

In 2003 *Excellence and enjoyment: A strategy for primary schools* was published which appears to promise more autonomy for teachers over curriculum and pedagogy, and could be interpreted as signalling a change in the direction of government policy on primary education. It avows that “schools should feel empowered to develop their own rich and varied curricula” (DfES, 2003a, p.15) and that “a central message of this document is that teachers have the power to decide how they teach, and that the Government supports that” (p.16).

The impetus for the primary national strategy (PNS) can be explained by a growing sense of the failure of the standards agenda and a slowing down in the rate of improvement in literacy and numeracy (Brehony, 2005). At least some of this improvement was due to a Hawthorne effect (Earl *et al.*, 2003) whereby increased attention leads to improvement irrespective of the nature of the innovation, and it became increasingly obvious that the government was not going to meet its ambitious targets. By 2004 the extent of that improvement claimed by government was coming under close scrutiny and being challenged (Tymms, 2004; Richards, 2005).

As outlined by Brehony (2005), pressure for a new policy direction was coming from a broad coalition that was against the emphasis on testing and qualifications, seeing this as detrimental to the development of the creativity and innovation required of a globalised knowledge-based economy. Hence the PNS calls for schools “to take control of their curriculum, and to be innovative” (DfES, 2003a, p.16). Such a knowledge-based economy was also viewed by those with influence on government policy, such as the Specialist Schools Trust (now the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust), as requiring individualised learning linked to ICT and assessment (Clarke, 2003). The PNS thus declares that “learning must be focused on individual pupils’ needs and abilities” and that “assessment for learning is a powerful tool for making sure that learning fits individual needs” (DfES, 2003a, p.39). Teachers’ improved use of assessment is to be achieved through the provision of data including the information provided through the Autumn Package (now updated by the Pupil Achievement Tracker) sent to schools.

However, much of the text of *Excellence and enjoyment* is devoted to reiterating the familiar messages of the standards agenda because “testing, targets and tables are here to stay” (p.20). In the foreword Charles Clarke, the then Secretary of State for Education, claims that “enjoyment” derived from “excellent teaching” is “the birthright of every child”. However, for him excellent teaching means the achievement of high standards in literacy and numeracy which “gives children the life chances they deserve”. Thus the intention of the PNS is to enrich the curriculum but not at the expense of the standards agenda. The focus on literacy and numeracy should remain and gains be built on by “developing the Strategies still further, and not losing sight of important fundamentals like the value of discrete literacy and mathematics teaching through the literacy hour and daily mathematics lesson” (p.27).

The views of teachers

The PNS was generally welcomed by the teachers in our research as “a move

in the right direction to get rid of all this narrowness in education” and to “put the fun back” into the primary curriculum. Regarded as a response to the negative effects of an overemphasis on the NLS and the NNS, the government was also perceived as “panicking” because attainment in literacy and numeracy was no longer improving. Teachers believed that ministers were now attributing this to the lack of spark and creativity in teaching that was resulting in “a level playing field whereby highly talented teachers were being brought down” and able pupils “being held back”. Consequently, teachers’ perceptions were that the government recognised creativity needed to be brought back into primary education:

The strategies did focus people but it made them too compartmentalised. You knew what you had to do — you had to teach this, and this, and this, and you lost that flexibility and creativity. I think it's gone full circle. Creativity and flexibility are being valued now, and a lot of the constraints are being removed by the government because I think they've seen a lot was lost because of that. (Headteacher, 43, June 2004)

Curriculum change was regarded as vital to make primary schooling more enjoyable and to motivate both teachers and children. However, teachers had invested much time, energy and commitment into implementing the NLS and NNS and, as recorded in chapter two, these were widely perceived to have increased the effectiveness of teaching and improved pupil learning and motivation. Consequently, headteachers were concerned at the prospect of another major change of emphasis that might soon lead to the gains made being lost:

