVDs, all depicting gleaming, clear-eyed children utterly absorbed in engaging and purposeful activity. Newspapers, magazines, TV and public advertising hoardings all exhort graduates to take up teaching with depictions of cheery adolescents full of fun and loveable, juvenile cheekiness. For many teachers, however, this official version of the English education system is at odds with a results-driven, performance-managed and reductive view of schools, fitting entirely with what Ball identifies as a 'culture of self-interest' and 'survivalism' (Ball: 2008: 45) dominated by tests, deadlines and accountability that encourage playing safe at all costs.

It comes, then, as something of a surprise, to find the smallest chink of light coming from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), one of the principal bodies established by central government to establish, uphold and monitor that most slippery of beasts – 'standards'. QCA's website leads us to the encouragingly titled: *Futures in Education: Building a 21st Century Curriculum*, posing the following question:

What does the word curriculum mean to you? Do you think of the national curriculum, the subject programmes of study, a set of content to cover? (QCA: 2008)

And then follows with a challenging response:

If the curriculum is to be inspiring and challenging and fit for the 21st century, we need to think of it as something more than that. It has to be dynamic, responsive to change, relevant and engaging.

QCA has developed a curriculum big picture to reinforce the concept of curriculum as the entire planned learning experience of a young person. This would include the lessons that they have during the school day, but also recognises how much young people learn from the routines, the events, the extended school day and activities that take place out of school. These are as much a part of the curriculum as the lessons.(QCA:2008)

The site then goes on to use as examples a number of schools that have, indeed, embarked upon exciting and innovative ways of approaching teaching and learning.

If there is a degree (and it is only a degree) of joy over one sinner repenting, then this might seem to be enhanced by aspects of other new elements in the National Curriculum – the introduction of Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) in September, 2008. After all, what is there to disagree about, for example, encouraging young people to ‘take informed and well-reasoned decisions, recognising that others have different beliefs and attitudes’ or forming ‘collaborative relationships, resolving issues to reach agreed outcomes’? (QCA 2008)

There appears to be nothing with which to argue here: the aspirations of PLTS and the encouragement from QCA is saying to schools and teachers what many of them already know only too well through their daily work with secondary students –that the current curriculum and its constraints bore children rigid and different approaches are required. If official doors are opening to allow this, then so much the better.

What then happens when a school adopts a different approach? To what extent are the opportunities presented by these developments countermanded by the constraints placed upon schools? I take as a starting point, two projects undertaken in two schools –one completed project and one ongoing – where evaluation of experimental and cross curricular projects have been undertaken.

In the first instance, it is worth briefly profiling these schools

## **School A**

School A is a large comprehensive situated on the outskirts of a major city. Its intake reflects the fact that it is not regarded locally as one of the 'better' schools in an area where, as elsewhere in England, a degree of *de facto* parental choice and academic selection militates against truly comprehensive school populations. In June, 2007, in the 'space' left by the completion of SATs tests, a two week Year 9 project looking at climate change across all subjects was put in place. The senior leadership of the school was supportive of the initiative but it was led by a self-selecting group of teachers committed to the project.

## **School B**

School B is a London comprehensive whose intake reflects the exceptionally wide ethnic and cultural mix of its immediate area. The school is undergoing a complete rebuild under the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) initiative and, in a project that has the overt and obvious backing of all school leaders, large parts of the Year 7 and 8 curriculum are being taught in an integrated, cross-curricular way.

Conversations with teaching staff at both schools identified the fact that there were significant numbers of teachers, 'especially those who had advanced beyond mere 'coping' into the reflective judgement of mature experience', who saw a clear need to adopt an approach that was 'much more principled, informed and subtle' (Alexander: 2004: 8) than was offered by what was often referred to as 'teaching to the grid' or 'following the Strategy script.' This mature experience is not a euphemism for 'older': many of the most engaged teachers are those who recognise that the 'grid' does not serve the interests of either pupils or themselves as professionals – a significant matter in a profession where retention is a major issue. ( Barmby 2006 and House of Commons Report 2004). Fundamentally, there is an implicit and explicit understanding in these schools that what is on offer simply will not do.

