

## A Learners' Curriculum

Towards a curriculum for the twenty-first century

**A contribution to the debate from  
the Association of Teachers and Lecturers**

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The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) is pleased to have worked with Mike Newby to develop this thought-provoking exploration of a curriculum for the future. *A Learners' Curriculum* starts from ATL's current policy regarding the curriculum and its assessment, and moves to a vision of an experimental, progressive curriculum with the needs and aspirations of learners at its heart.

ATL has a number of concerns regarding the curriculum as it is currently constituted. The top-down, centrally controlled model of the curriculum sees children and young people as passive participants in a prescribed and directed teaching environment. Equally importantly, it places teachers as 'couriers', conveying knowledge, and increasingly using methods, prescribed by others. In calling for a review of the curriculum, ATL is also pressing for renewed thinking about the role of teachers.

Developing a learners' curriculum would engage teachers and support staff in experiment and debate, about pedagogy and about knowledge. It is not a prescribed national curriculum, but one that is constructed, refreshed and renewed by teachers and pupils in their daily work. This is a vision of a future where teachers are trusted as knowledgeable and skilled professionals, working, learning and reflecting collaboratively, to best meet the needs of learners. ATL invites you to join the debate.

***Dr Mary Bousted***

*ATL General Secretary*



## About the author

Professor Mike Newby has spent all his professional life in education, as a secondary English teacher, for a while in further education and, for the majority of his career, in higher education. Educated in London, he studied at the universities of York and Reading, first becoming involved in teacher education at what was then Westminster College (now part of Oxford Brookes University). From 1989 until 2004, he was Dean at the University of Plymouth, with responsibility for teacher education and, for most of that time, also for art and design, media, performance and the humanities. He has lectured in China, Finland and Australia and for a while was Visiting Professor of English at Ball State University, Indiana, USA. For most of his career, he has been active nationally, having for ten years been an executive member of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers and its elected Chair from 1998 until 2001. Now Emeritus Professor at Plymouth, he acts as Higher Education Liaison consultant to *Teachers TV* and leads the *Teaching 2020* project for the Training and Development Agency (formerly, the Teacher Training Agency). He also chairs the Higher Education, Arts and Schools project, a national project aimed to revitalise the place of the arts in the experience of those training to become primary teachers. He lives with his wife Sue in East Devon.

The curriculum cannot remain static. Over the past 12 months ATL has been calling for a broad debate on the school curriculum and its relevance to the needs of learners in the twenty-first century. This publication questions whether the concept of a 'national' curriculum is still relevant. It looks at curriculum ownership, and at ways in which the curriculum has become centrally controlled and subjected to constant government intervention. It goes on to describe three kinds of curriculum as the foundations on which a new curriculum should be built: the content-based curriculum; the vocational curriculum; and the child-centred curriculum. This publication considers how the power of the internet has transformed learning opportunities using IT networks. It proposes that non-hierarchical, self-managed networks will become characteristic organisational features of the middle years of the twenty-first century, and that we must therefore prepare children and young people for a networked world. It concludes that if learners are to flourish and thrive in the decades to come, they will need an experimental, progressive curriculum – one focused on the learner – where moulds will be broken and traditional barriers between disciplines and subjects will start to crumble.

For well over a year, ATL has questioned whether the National Curriculum, as currently constituted, is still the best curriculum we can offer children and young people in the twenty-first century. The Association is not calling for piecemeal changes to existing subjects or for the addition of new subjects. Rather, ATL believes that the time is right for a wide-ranging, carefully considered and informed debate regarding the sort of curriculum that will best meet the needs of twenty-first century learners and the values and principles that should underpin that curriculum.

ATL has already welcomed steps taken by the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment in Northern Ireland to undertake a comprehensive review of the curriculum, and to establish a framework of curriculum objectives. In particular, the Association has been impressed by the extensive and wide-ranging consultation process, which involved seeking the views of young people, teachers and the wider community. The Association has also welcomed the announcement by the Welsh Assembly that a similar review will be conducted in Wales.

More recently, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has announced its intention to promote a broad debate about how the curriculum for schools in England can best adapt to changing needs and demands. The QCA's pamphlet *Futures: Meeting the challenge* is an important first step in promoting such a debate. Furthermore, the 18 QCA-commissioned papers, written from a variety of viewpoints and covering a wide range of issues, provide a welcome focus for discussion and debate.

ATL's publication *A Learners' Curriculum* is a contribution to that debate. It does not claim to be a panacea. Rather, it has been written to help promote discussion and stimulate debate in relation to the curriculum of the future. We look forward to promoting this important debate in partnership with all those who hold a stake in the school curriculum, but most importantly with teachers and lecturers and those who work alongside them in schools and colleges, and, of course, with children and young people themselves.