I hope we don't lose the rigour. Everything seems to turn doesn't it? You know, we were bombarded with, first of all, the national curriculum and tests, then literacy and numeracy, the three-part lesson, everything being very automated in our responses and the way we teach. Then the government saw that wasn't delivering anyway, so they thought, perhaps if we made it a bit more interesting. So now we've got the primary strategy and we've got to be all singing, all dancing. We don't want performance tables — we don't want the pressure of that — but we do need the rigour. (Headteacher, 196, Nov 2004)

The PNS covers school policy and practice in relation to innovation and the standards agenda, individualised learning, partnership with parents, leadership and workforce reform. Consequently its aims were viewed as “all intermingled”, “diffuse”, “wide-ranging” and “all encompassing” and therefore open to a variety of interpretations:

I think for everybody it means different things, doesn't it? Assessment is a big focus for us because it was one of our key issues and Assessment for Learning is one of these strands that is coming through the primary strategy and so those seem to fit really well. We are already promoting things like success criteria in lessons, assessment ladders and those kinds of things on a day-to-day basis. (Headteacher, 440, June 2004)

Schools already involved in their own or LEA-wide initiatives to develop breadth and/or depth in the curriculum or new approaches to teaching (eg use of whiteboards, “purposeful play”, the teaching of musical instruments and the role of emotional intelligence in learning) saw these as consistent with the recommendations of the PNS and appropriate to be classed under its umbrella.

Even if headteachers and senior staff were uncertain of its key messages and the implication for their schools, they were familiar with the PNS from looking through *Excellence and enjoyment* (DfES, 2003a) and attending local strategy conferences and/or regional dissemination events. However, teachers who had not been involved in such events were often unaware of the PNS, as the following two interviewee responses indicate:

Interviewer: *How much do you know, if anything, about the new primary strategy? Has it had an influence here?*

Teacher: *No. [Laughs] I don't know what...*

Interviewer: *What about Excellence and enjoyment? Does that mean anything to you or not?*

Teacher: *Excellence and... no, no [laughs]. (Jan 2004)*

Interviewer: *Do you know anything about the primary strategy?*

Teacher: *My mum works with the primary strategy but she's a foundation teacher. Is it to do with the PIPS and new assessment scale? It's a new planning scheme and assessment... It's not publicised, is it? But I've seen it — the front of it's stripey. (Dec 2003)*

“Freeing-up” the curriculum

The PNS was viewed first and foremost as heralding a “freeing-up” of the curriculum which enabled teachers to exercise professional judgement and sanctioned them to depart from government and LEA recommendations:

I think that it is really exciting because it is enabling us to actually get back to what we all feel education really is — the children and what is right for them. Not just somebody saying you have got to deliver this, and they will have it delivered whatever ... there are still some advisors in the county who are saying, “you teach the Year 3 literacy strategy to those Year 3 children and they have it!” That is irrespective of their special needs and they might want to be working at Year 2 level. (Headteacher, 144, June 2003)

It has now been said that it is okay to plan in some things which are going to provide enjoyment but will still promote excellence, but excellence in more areas, wider areas. It doesn't just have to be the basics of literacy and numeracy; you can push to have excellence in art and that kind of thing. Primary schools are about developing the whole child and not just a bit of them. (Headteacher, 250, July 2004)

You can be a bit more relaxed with the children and do things which don't exactly fit in with the QCA documents. They are not statutory anyway but I think you would be expected to follow them pretty closely. However, since this primary strategy I feel happier doing stuff that is not fulfilling targets all the time. (KS2 teacher, 33, Feb 2005)

When asked for an example of something that she would not have done prior to the primary strategy, the teacher quoted above described how, during a history lesson on the Romans the previous afternoon, she had given out scissors and paper and let the children make stand-up figures of Romans. A year or so ago she explained that such a simple activity would have had to feature on a lesson plan or even be formalised as a design and technology project, and subjected to the full design and evaluation process “which gets to be a bit of a bore”.