In School A, once the project was completed, teachers were convinced that it had been a success. In making these judgements they were careful to attempt to disaggregate such factors such as novelty and a fair smattering of special events during the course of the two weeks from their overall conclusions. There was widespread agreement that despite a degree of repetition, and some planning that could have been tighter, (criticisms echoed by students) good learning had taken place and a level of engagement shown that would not normally be expected – especially at what could be deemed a 'dead' part of the year. One experienced teacher commented:

These two weeks have reminded me of why I came into teaching (some twenty years ago.) It's also made me ashamed of what I have allowed myself to become.

A Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) student involved remarked that:

It made me see that the utopian ideas I am mustering at the moment actually work!

The number of referrals to senior staff for unacceptable behaviour declined and the level of attendance during the project improved - both significant indicators of a greater degree of engagement from pupils. While this could be attributed to the novelty of the project, the same patterns are emerging in the longer term initiative in School B.

The responses from students at both schools prompt some interesting thoughts and raise a number of further questions. Schooled as they are in what Lord and Jones (2006) identify as 'a narrow view of the relevance of the curriculum, associated with perceived subject status, assessment and 'getting grades'' it would not be surprising if some would see this as just 'more school'. Whilst there are, indisputably, a large number of students for whom this is, indeed, the case, there is also a strong perception from many of them that there is a degree of handing over some learning to them and that this affords them some responsibility that they are happy to take on. In the extended project in School B, it is clear that some pupils understand how the cross-curricular approach is being handled and are capable of conceptualising a bigger picture into which everything fits. There is enjoyment in the solving of 'real' problems and many students follow the thread from lesson to lesson and session to session with a clear perception of how it all fits together.

Underpinning all of this, and endorsed by the QCA, is the aspect of 'real' issues and ideas. Lord and Jones remind us that 'real-life connections, vocational and practical application are valued by pupils' and this is echoed when QCA talks of 'active and responsible citizens, who make a positive contribution to the needs of present and future generations.' The PLTS criteria also encourage us to lead students who should 'connect their own and others' ideas and experiences' and 'adapt ideas as circumstances change.' More mundanely, perhaps, it is a dull teacher who does not adapt a lesson to incorporate major events, be they global or local. Conversely, it has to be remarked that unwillingness to do so, stemming largely from a lack of confidence from teachers, means that trekking out to see the snowflakes or abandoning today's plans to watch breaking news on TV, are precisely the sort of real events that often fall by the wayside.

The principal concern from teachers at School A was that what they were doing could be legitimised in terms of learning objectives and outcomes – even at a time of year when the pressure of SATs had been relieved. Such a concern is at the heart of similar

worries from teachers at School B. Planning in cross curricular groups for such units of work as London, Freedom and the Far East, teachers remain anxious that what they are doing meets the needs of the learning objectives of specific subjects. In a profession that has systematically learnt to mistrust its own judgements, it hardly comes as a surprise that teachers, even when formulating creative and imaginative ideas for learning that they are sure will work, feel the need for the safety net of 'authorities' to fully validate what they are doing.

This lack of professional certainty has its roots in what White (2004: 180) calls the 'assessment regime...introduced after 1988' to which 'when in power, those of all stripes have been addicted ... because of the perceived popularity of leaguer tables among parents.' Leaving aside for another day this 'perceived popularity', White touches here on the crux of the issue for teachers. On the one hand there is a clear and obvious need to present material to young people in a way that is innovative and, crucially, 'real'. On the other, there is concern about performance management that inevitably impacts on pay, the promulgation of data for league tables, value added examination results and, thundering along behind all of this, the heavy hooves of Ofsted.( Ball (2008: 49) sums this up as 'performativity' – a culture or a system of terror.' The elements that constitute a teacher's performance are all bound up in the context of 'managing' schools as part of education policy that Young (1998: 156) characterises as part of 'neo-liberal economic policies devoted to trying to cut public expenditure and maximise the economic benefits of educational spending by increasing its efficiency and directing its goals to economic rather than social or cultural ends' and which Ball (2008:43) condemns as leading to a situation where 'learning is re-rendered as a 'cost-effective policy outcome' and achievement is a set of 'productivity targets' and so on.' Against this background it is unsurprising that teachers, many of whom have themselves been educated in a system where performance indicators have taken precedence over educational ends, guard continually against frequent – and occasionally unannounced –scrutiny.