### ATL POLICY ON THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

- All children and young people are entitled to a curriculum that is broad, balanced and relevant to their learning needs.
- The main emphasis of the school curriculum should be on educating children and young people for a rich and fulfilling life, not merely on training them for the world of work.
- The principle of subsidiarity should apply to the school curriculum. This means that higher levels of authority should not intervene in decision-making that can more appropriately, more responsibly, more effectively, more accountably and more economically be taken at lower levels.
- Any review of the school curriculum must be accompanied by a review of how the curriculum is assessed.
- There should be greater coherence in the principles and values that apply to the curriculum across the Key Stages – for example, the principles that inform Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 should be consistent with those upon which the Foundation Stage has been developed.
- Curriculum designers should recognise that many of the skills, dispositions and competencies that young people are encouraged to develop in the post-14 phase of education are being developed from the Foundation Stage.
- Any debate on the curriculum should involve the widest possible variety of people with an interest in education. This includes teachers and those who work with them, parents, pupils, school governors, researchers and academics, and those in the wider community.
- The QCA, and its sister bodies in Wales and Northern Ireland, should give greater consideration to questions concerning curriculum manageability. They should provide first hand evidence that the statutory curriculum is manageable in a variety of school contexts.
- Any change to the school curriculum should be properly costed, trialled and thoroughly evaluated before it is implemented.
- All changes must be accompanied by comprehensive and properly resourced in-service training and professional development.



## A LEARNERS' CURRICULUM

The curriculum teaches children and young people, through formal lessons and the experience of being at school, all that they need to equip them for life when they leave school. It aims to give them knowledge, skills and understanding and aspires to seed and develop their values and attitudes. In helping to shape each child and young person, the curriculum shapes the school where they learn and the community in which they live. To reflect changes in society the curriculum should develop and move on or it will lose its responsiveness to contemporary realities and future needs. ATL believes it is now time to consider change.

Professor Alistair Ross warns us: 'the curriculum is a major tool in the construction of identity, and it must be used with care' (Ross, 2000). So *what* should we teach the young? Are there immutable, timeless areas of human knowledge which all children everywhere must learn if they are to survive and prosper in the world? Should the school curriculum enshrine the nation's heritage? Should it bustle in today's world or strain towards the future? Any curriculum is inevitably marked by the fingerprints of those who design it, as it displays the values, prejudices and preferences of the times. What does our curriculum tell us about the particular identities we are asking children and young people to assume?

The purpose of this publication is to promote an informed debate about the nature of the school curriculum and how it is assessed. How does today's curriculum, designed in the 1980s and 1990s, with its roots in the nineteenth century, match up to the needs of children and young people in the first decades of the twenty-first century? ATL believes the time is right to imagine a revitalised curriculum, one focused on the needs of each learner in tomorrow's world. Whilst we welcomed the publication of the Tomlinson Report *14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform* (Tomlinson, 2004), ATL believes it is important to go further and see a similar exercise embracing the whole of the school curriculum, from the Foundation Stage onwards. This publication concentrates on what is taught and learned, but ATL believes that this debate should also include a discussion of the close relationship between the curriculum and how it is assessed.

Following its successful **Teaching to Learn** campaign, which was designed to put learning back at the heart of education policy and to shift the debate about schools and schooling away from target, tests and league tables and towards learning and the learner, ATL aims to look ahead to a **Learners' Curriculum**.

## A NATIONAL CURRICULUM?

*It is not long in our history that schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (see note 1) have had a statutory curriculum for all pupils (see note 2). The National Curriculum, introduced in 1988, is already showing signs of age. Times change rapidly and successive governments, using extensive powers, have modified it to reflect their particular enthusiasms and concerns, with the consequence that it is now a thing of patches and scratches.*

ATL has a number of concerns about the National Curriculum. This publication will raise questions about its content, structure and intentions. It also questions whether the very idea of a centrally-determined curriculum in a nation as diverse as ours is either possible or desirable.

Given that a curriculum is a device for forging identity in the young, a 'national' curriculum must be designed in part to help mould *British* children into *British* adults, in this way protecting and preserving the nation state. The first Chief Executive of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), Dr Nicholas Tate, was quite clear about this when he wrote '... a key role of a National Curriculum should be the explicit reinforcement of a common culture ... the culture and traditions of Britain should be at the core' (Tate, 1994).

ATL believes this view is contestable. *Whose* view of 'Britain' should we accept as the authentic one to pass on? What, for instance, of pupils' European-ness: ought that not also inform the curriculum? And can we be confident that there is indeed such a thing as a *common* culture to be explicitly reinforced in what children and young people are taught at school? Teachers must daily confront the interplay – sometimes the struggle – between that view of British culture, embodied in the institutions of the State and so powerfully expressed in our national life, and the real, lived-in cultures which children and young people bring with them to school; cultures based at least as much on their locality, region, ethnicity, class and gender as on any sense they may have of being 'British'. In the twenty-first century, teachers must educate children and young people to find their place in a global, trans-national world, and in a local and regional one, as well as preparing them to become citizens of a nation. Furthermore, we also cannot ignore the fact that children and young people are increasingly becoming members of a virtual, networked world.