In a few interviews the PNS was also described as encouraging a return to the flexible and spontaneous teaching that took account of national/local events and children’s experiences and interests, also associated with “progressive” primary education:

More recently when I've done Excellence and enjoyment and I've seen other people speak who've been influential, they're actually saying "What did you do 20 years ago when it snowed? So why aren't you doing it now?" [re-emphasising the value of spontaneity in teaching] Because we were told that we had these objectives and we had to get these covered and it doesn't matter if so and so's had a new baby and mum's brought the baby in because it's not in my text that we're doing new babies. Whereas I think we're being able to be more creative again and having days out or weeks out to do a particular topic...We're going full cycle. (Deputy head, 220, Oct 2004)

As illustrated by the above quotations, the PNS tended to be understood as allowing departure from the approaches within the NLS and NNS. The teachers felt it permitted some freedom from government prescription as opposed to actively encouraging and promoting innovation and curriculum experimentation. As characterised by one head, it is “just trying to inject a bit of excitement — what we could do within the limits of what Charles Clarke set for us”. Perhaps for this reason some teachers regarded the PNS as “very thin on the ground” and a rather “half-hearted attempt” to bring back the creativity that they regarded government policy as having effectively quashed. However, it appeared to be a very important milestone in restoring teachers’ confidence and belief in their own professional judgement:

Deputy head: I think that teachers did go through a period of uncertainty as to what is right, what is wrong, and I do truthfully believe that some teachers, as a result of all the various initiatives we have been bombarded with, lost some confidence and belief in themselves. I feel it is only now that their confidence is being restored. We are well supported by all of the frameworks but now we are saying “that is good, that works, we will try that”.

Interviewer: What has brought the confidence back in your view?

Deputy head: Literally being given permission by advisors over the last year, messages from people who have seen how confined we have been by the rigidity of the frameworks — who have actually come out to school and to school meetings and said: “You have got this, you have got the structure, now use it as you feel....” (Deputy head, 391, Oct 2004)

Cross-curricular work

A major spin-off of the “freeing-up” of the curriculum was experimentation with cross-curricular work. The PNS served both to legitimise changes to the school curriculum that were already underway before the publication of *Excellence and enjoyment* (DfES, 2003a) and to provide a stimulus to try out new approaches. In a few schools it served to legitimise the topic approach they had already modified considerably to accommodate the national curriculum and the NLS/NNS but had never completely relinquished. However, in the majority of schools where the curriculum was comprised mainly of separate subjects, a move towards subject integration was approached with caution. Often such a move was influenced not only by a wish to help children appreciate the links between knowledge and skills in the various curriculum subjects, but also by a perceived need to provide more opportunities and relevant contexts for writing to improve the standard of pupils’ written work:

That is why we have moved this year from English and called it language across the curriculum and appointed someone. ... what we are aiming to do is keep the curriculum but look at putting some of the “Englishy” bits into the other subjects. So what we have got now is people linking up the literacy, the English and the history — for example, in the novel they are reading or the educational visit they are doing — then linking some of the geography into that. We are going back into the sort of thematic approach, but with structure. (Headteacher, 564, June 2003)

In other schools where the curriculum was taught as separate subjects, cross-curricular work involving a broader range of subjects took the form of variously labelled theme/project/topic days or weeks. During these the usual timetable was abandoned and practical activities on a theme, usually involving visits and guests to the school, took precedence. For example, one school had a project week — the week prior to the fieldwork — where each class chose their own topic focus for the week, including flight, Europe, living things and healthy living. As the deputy explained, “the project week was our first step to helping people to open up the curriculum and we’re hoping to develop that more next year, possibly by having two project weeks and encouraging people to make more links between the subjects”. More commonly, all classes focused on aspects of the same theme in such weeks, with multicultural or international topics, Europe and healthy living being recurrent themes.