In the light of this, what of the brave new world posited by QCA and the opportunities presented by PLTS - not to mention the overarching importance of the Every Child Matters initiative? Could these developments really 'free' teachers to take control? Does the rhetoric match the reality? Once again, it is worth looking at the language and expectations coming from officialdom. In the research document *2020 Vision*, commissioned by the (then) Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the authors set out the benefits of personalised learning in the following paragraph:

Learners are active and curious: they create their own hypotheses, ask their own questions, coach one another, set goals for themselves, monitor their progress and experiment with ideas for taking risks, knowing that mistakes and 'being stuck' are part of learning. Work is sufficiently varied and challenging to maintain their engagement but not so difficult as to discourage them. This engagement allows learners of all abilities to succeed, and it avoids the disaffection and attention-seeking that give rise to problems with behaviour.

The report then goes on to recommend that the Secretary of State, working with QCA, Ofsted and serving teachers should

consider how best to ensure that their curriculum and associated assessment support personalising learning, making use of existing curriculum flexibilities and reporting on progress to their governing body.

All of this is then reinforced in the QCA's own document, which talks of how that body will 'encourage schools and their communities to take ownership of the curriculum' and of the importance of schools having ownership of such a curriculum. The report goes on to emphasize the importance of presenting 'problems to children, rather than solutions' and of the need for 'these problems to be real or realistic so the children care about finding solutions'.

What is there to disagree with here? Is this not a blueprint for everything that progressive thinkers want from education? Which school would not willingly espouse such an approach?

Schools A and B have, indeed, adopted approaches in line with this vision of a 'curriculum for the future' in a situation where, in both cases, test results and league tables position the schools below the national average. Given that it is frequently the case that where schools find themselves falling foul of the assessment regime the reaction is to adhere ever more closely to 'the grid', the decision of these schools to embrace innovation is testament to a degree of bravery. There is, in some respects, an element of a leap of faith in so doing, given that experimentation may not yield the sort of results that the assessment regime demands – albeit that mature practitioners tend to feel, and probably know, that it will. Yet what is there in the language of QCA and the Department for Children Schools and families (DCSF) that will reassure them or help to liberate the more timid?

Regrettably, the simple answer is that there is very little. Scan through the uplifting material on the QCA website and wherever assessment is mentioned, it is done so in the most benign of terms. Schools should be able to choose 'assessment fit for purpose' and 'use a wide range of evidence to encourage learners to reflect on their learning.' When it comes to PLTS, it should be the 'self-assessment process itself (that) helps the development of the reflective learner.' All of this exists in a world far removed from the tracking of students through a maze of end-of-unit tests, predicted grades, optional SATs, comparative league tables, the labeling of children as 'gifted' and a plethora of other devices designed to 'measure' educational provision and, by default, to militate against innovation and experimentation. The message seems to be a clear one: by all means play around with the curriculum to your heart's content, but the expectation is still that you will deliver the results that the system demands.

All of this leaves teachers and schools with a dilemma that is at the heart of this paper. Instinctively or consciously, many teachers would like to teach within the framework of a bigger picture that is not constrained by 'the grid'. Despite this, the dimension characterized as performativity drives a great deal of what they do on a daily basis. To complicate matters, teachers' daily experience demonstrates to them that the system that drives this performativity is in something close to crisis. At the time of writing, a look through the newspapers reveals – against a chaotic fiasco around the organization of national tests for 11 and 14 year olds – the head of Cambridge University's exam board and Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools both identifying endemic faults with the very regime that drives what schools do. For all of this, there is no indication from officialdom that the assessment regime will be relaxed and, as a consequence, many teachers and schools continue to find themselves caught between doing the right thing and 'survivalism.'