Bearing these things in mind, we need to ask whether an explicitly National Curriculum will offer children and young people the perspective in their learning that they will need in the future.



## Who owns the curriculum?

*We agree with Michael Young's analysis that 'there is a link between the distribution of power, the interests of the powerful and the curriculum'* (Young, 1999).


The curriculum ceased to be the exclusive preserve of the teaching profession long ago, but it used to be. Before 1988, it was not held to be the task of central government to determine what was taught in Britain's schools (see note 3). Local Education Authorities (LEAs) had that oversight, often exercised through the LEA advisory service, though it was the schools and the teachers themselves who chose the subjects and the methods of teaching them. The content of the curriculum was a professional, not a political, matter.

In the 1970s, however, increasing concern was voiced regarding the state of the education service and its apparent failure to provide adequately for a large proportion of pupils. Teachers, attacked by many in the media for 'trendy' classroom methods, were no longer trusted to determine what the young should be taught. Their previous position as custodians of knowledge was to change and was instead to become one of conduits for the knowledge, set out in what was to become the National Curriculum.

In 1976, the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, in his Ruskin College speech, claimed the right of governments to have a view about what went on in schools. The 'great debate' which followed prompted central directives requiring LEAs to give an account of the steps they were taking to keep a watching brief over their schools' curricula (DES, 1977a). The way was cleared for more central control.

During the formative stages of the National Curriculum, it became clear that powerful forces were engaging in a struggle over its future content, form and function. In 1980, the Department of Education and Science (DES, 1980a) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (DES, 1980b) each produced documents which became templates for particular (and differing) views of the curriculum. When the Orders were drawn up to prepare programmes of study in what would become the new National Curriculum, government intervention became intense.


Professor Brian Cox, chair of the Working Group established by Mr Kenneth Baker (then Secretary of State for Education in Margaret Thatcher's government) to propose the nature of English in the National Curriculum, wrote: 'when my Report was submitted [to Mr Baker] he so much disliked it that he insisted it should be printed back to front. ... neither Mr Baker nor Mrs Rumbold [a Minister in the DES] knew very much about the complex



debate that has been going on at least since Rousseau about progressive education ... they did not realise that my Group would be strongly opposed to Mrs Thatcher's views about grammar and rote learning. The politicians were amateurs, instinctively confident that common sense was sufficient to guide them' (Cox, 1991).

ATL believes that 'amateurs' of this kind should not have the final say in matters as vitally important as the content and direction of any National Curriculum. This does not mean we are opposed to the lay person taking part in the debate; indeed, we would welcome it, but their contributions must be alongside those from a wide variety of people with a stake in the curriculum. These include parents, employers and, of course, teachers. We believe that any discussion concerning the content of the curriculum should also include the voices of the children themselves. Since the establishment of the National Curriculum Council, and subsequently the SCAA and the QCA, the curriculum in England has been under constant review. Secretaries of State have powers to change the content of existing subjects and to introduce new ones. ATL is concerned about this for the following reasons:

- As more goes into the school curriculum, it can become under-resourced, in terms of time as well as human and material resources. For example, there is now an expectation that pupils at Key Stage 2 should have an entitlement to learn a modern foreign language. This begs a number of questions: where will the curriculum time come from; what will have to give place; and where will the teachers be found, given the widely-acknowledged shortage of modern foreign languages in secondary schools?
- Teachers must constantly change direction as a result of central dictat. How, for example, has the introduction of Citizenship into the secondary school curriculum affected other subjects – in particular, history, religious education and personal, social and health education?
- Although the National Curriculum promised to bring with it greater continuity and progression to children's education, insufficient thought has been given to transition issues – particularly between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, and Key Stages 2 and 3, as the pupils move from primary to secondary school. Children (and their teachers) need coherence, not discontinuity, in their education.
- A centrally-determined curriculum which takes little account of teachers' views undermines their professionalism, taking away from them a crucial part of their professional role.
- An undue emphasis on a centrally-imposed, high stakes testing regime in a limited number of subjects has the perverse consequence of narrowing the curriculum. It can also encourage 'teaching to the test.'

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- In any case, the assessment regime imposes too great a burden on teachers and their pupils.
  - Central control of the curriculum inevitably spawns a complex and expensive bureaucracy, spending money on itself and not on schools (see note 4).
  - Decisions can be taken about the content of the National Curriculum, or introducing National Strategies, without having proper regard to how doing so will affect the existing status quo. In Key Stages 1 and 2, for example, the introduction of the National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategies not only changed the way English and mathematics was taught it marginalised other subjects, reducing the curriculum breadth and balance to the minimum that all pupils were legally entitled. A similar situation applies to Key Stage 3, where the introduction of the National Strategy compounded the existing problems of curriculum congestion and overload.