For some teachers trained in the ‘60s and ‘70s the move to cross-curricular work had a lot in common with topic work. These teachers listened to younger heads and LEA advisors enthusing about the kinds of creative and practical activities that the older teachers had been accustomed to doing pre-national curriculum “with words like grandma and sucking eggs coming to mind”. For them the PNS provided “an excuse to go back” to such aspects of “progressive” primary education. This is a concept that has been variously defined (Jones, 1983) and also subjected by many policy makers to a “discourse of derision” (Ball, 1990). However, several senior teachers expressed considerable concern about such attitudes:

What does worry me is when I go to schools and people say, "Oh, we are going back to topic teaching" and I think "No, you are not". It is upside down topic teaching. You are not seeing an idea and weaving things around it any more. You have knowledge to impart and you find the best way of doing it. ... I do really think that is a message that needs to be put across to people. (Advanced skills teacher, 317, Feb 2004)

When the 50 schools were researched a decade ago, teachers were analysing existing topics to establish how much of the national curriculum programmes of study and attainment targets, especially the latter, were covered. When gaps were identified, the topic was modified to accommodate the missing subject matter. Where material could not be fitted in, it was covered in mini-topics and specific subject lessons (Webb, 1993). In "upside down topic teaching", as the AST characterised it, the process is reversed. Starting from existing schemes of work based on the national curriculum and the NLS and NNS, potential overlaps in knowledge and/or skills and meaningful links between subjects are identified and exploited. In the '90s, shortly after the introduction of the national curriculum, teachers considered subject integration to be the only way in which national curriculum coverage could be fully achieved. Interestingly, this was once again the case post-PNS even though, since 2000, schools were increasingly making coverage of national curriculum content more manageable by deciding which aspects of subjects, especially history and geography, should be touched on or studied in depth.

Cross-curricular work, which might reproduce elements of topic work, was regarded as a threat to rigour, particularly in terms of attainment in literacy and numeracy and to SATs results:

I mean we don't want to throw babies out with the bath water. My main concern is that we might end up — because people say "Oh right, we are going back to topic-based stuff" — losing the rigour. I have got to always think about the end point: that I want these SATs results and we need to keep a quality. (Deputy head, 580, Jan 2004)

However, as discussed in chapter 7, the majority of teachers accepted as valid the many criticisms made of topic work. They considered that the focus, structure, learning objectives and plenaries derived initially from the national curriculum and consolidated through the NLS and NNS greatly enhanced the effectiveness of their teaching. Consequently, it seems unlikely that these gains will be relinquished as a result of the recovery of the spontaneity, flexibility and creativity that had been lost in primary teaching over the decade.

Curriculum balance

Galton *et al.* (2002) found that "teachers are devoting 22.04 hours a week to curriculum subjects, 48.5% of this time being given over to literacy and numeracy" and as a result "art, drama, music and ICT are being squeezed" (p.5). They report that "in some schools, music typically is now allocated thirty minutes a week while elsewhere art is dropped altogether for Year 6 pupils until their tests have been completed" (p.5). There was a general consensus among the headteachers in our 50 schools that the PNS was emphasising the

importance of the foundation subjects and requiring schools to strive for a broader curriculum, with a better balance of subjects and more opportunities for children to study aspects of these in depth. However, the situation reported by Galton *et al.* (2002), whereby SATs are distorting the curriculum for Year 6 children, has not improved and from our data seems likely to have worsened:

Excellence and enjoyment is so important; it is what was needed for such a long time to actually give some teachers the freedom to deliver the curriculum in a more meaningful way again. It is difficult to do it when we push, push and push to raise standards for SATs results. What we try to do to address that is to have specific weeks in the summer term We have just had an arts week. SATs are out of the way now so we downed tools on literacy and numeracy and let's do some quality teaching in the arts. That is because those are things that go by the by and get shoved into a corner. (Headteacher, 190, June 2005)

After being "very much heads down and get on with it", the Year 6 children were provided with an exciting curriculum for the remainder of the summer term as they also had a week focusing on health and citizenship, another on wildlife working in groups with TAs and parents to develop the school's wildlife area, and opportunities to pursue additional activities in PE. However, rather than such weeks being grouped together at the end of the year to compensate Year 6 pupils for and motivate them after SATs, teachers would prefer to intersperse them throughout the year.