How have we reached a position whereby, acting against instinct in the case of new entrants and knowledge on the part of those more experienced, teachers have allowed themselves to be dragged into this vortex? A popular analysis in staffrooms and university schools of education goes along these lines: we now have a generation of teachers and, in particular, school leaders who have known nothing else. Having been put on the SATs treadmill at 5, they have never come off it – and that includes their period of training as a secondary teacher. There is truth in this argument, including the accusation that graduate teacher training, assessed as it is through the completion of a range of atomized competencies, discourages new entrants from seeing anything of a big picture. Young (1998) talks of how ‘teachers will need a more sophisticated theory of knowledge and the curriculum than is made available to them in many teacher training courses which concentrate largely on the specifics of content’ (22) and then goes on, most significantly to say those who work in education need to learn far more about the non-school world.’(33) As tempting as the argument that we should forgive those new to the profession for they not what they do may be, it doesn’t answer why this has happened and unless, as Young suggests, we lift our own view beyond the school gates, we will not find a satisfactory answer. There is nothing intrinsically timorous in the make-up of the teaching profession - it just may be that its courage needs awakening.

The Education Act of 1988 brought into play a series of measures that, in a coordinated and systematic way, brought education within the remit of central government that no other piece of legislation had previously attempted – or even dared - to do. (Ball:2008). The Act was partially a response to a growing tradition of teacher militancy which had seen widespread strikes over pay in the 1970s and 80s, themselves an element of wider industrial action by a multiplicity of groups of workers. This tradition of militancy was built on basic industrial demands over pay and working conditions, but most significantly, sufficient momentum was generated by this action for the National Union of Teachers to lead to a successful boycott of SATs exams in 1993. This action demands a moment of reflection – albeit that it was brief and eventually undermined by the internecine union warfare that is characteristic of the entrenched syndicalism in English teacher trade unionism. (Jones. Coles.1994) This action was not about pay, but was a direct response to the imposition of a set of tests that were educationally questionable, unproven and unnecessary. That teachers should have been prepared to take action over the defence of the curriculum a mere 15 years ago should prompt genuine pause for thought and analysis.

When Cuban (2004:69) poses the question, ‘why did educational policy makers and practitioners working in tax-supported institutions aimed at achieving larger public goods...so readily adopt prescriptions designed for private, profit-driven firms governed by market principles?’ he is addressing the same conundrum. How could it be that a profession, largely self-selecting and whose members had, broadly speaking, chosen this particular occupation out of some degree of social commitment, have allowed itself to have been sucked into the world of market-led competition? When Young talks of the ‘non-school’ world it is here that we can begin to find some sort of response. The neo-

liberal agenda has 'ensured that ...the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market' ( Harvey 2005:3). To challenge this is to adopt a position that, in many schools and governing bodies is nigh-on heretical:

Though it has been effectively disguised, we have lived through a whole generation of sophisticated strategising on the part of ruling elites to restore, enhance or....construct an overwhelming class power.....In this, progressives of all stripes seem to have caved in to neo-liberal thinking since it is one of the primary fictions of neo-liberalism that class is a fictional category that exists only in the mind of socialists and crypto-communists (Harvey: 202)

Is this process of 'caving in' now complete? Are the heady days of a profession that was prepared to defend the very substance of what it 'produced' mere footnotes in history? Is the hegemonic position, reinforced by an army of consultants armed with truckloads of strategy documents, now unassailable? I argue that there are four areas that should give us cause for greater optimism when it comes to mounting a challenge to the market in schools.

The first and most obvious of these is the willingness of schools such as A and B to scrutinise their practice and to embark upon something that challenges the 'grid'. Such schools are by no means isolated examples and there is a widespread readiness emerging from within the profession to depart from the script. That some official bodies now clearly support and recognise the need for such an approach is to be welcomed and even though such experimentation takes place with schools and teachers constantly looking over their shoulder at the standards agenda, we can count this as definite progress.