Above all, the Association's concern regarding excessive government intervention in the curriculum is based on a concern for civil liberty. That elected governments clearly have a responsibility to the education service is not at issue; however, the curriculum, as the focus of the education service, is about knowledge and ideas, skills and values, culture and wisdom. In our view, therefore, no democratically-elected government should allow itself too much control over what goes on within it. As Duncan Graham, first Chairman and Chief Executive of the National Curriculum Council commented '[The National Curriculum] created the potential for great misuse of power. Central statutory detailed control of the curriculum is a heady brew for politicians' (Graham, 1993). We believe governments should establish effective machinery to ensure fluent and informed debate regarding the nature of our curriculum, but we do not believe that it should have powers, through its Ministers, to impose a particular government view on what the nation's children and young people learn.

ATL does not accept the need for 'Ministries of Required Knowledge' any more than, in a democracy, we would accept a 'Ministry of Prohibited Knowledge'.

### Three kinds of curriculum

*A curriculum is a blueprint for the people we want children to become. On it, we inscribe our aspirations for the kind of world we trust them to shape as adults. It does not emerge by accident. As the philosopher Paul Hirst reminds us: 'There can be no curriculum without objectives. Unless there is some point to planning the activities, some intended, learnable outcome, however vague this might be, there is no such thing as a curriculum' (Hirst, 1974).*

The following are three different approaches to designing a curriculum, each with a different objective, presented as curricular types from which to plan ahead to possible future different outcomes. They are the main ingredients from which a future curriculum is likely to be formed.

## The content-based curriculum

A content-based curriculum assumes that pupils go to school to learn facts. Philosophers help us understand how this information is to be sub-divided and structured and we will come across concepts like *realms of meaning, forms of knowledge and discipline areas*. They can be generalised as were, for example, the *areas of experience* in the following list, published by the Department for Education and Science as it began to consider nationalising the curriculum (DES, 1977b):

*the aesthetic and creative, the ethical, the linguistic, the mathematical, the physical, the scientific, the social and political, the spiritual.*


Alternatively, the concepts can be more specific: a content-based curriculum is most familiar to us as that set of *subjects* which form the basis of the school timetable (science, art, history, French, etc).

Subjects jostle for position within a hierarchy of high- and low-status studies. Well-established subjects, headed by professors and their university departments, are deemed to be academically more valuable than newer ones, sometimes of a more practical and applied nature. Some new subjects can find it difficult to gain academic respectability, particularly among sceptical traditionalists, who sometimes refer to them disparagingly as 'Mickey Mouse' subjects. A content-based curriculum inevitably displays a tension between old knowledge and new.

A content-based curriculum, with its associated system of assessment and qualifications, is a powerful device for sorting learners into high- and low-achievers, in this way establishing which 'station' a child will take up in life after school. The highest success is accorded to pupils who do well in examination of high-status subjects, some of which are deemed to be 'more difficult' than others. Some (the *Classics*, for example) have even done service as 'latch-key' subjects to a particular university course or profession, justified not so much for their utility or relevance as their capacity to 'train the mind'.

The fact that some subjects in the content-based curriculum carry higher status than others may have more to do with these subjects enjoying 'cultural approval' than their having any intrinsic superiority. Employers of graduates may not particularly care about the content of someone's education, but be impressed that they have become 'versed in the culture and discourse of culturally-approved knowledge' (Ross, 2000).

Of course, regardless of 'cultural approval', subjects will claim their place in the curriculum partly for reasons of *cultural necessity*. People need to be able to read and write, to count and calculate, to know something of their past, to be alive to their place in the physical universe, to experience the



arts, to become physically strong, healthy and dextrous, to develop a social and political consciousness, to learn about their own and others' spirituality. A curriculum will inevitably lead its designers to argue over what must be present and what will have to be omitted; it is therefore predictable that some subjects will come to be valued more highly than others.

Furthermore, subjects rise in popularity or fall out of favour as times change. *Latin* and *Greek*, essential to any 'gentleman's' education in the nineteenth century, are rarely taught in schools today, even though they still rank highly in the pecking-order of academic respectability. By contrast, *Media Studies* is a good example of a subject establishing itself against opposition.

Often vilified by traditionalists as a sign of 'dumbing-down', it forms an increasingly popular choice at both 'A' level and at degree level in universities. It will be a struggle, nonetheless, to transform attitudes: teachers and pupils themselves well know which subjects carry high, and which low, status and which subjects lead to influential and well-paid employment.

This is not to say, of course, that a curriculum emphasising subject content, which places 'culturally approved' subjects higher in the subject hierarchy, is either intrinsically reactionary or is standing in the way of progress towards a more equitable and equally-capable society. The National Curriculum, a content-based curriculum built upon core and foundation subjects, certainly sets apart knowledge within familiar domains. Some have seen this as a means of reproducing the social order, perpetuating power among the dominant class (the one which controls the curriculum). Others, however, have seen quite different motives informing its design – an opening up of the high-status curriculum to all children from every background, thus using it as a progressive instrument to re-shape society. Either way, the educational mechanism remains the same: the grammar school curriculum may have become the property of the comprehensive school but the broad content and assessment machinery remain much as before.