The blocking of some subjects to provide longer periods of time was also regarded as a way to provide in-depth work in the foundation subjects within the limited time available after timetable allocations to the core subjects. This was already practised by over half the schools and in others it was being introduced or extended to other subjects:

We'd already been blocking subjects, for instance for the first half term, it would be art and the next half term it would be DT...so we had three half terms a year on art, and three on DT. We've tried to add more first-hand experiences and we've tried to take the children out and have visitors in. For instance, in DT, in Year 3 we now have a gentleman who's been coming in for a couple of years to demonstrate packaging. He worked for a local packaging company, and he's worked up a lovely PowerPoint presentation for the children. He's got practical materials there and the children then get ideas for their own packaging and it's been extremely successful. (Headteacher, 212, June 2004)

A further constraint on extended in-depth treatment of the foundation subjects identified by headteachers was the lack of flexibility, confidence and ideas of teachers trained since the introduction of the NLS and NNS:

I am still trying to break down barriers and get people to actually look at subjects rather than it being a one-hour lesson every week. Like, for example RE which is so difficult to teach anyway when you don't actually have that belief yourself, but to actually go out to different places and say, "Right, well instead of doing an hour for the next six weeks we will just spend a full day on our RE. We will go to the mosque and we will explain everything first hand because the children learn so much more

from doing that rather than sitting there with a worksheet." It is retraining staff almost because they didn't know how to do that before; they didn't have a day where you did all RE or you did all art because you had to have your hour of literacy, your hour of numeracy and that is the way they have been trained. (Headteacher, 190, June 2005)

A few schools were also reviewing the structure of the school day in order to minimise fragmentation and to organise the day in more effective teaching periods, thereby creating additional lessons in which to teach the foundation subjects.

As identified in chapter 5, when lessons were covered to free teachers for PPA time, this cover time was also viewed as an opportunity to increase pupils' access to additional subjects, such as philosophy for children, and the foundation subjects, especially art, music and PE. This was particularly the case where schools were bringing in specialists to provide cover. For example, one headteacher explained that she employed a teacher for two days a week, who was a PE and science specialist and could teach those subjects in KS2 to provide others with their PPA time. The headteacher also employed a teacher who had taken early retirement but was returning part time to teach art as a specialism in KS1. While these "specialists" were also primary teachers, some headteachers considered it was likely they would use specialists who worked as sports coaches, musicians or artists, believing that their in-depth knowledge and enthusiasm for their area would be beneficial for the children and strengthen the subjects.

Personalised learning

Excellence and enjoyment states: "Every teacher knows that truly effective learning and teaching focuses on individual children, their strengths, their needs, and the approaches which engage, motivate and inspire them" (DfES, 2003a, p.39). If, as the government now calls it, "personalised learning" appears to be another aspect of the strategy that resonates with the child-centredness of primary progressivism, this is forcefully denied (Miliband, 2004). In *Excellence and enjoyment* personalised learning is based on assessment knowledge about individual children's progress and pupil self-assessment according to individual improvement targets. It underpins the inclusion agenda as "it will be the single most important force in mainstreaming (without diluting) the support that is given to pupils with special educational needs" (p.40) to try to tackle the resistant lengthy tail of underachievement, especially of pupils from areas of disadvantage. It is also intended to inform provision for gifted and talented children and those from ethnic minorities.