Secondly – and there is genuine currency to this argument – the standards machine is grinding to an embarrassing halt. The mechanism for marking and distributing the results of the 2008 SATs, placed in the unreliable hands of private enterprise ETS, has brought to the fore wider arguments about the validity and necessity of such forms of assessment. Notwithstanding the annual right-wing response to improving GCSE results there remains a degree of mistrust about the value of such qualifications. Stumbling attempts at addressing 14-19 assessment generate little confidence and elite universities are a short step from setting their own admission exams. All of this against a background where the manipulation of exam entries is winked at by schools and teachers in a way that would have been unthinkable two decades ago. Among parents, teachers and, critically, students – who bear the annual brunt of being informed that their efforts are somehow unworthy – there is a deep sense of going through the

motions and a diminishing sense of learning for enjoyment and fulfilment. Schools such as A and B – particularly the latter – and many like them, are increasingly prepared to take the chance that by approaching the curriculum in a more imaginative and creative way they will meet the needs of their students and, when the time comes, meet the needs of the assessment regime. This means that the diet of repetition and practice that so deadens students' experience and which is (often unwillingly) espoused by teachers can be replaced by an enriched and enriching curriculum that is not led by meagre and piecemeal examination practice. That this system is currently so discredited should imbue schools with greater confidence to step beyond its shaky boundaries.

Thirdly, the government's Children's Plan (2007: 83) proudly trumpets that it will allocate '£44 million over three years to make teaching a Masters profession.' Once again, let us allow ourselves to skate over what, exactly £15 million a year will achieve and how much of this is 'new' money - and let us also ignore temporarily the rhetoric that accompanies this wish, talking, as it does, of this qualification 'building on the recently agreed performance management measures' (an agreement not made with the NUT, the largest teacher union.) When Alexander asks in 2004 why Simon's 1981 question about the lack of pedagogy in English schools has not been addressed, he identifies an increasing suspicion of anything beyond 'what works' as being at the root of this. The training of teachers, particularly those entering the profession as graduates, eschews wider questions about child development and psychology – let alone those about the political and economic context within which schools operate – in favour of an atomised set of standards that 'trainees' set about evidencing in their practice. If teachers, either at the initial stage of their training or during their continuing professional development, are being encouraged to operate at Masters level, then there has to be the hope that this opens up the space for them to not only interrogate their own daily practice, but to begin to question the provenance of the hegemonic position that has framed that practice.

Finally, if the teaching profession had, indeed, caved in, then organised resistance of any sort would be a thing of the past – and this is not the case. April, 2008 saw the first national strike over pay for 22 years and this action was part of a trend that saw more strike days in the UK in 2007 than any, bar one, since 1988. Public sector workers and those in service industries, whose actions already account for the majority of strike days, are showing increasing willingness to act in a coordinated and coherent way in the face of wage restraint, increasing managerialism and an over-refined culture of 'accountability'. For teachers, it is impossible to separate this fight over pay and conditions from the restraints placed upon them by a reductive curriculum and an intolerable level of professional scrutiny.

In conclusion, we can make the following observations:

- Despite the battering it has received over the last two decades, there are signs that the teaching profession is ready to exert a greater degree of professional autonomy than it has recently enjoyed.
- There is a realisation at all levels that 'teaching by the book' simply will not do – but the challenge, until such time as there is an unlikely rethink by governments in the UK and elsewhere, is to allay the nervousness of schools for whom reaching 'standards' is a matter of survival by generating research that demonstrates that these standards will, indeed, be attained or improved upon.
- Schools are already beginning to use the official rhetoric of QCA, The Childrens' Plan and Every Child Matters as the basis for a degree of experimentation and creativity.
- We can hope that a profession operating at Masters level will be one that interrogates the present system and sees it in the wider, neo-liberal context that has framed it. By doing so, the profession could become one that is more autonomous and critical - and one that mounts a meaningful challenge to the current hegemony.

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