Above all, a content-based curriculum, built around a set of subjects, emphasises the acquisition and testing of knowledge. At the extreme, it is an *end-in-itself* curriculum, the objective of which is the acquisition of information for its own sake, its highest aim being that the learner emerges from the education process as knowledgeable (as 'well-educated') as possible. In this publication it is contrasted with two other curricular types displaying different emphases. The first of these might be called a *means-to-an-end* curriculum, in which the knowledge and skills taught are validated not for their own intrinsic worth but by the uses to which they can later be put in the world after school.

## The vocational curriculum


A vocational curriculum intends to help young people find work when they end their formal education. Whether this is done in highly specific or more general ways, the clear direction taken is from school to eventual employment. This might show itself in the presence of particular subjects in the vocational curriculum. For example, as ever more tourists visit the United Kingdom, making tourism one of the most important elements in Britain's economy, a vocational curriculum will ensure that *Hospitality and Catering Studies* appears on the timetable.

Where the vocational curriculum contrasts with the content-based curriculum is in its unequivocal emphasis on having an eventual utility, usually in the work-place (see note 5). The vocational curriculum will teach practical skills and apply more abstract knowledge to real-world situations. Students will typically be sent on work experience, thus moving schools and the world of work into closer union (see note 6). Pedagogically, the emphasis in the vocational curriculum will tend towards a training mode.

It would, however, limit its reach to identify a vocational curriculum by demanding an ever-present and direct correspondence between a subject and a particular occupation in the work-place. In addition, a vocational curriculum teaches generic skills which can be applied in a variety of settings. For example, students will learn how to deal with members of the public, an ability valuable in many occupations.

A vocational curriculum is one in which the teacher will highlight the connection between classroom study and the learner's future in the world of work. In this respect, any subject is legitimately a part of the vocational curriculum if it makes that connection. For this reason, not only obviously work-related subjects will appear in the vocational curriculum: traditionally academic ones will be there too, though now for more utilitarian purposes. Being good at a modern foreign language means not only that you can enjoy reading the literature of another culture but that you can get a job with a tour company as a courier.

So the subjects taught within the National Curriculum can all be said to contribute to a vocational, *means-to-an-end* curriculum as much as to a content-based, *end-in-itself* curriculum, in that they contribute to a learner's chances in life after school of seeking higher qualifications or employment. Right from the early years of primary school, each subject builds part of that foundation of knowledge and skill which the learner will eventually need to become an earner.




Britain has traditionally favoured profession over trade, according higher status to subjects needing high levels of conceptual understanding and the ability to manipulate abstract symbolic systems than to those relying on manual dexterity and the skills involved in working with people (see note 7). The content-based curriculum was particularly effective at identifying those who would go to university and then serve in the Civil Service or the professions. Its great failing was that it left the majority of young people falling outside this elite, ill-equipped to face the future. They were rejected as the ‘failures’ of a system predicated on success only at the apex of the academic pyramid.

It became clear in the 1970s that one consequence of this socially-divisive education system was a skills shortage, which was seriously damaging Britain's economy. Many urged that the nation was falling behind its economic competitors because of the then education policy. Influential industrial and business leaders lost patience with an education system which taught subjects and skills exhibiting no discernible practical utility or market-place value, and which left the majority of school-leavers ill-equipped to find any worthwhile employment. Subjects in the curriculum came to be scrutinised, some for the first time, on grounds of economic relevance (see note 8). To serve the demands of a competitive economy, the Government wanted the education service to meet the needs of the work-place. Lacking in trust in schools and teachers, and believing that direct government action was the only way to save the situation, the Government withdrew control of the syllabus from the teaching profession, opening up the hitherto ‘secret garden’ of the curriculum, which by the end of the 1980s, they had nationalised.

The differences and overlaps between a curriculum principally organised around the content of academic subjects and one informed by the needs of the work-place have led to confusion ever since. Bringing clarity to the provision made for young people in the final two years of their obligatory schooling, and beyond, has remained a daunting task. The Tomlinson Report: *14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform* offered a comprehensive attempt to re-conceptualise the relationship between academic, subject-based and vocational work-related emphases in the curriculum (Tomlinson, 2004). Aimed at providing each young person with the preparation for ‘work to which they are well-suited’, the proposals in this Report linked common skills with a unified framework of diplomas, which ‘whatever the nature [of the learner's programme] would offer clear and transparent pathways through the 14–19 phase, and progression into further and higher learning, training and employment.’ This is very ambitious. If it were to succeed, it would help fuse the division, creating a curriculum and a qualifications mechanism according equal worth to both the academic and the vocational.