Since the '60s trying to cater for the diverse learning needs of individual children has been an ongoing concern for primary teachers, who have always found it extremely difficult (see Bennett *et al.*, 1984). A decade ago teachers in our 50 schools, while mainly differentiating work by outcome in terms of the speed of task completion, quality and quantity of work produced and the amount of help required, were using the national curriculum with its 10-level

framework of Statements of Attainment to set different tasks for small groups and individual pupils. As the complexity of differentiation grew, it was recognised as unachievable. The manageability of differentiating the curriculum to such an extent became increasingly questioned, with examples of practice in the Pacific Rim countries being cited to argue that delivering the same teaching to all pupils was both more effective and equitable (Reynolds and Farrell, 1996). Increasingly, setting was recommended as the way forward for catering for individual difference (Ofsted, 1998). While a decade ago only a few of the 50 schools were making limited use of setting, in the follow-up study in all but small schools it was commonplace for literacy and numeracy. Within sets further differentiation was achieved by the way in which the material was presented to pupils and the use of questioning. However, the challenge for teachers was undiminished:

You still have them all sitting there listening to you but almost invariably you have a teaching assistant who is there to help interpret what you are saying for the less able — but you are also meant to make sure they are all involved. So you would be asking an able child a very difficult question because you know she's very bright, and you'd be asking that child over there an easy question because you want to make sure they are on board and they understand what's going on. If you asked them the same question you've asked her, they will get lost. You are stretching her learning...while somebody over here is helping interpret what's going on for the less able. So you've got the differentiation. It's really sophisticated and complicated, what is expected to happen by one poor teacher who's doing this for an hour followed immediately by another hour on a completely different subject. So the primary strategy, if it introduces for us easier techniques for doing this, or easier ways of thinking this through, or training people so it becomes embedded in your consciousness, would be very helpful. (Headteacher, 249, July 2004)

The importance of addressing the needs of gifted and talented children accorded with the concerns of many teachers, who felt that the dominance of the NLS and NNS geared to the ability of the majority was detrimental to their learning:

I think a lot is lost on the very, very bright children. I think those are the children that lost out. We killed their creativity and their interest and their will to learn. But I think it's gone the full circle now and it's coming back, and there's more recognition for children to work individually. A lot of the homework now and a lot of the secondary work that I see them bringing back to me — some of the younger ones — it's encouraging that freedom to learn, that enquiring mind and the enquiring mind went out when everything...but I think we're coming out of that now and I can see that children are blossoming again. (Headteacher, 43, June 2004)

Tasks to promote independence, investigation and problem solving of the kind developed in the early years of national curriculum science were viewed as once again being valued by government.

Over the last two to three years the majority of schools had focused on teaching approaches that were promoted through school and/or cluster-based training (often led by consultants) and LEA initiatives taking account of the different ways in which children learn, and their individual learning needs. Most

schools concentrated on one or two of these approaches. However, the following extract from a headteacher's interview describes how her staff had explored, implemented and integrated those approaches that had proved to be the most popular among the 50 schools:

The first year we did one [whole-school staff away day conference] entirely about accelerated learning and introduced accelerated learning throughout the school, so we are looking at visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning.... Last year (2003), we had a conference about thinking skills so we have started to introduce thinking skills throughout the school, trying to make lessons more interactive so the children aren't actually fed information but use information for a purpose. To start off what we did was to have individual thinking skills lessons, so for the last year we've had an hour a week of thinking skills lessons. It got to the stage where we had run out of ideas, so we're now going to take some of the thoughts we've had about how to do thinking skills to encourage children to think within other lessons. And we're going to particularly extend it by thinking about philosophy: next week we're going to have another training day when we'll be looking at philosophy and how we can actually encourage children to ask questions in a more directive thoughtful way. We've also in the last year been involved in a creativity project led by the LEA so the children have been involved in drama, problem solving and writing creatively within history, geography, science and RE lessons. It fitted in beautifully with our looking at visual, auditory, kinaesthetic learning because that seemed to be the key to the whole thing — trying to find lots of different ways of teaching the same subject or the same topic to children in order to reach them because they aren't all reached the same way ... I'm fascinated by looking at the primary strategy, which we've just been shown in [the LEA] in the last term... it pulls together all these different initiatives because it is talking about different types of intelligence; it is talking about different types of learning. (Headteacher, 249, June 2004)

As the above illustrates, headteachers felt the primary strategy legitimised the increased use of such approaches as a way of personalising learning.

Excellence or enjoyment: an irresolvable contradiction?

For headteachers there was a tension between the government's drive for excellence through the standards agenda and the desire for schools to be creative and foster enjoyment:

I am not quite sure how all the recent government initiatives sit together. I think the target-setting agenda and the league table pressure don't sit comfortably with some of the ideas of bringing in enjoyment and flexibility and so on. Even though we have heard Mr Clarke say that schools can set their targets and local authorities will take those targets and aggregate them, and that will be the local authority's target. It doesn't fit with what I have seen in practice. The pressure this year was perhaps greater from the local authority than it has been in past years. (Headteacher, 580, Jan 2004)

The fixation on targets pressurised schools into concentrating on literacy and numeracy rather than reintroducing a broader curriculum with initiatives to promote creativity. But relaxing the emphasis on the basics and the achievement of targets was viewed by high achieving schools as a potential, and perhaps unwarranted, risk to their position in the performance tables:

It is a conflict between the two things. As soon as you start focusing on enrichment and enjoyment in the curriculum then to a certain extent in the short term the focus on adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, phonemes, word building, etc goes out the window a little bit. ... This school is very good at getting our children to do very well in tests and I think that it is a shame that is seen as important, but it is a judgement that is being made by Ofsted. We actually have to do some risk taking. We can move away from that and say, "well, we believe this is a better way" and the results may or may not go down. But, if they do go down, there is a consequence. So it is whether or not you can actually afford to take that risk and I don't think that many people want to take that risk. It is just, let's keep those standards up. Certainly the inspectorate is very, very keen to keep those standards high. We are quite a flagship school in some respects, I would say, and it is important that we keep results high year on and year out. I am not altogether sure that we can do that if we are addressing other more fundamental rights of children in terms of enjoying education. (Headteacher, 526, May 2005)

As claimed above, the judgements of Ofsted, whether perceived or actual, were crucial in schools deciding whether or not to make changes to the curriculum. Two schools inspected within the fieldwork period found that Ofsted showed less interest in the teaching of the NLS and NNS, and more interest in curriculum breadth and the foundation subjects than they had anticipated. Somewhat to the surprise of staff, the Ofsted inspectors also specified the need for those schools to incorporate more cross-curricular work into their planning. As one head stressed:

There has always been this phrase "what goes around comes around" and in educational terms everything goes in and out of fashion. You know the emphasis on concrete experience, on doing rather than learning, whole-class teaching ... in 30 something years you do see it coming and going around. I said [to Ofsted] what seems to be happening now in the primary curriculum — within five years you were told "concentrate on these things to the expense of the others" and now they are saying "concentrate on the others, but don't lose what you have learnt here". It seems as if the curriculum circle is only five years now. (Headteacher, 280, Feb 2004)

Certainly Ofsted (2002a) argues that schools which are successful in achieving high standards in literacy and numeracy can also provide a rich and varied curriculum that does full justice to the foundation subjects. Ofsted does not acknowledge that there is an irresolvable contradiction between achieving excellence and enjoyment. While at the level of rhetoric these two aspirations are complementary — and the 50 schools provided many examples of both excellence and enjoyment in their classroom practice — there was evidence of the daily tension experienced between the two. The interview and observation data showed the toll taken on pupil enjoyment and the primary curriculum by the government's narrowly focused, target-obsessed standards agenda.

Conclusion

The government denies that an emphasis on the basics is in conflict with promoting creativity and argues that they are mutually reinforcing. In the immediate future the emphasis on performance described in chapter 3 looks set to continue. As Alexander (2004) argues, the mixed messages coming from the DfES on the purpose of the strategy and the “doublespeak on professional autonomy” within the document reflect “a desire to be seen to be offering freedom while in reality maintaining control” (p.15). However, the perception by teachers that the primary strategy was giving them some freedom from government prescription and legitimating past and/or new ideas and practices that they value, appears to be playing an important role in boosting teacher confidence and self-belief, and restoring hope that in the not too distant future the government may put more trust in teachers’ professional judgement.