As Paul Hirst said: ‘there can be no curriculum without objectives’ (Hirst, 1974). We cannot understand the concept of a curriculum – particularly one



determined by central government – that does not recognise its potential to be instrumental in raising standards. When linked to assessment measures and the publication of results, rank orders and league tables, we can benchmark the curriculum, set learning objectives and assess its capacity to improve outcomes. In the hands of government, the curriculum thus becomes a powerful instrument for social, cultural and economic change. What happens, though, if we move in the opposite direction and instead frame a curriculum not around the needs of the economy but the personal needs of the learner? The third curricular type differs from the first two by being steered by the *processes* of learning. This is not an *end-in-itself* curriculum, in which acquiring knowledge is the main objective, nor is it framed by some external force (the economy, the league tables, the Government's policies) as a *means-to-an-end* curriculum. Instead, it centres on the needs of the child.


### The child-centred curriculum

The natural state of childhood is to explore and to question, to discover how the world works. And so the child-centred curriculum will be open and generous, beckoning the child to revel in a learning environment rich in detail, extensive in scope, nourished by a sense of wonder and excitement and free from limiting boundaries. It will lack the formal rigidity of timetabled lessons, being instead organically sympathetic to the growing needs of each child. In thus moving away from traditional teacher-centred classroom methods, it will be seen as progressive.

What we know as a species does not come naturally pre-packaged into subjects. These arrive later, superimposed for our own convenience. The growing child can find such demarcations false, confusing and frustrating of the urge to explore and discover. The child-centred curriculum will therefore be based not on subjects but around activity and topic as a means to prompt learning, for it matters more that a child learns how to learn than what they learn. There will be time enough for that later.

What is more, the serious business of play will be treated not as a distraction to learning but as lying at its heart. For it is through play that a child learns skills, knowledge and values, and about her or his identity in the world. It is particularly the learning process which engages us in this curriculum.

The child-centred curriculum is sometimes described as preparatory in its positioning of the primary-school child for more conventional, subject-based learning later on. Nonetheless, elements of the progressive, child-centred curriculum are often to be found among older learners too. Making discoveries, being encouraged to connect unexpected ideas, not being corralled within conventional subject-based stockades – these habits of thinking could as well describe famous inventors, explorers and university researchers as children in primary school.



In 1967, the Plowden Report put it like this: 'Underlying all educational questions is the nature of the child himself' (Plowden, 1967). The child-centred curriculum is all too easy for hard-headed Gradgrinds (see note 9) to dismiss as soft-centred romanticism. However, it has been a model of considerable authority for a long time, particularly in primary schools. In 1902, the American philosopher John Dewey, reflecting upon the 'fundamental opposition of child and curriculum', urged the 'need of sympathy with the child, and knowledge of his (sic) natural instincts' (Dewey, 1902). He sought their *rapprochement*, arguing that we should 'abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child's experience ... the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process.'

The child-centred curriculum has been criticised as an outgrowth of the 'trendy' educational progressivism of the 1960s and its apparently socially-damaging legacy. When the call is for more discipline in the economy, and higher levels of skills in the workforce, it is not altogether surprising that educational practices that apparently privilege the needs and demands of the child over those of the teacher are frowned upon. To be committed to *process* (how a child learns) in preference to *product* (what a child learns) offers, for many, too rarefied a view of what the education system is there to achieve. Furthermore, to be 'progressive' is to work in the opposite direction from those who would conserve. Some have seen the seeds of moral and social decay in progressive, child-centred experiments and as a consequence would actively resist a move towards a child-centred curriculum. When we consider Key Stages 1 and 2 in today's National Curriculum, we can clearly see a content-driven curriculum at work. With the later introduction of the National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategies, and most recently the Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2003), the primary curriculum is far removed from the one advocated by champions of progressive, discovery-based, child-centred learning and remains focussed on the acquisition and testing of knowledge.

Yet curriculum planners need to re-visit the Plowden Report, if only to remind themselves of the fundamental importance of the learner to everything we do for them and to them whilst they are at school. We cannot look ahead to a curriculum of the future that is neglectful of the needs of the learner.



## A learners' curriculum

*We need a curriculum that will prepare children and young people for the twenty-first century. We must therefore look ahead and try and anticipate the knowledge and skills base that will be required in the years to come. Some features of the future are with us already; ATL proposes that we build our future curriculum around these features.*

Contrary to the science-fiction image of a dark, dystopian future dominated by Big Brother, its people no more than small cogs in a remorseless, uncaring State machine, networks will emphasise individuality and the creative, enterprising potential of each person. Equally, they will enhance group identity, not replacing social contact in the real world but augmenting it by empowering people to be members of many additional groupings through the internet. Networks will empower people and with it, give them still greater responsibility for their decisions and actions than they have today. Finding and exchanging information, making and influencing ideas, buying and selling, connecting instantly to events anywhere in the world (see note 10), being open to many different cultural messages and moods, mixing genres and styles, habits and beliefs ... the networked global community is already with us and will continue to develop and grow.

### Networks

The characteristic organisational feature of the middle years of the twenty-first century will be the *self-managed network*, in fact it is already with us. As the American commentator Kevin Kelly tells us: 'Networks have existed in every economy. What's different now is that networks, enhanced and multiplied by technology, penetrate our lives so deeply that 'network' has become the central metaphor around which our thinking and our economy are organised' (Kelly, 1998). Networks will help people have the freedom and the responsibility to organise much more of their lives for themselves, at work as well as at home. Our curriculum will need to prepare children to find their place as active, responsible and capable members within many networks, for it is mainly as members of networks that they will wield most influence in the world. The technological manifestation of networks, the internet, is already transforming the world, making phrases like 'the global community' and the 'network economy' actually denote something real. It will have no less transforming an effect on our education service.



## **The curriculum and the nation**


Concepts of *nation-hood* will come to be qualified as individuals increasingly recognise their allegiances to many different groupings (of which Britain, for British people, may yet remain a powerful one – though not the only one) and so a *national* curriculum, as a construct aimed at cementing a national culture, will no longer have its original relevance. The network will, at the same time, allow people membership of small, distinctively-defined ‘tribes’ and citizenship of vast, globally-connected ‘nations’. Each of us will become a nodal point in many different networks, dropping in on some only for a day, remaining in others for life.

## **Schools**

Schools will be no exception. Grouping together across the network, as well as in the geographical locality, schools will increasingly come to share expertise and act as the focal-point for all: children, young people and adults alike. Schools will connect all who work and study in them to the world of knowledge and ideas, no longer metaphorically but literally, plugged in through the internet, supporting learners to maximal effect. But the traditional shape of the school day will change. Pupils will not always need to be in the same place at the same time to learn the same things: the network will permit learning at any time and in any place. School buildings will change too, making more social space available, and more networking facilities, so the classrooms of the future will look different to those we know today. New ways of teaching and learning will follow, making the school which animates this new curriculum an experimental, learning organisation, far more so than one reproducing the *status quo*.

## **Knowing and learning**

Knowledge will no longer uniquely reside in the heads of teachers, to be conveyed each lesson to their pupils, but will be perpetually available on the internet. The content-based curriculum, such as it is ‘delivered’ in schools (for it will be available everywhere), will have to change to take account of the ready availability of knowledge of many kinds. Subjects, where these remain important, will be in a constant state of flux. Barriers between disciplines will start to crumble, as subjects begin to blend and morph into new subjects. Teachers, eager to protect the status of their subjects, will nonetheless be asked to think anew, and to work alongside others from different disciplines; thus fresh alliances will be formed. More important than assimilation of particular bodies of knowledge will be



*intellectual approaches, ways of knowing.* Powers of synthesis and analysis will be needed and the ability to interpret, to be critical and to be able to navigate will be important attributes in the well-educated person of the twenty-first century. The experimental, contingent nature of knowledge in the school of the future will require learners to acquire qualities of thought and action, which will better prepare them to succeed in a world of fewer certainties and increased risks. Teachers will need to support children and young people in thinking and acting in new ways.


The *processes* of learning will be no less significant than the content learned. Value will be placed upon the development of individual responsibility in each child and young person, and the experience of learning will help animate and strengthen his or her capacity to make personal decisions, act upon them and assess their consequences. Learning will become negotiated rather than imposed. The curriculum, thus liberating schools and those who study and teach in them from conventional habits of thought and action, will become a progressive engine for driving social change as well as personal fulfilment.

### **Teachers**

Teachers will be there to support the learner in navigating across this vast expanse of knowledge and information, helping them to make sense of it and to apply it. The responsibility on them will be formidable, but it will be different in kind from their responsibilities today. Expertise in a subject will no longer carry the same importance for teachers as it does now, as subject experts from all over the world will be instantly available to each learner. Instead, teachers will be vital as *interpreters, critics* and *guides*; they will carry great moral, as well as intellectual, responsibility. They will also be needed as *curriculum designers*, as the network will signify a much more learner-centred curriculum in which each individual will study at his or her own pace, and in varying sequences, depending on need. Teachers will be there to help individual learners structure and phase their learning. The idea of a centrally-imposed curriculum, 'delivered' during a centrally-timetabled school day, will come to seem curious and quaint.

### **Work**

The occupations for which children and young people will need to be prepared will differ from those we know today. Our manufacturing industries have already shrunk as the information-based occupations have displaced them. This tendency will be more marked in the future as the network



amplifies the effectiveness with which people can work with information. Pupils will need to be educated to know how to find things out, to make sense of it and to put this knowledge to use in a wider variety of formats and for increasingly diverse functions. Young people will need to prepare themselves for occupations different from those we know today. A vocational curriculum which is too narrowly-focused on particular occupations will no longer be of any use. Instead, *skills of adaptability* will be needed, preparing learners to take on a wide variety of different occupations.


Work-place norms will change. People will enjoy greater autonomy and old stratifications will seem misplaced. Top-down managerial hierarchies will become anachronisms. Employees will be more likely than now to share responsibility for running their companies as participative, self-managed organisations – the prototypes are already with us. Professor Judith Chapman writes: 'Innovation will be perpetual and continuous. Knowledge-intensive organisations based on networks and teams will replace vertical bureaucracy, the cornerstone of the twentieth century' (Chapman, 2003). Children and young people will need to learn how to share in decision-making at school for they will be decision-makers when they go to work. They will need the skills to become innovators in innovative schools.

Bearing all these things in mind, how shall we construct a curriculum for the future?

### **A learners' curriculum**

Of course, learners must become knowledgeable and skilful while at school. They must have access to the widest range of experiences in the arts and the sciences, the visual image and the written word, the social and political, the psychological and the spiritual. All learners must be developed and strengthened. The mind, body and spirit must be animated and exhilarated by the experience of education. This can only happen if the curriculum grows out of its own time and as educators it is our job to prepare the ground.

We do not want a curriculum which encourages passive learning but one which centres on the active, exploratory, problem-solving, sense-making, decision-taking capacities we wish to encourage in every learner. ATL believes the kind of curriculum needed to prepare children for the world of the future is likely to be an experimental, progressive one, focussing at all times on the learner. It is the *experimental, progressive, learners' curriculum* which takes the most risks, looking ahead to a future more uncertain than



the others detailed in this publication. This curriculum shows the possibility of a school engaged in experiment, asking questions about its pedagogy as much as about knowledge itself, prompting both teachers and pupils to think afresh about the ways knowledge is gained and described, and doing all this with a view to making progress.

Teachers and learners will experiment together in constructing such a curriculum, constantly refreshing and renewing it. The growing power of the network offers drivers towards this curriculum, which are more shrewdly aimed at a recognisable future than those based simply on optimistic guesswork and an enthusiasm for breaking moulds. But break moulds it must. And it will.

- 1 In Scotland, a set of non-statutory guidelines reflect *National Priorities in Education* set out by the Scottish Assembly. In Wales (where education and the curriculum are controlled by the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff) all pupils must study Welsh as a core subject at all Key Stages, as well as learning the *Curriculum Cymreig*, which aims to develop a sense of Welsh identity. In Northern Ireland, schools may add curriculum elements appropriate to local circumstances (including the Irish language in Irish-speaking schools) as long as these have equivalence with the National Curriculum in England. Otherwise, schools in Wales and Northern Ireland currently follow a curriculum broadly similar to that in England.
- 2 Except those whose parents have decided to pay for their children to be educated privately, in which case there is no statutory requirement on the schools concerned, being outside the state sector, to teach the National Curriculum.
- 3 The exception was Religious Education. Schools established under the 1870 Education Act, supervised by local authorities, were required to include non-denominational Religious Education in the curriculum. The Education Act of 1944 provided for compulsory 'religious instruction' in state schools, with the right to withdraw. In 1988, Religious Education became part of the 'basic curriculum' though, as the only subject from which pupils can withdraw, it stands outside the National Curriculum.
- 4 In 2001–02, the QCA cost the country nearly £62 million even before its staff costs were taken into consideration.
- 5 In an age in which women were expected to stay at home and raise a family, a vocational curriculum ensured that they studied the skills of house-keeping and motherhood in 'domestic science'. The social situation is a world away from our own, but the principle is the same.
- 6 Before its present title, the *Department for Education and Skills* was called the *Department for Education and Employment*, enshrining in its name a clear view of what education is meant to achieve.
- 7 This has been partly for reasons of snobbery: a gentleman would not wish to learn the skills of the tradesman or artisan on his estate.
- 8 Giving rise, among the exasperated, to the complaint that those who would re-orientate the curriculum to meet the needs of the employment market-place knew the cost of everything but the value of none.
- 9 'Now, what I want is, Facts! Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life ...' thunders Mr Gradgrind at the children in the school room at the start of *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, published in 1854.
- 10 Even coming to influence them as they happen through the power of interactive networking.

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The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) is pleased to have worked with Mike Newby to develop this thought-provoking exploration of a curriculum for the future. *A Learners' Curriculum* begins with ATL's current policy regarding the curriculum and its assessment, and moves to a vision of an experimental, progressive curriculum with the needs and aspirations of learners at its heart. ATL believes that developing a learners' curriculum would engage teachers and support staff in experiment and in a debate about pedagogy and knowledge. This would not be a prescribed national curriculum, but one that would be constructed, refreshed and renewed by teachers and pupils in their daily work.

*A Learners' Curriculum* is a vision of the future where teachers are trusted as knowledgeable and skilled professionals, working, learning and reflecting collaboratively, to best meet the needs of learners.

ATL invites you to join the debate.

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