



Policy Study No 132

An Entitlement to Knowledge

Agenda for the new schools authority

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CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

Contents

Introduction	5
1. The Idea of a National Curriculum	7
2. Choice and Diversity	18
3. Where we stand: the National Curriculum in 1993	21
4. The Way Forward: the task for the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority	25

Introduction

The Conservative Government has now reached the most important stage in its reforms of state education. The Education Bill currently before parliament proposes the setting up of a single body to control examinations and the curriculum. The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority will replace the two separate - curriculum and assessment - bodies in place since the 1988 reform act. Unless the new framework allows for diversity and rigour in our schools, the government will have failed in its education reform. The continuous changes since 1979 have wearied teachers, and parents now want to see results.

The danger is that too uniform and rigid a framework for the national curriculum will nullify the diversifying effect hoped for, and rightly hoped for, from the other central element of reform - opting out. This pamphlet will show how diversity and curricular control need not be at variance, and how in fact we need both.

But they will be at variance if control of the curriculum means that more than half of the school teaching day is dictated by central government or if the government outlaws all examinations but its own even in respect of its own curriculum. In taking its last chance on the curriculum and examinations, the Government must show that it is seeking a minimalist curriculum, rigorous where it matters and rigorously tested; but a curriculum which makes no claim on every moment of the school timetable, and which does not dictate the manner in which it is tackled.

Under the 1988 Education Reform Act, two statutory authorities were set up, one to deal with the curriculum and the other to deal with examinations. Both authorities underwent various vicissitudes, and seemed at the outset to represent an uneasy compromise between the ideals of the old educational establishment and the reforming intentions of the Government. It may be that initially some such compromise was necessary in order to get the National Curriculum and national testing underway at all. At any event, it was not until 1991 when Kenneth Clarke appointed new chairmen to both bodies that a clear sense of direction emerged in either case.

AN ENTITLEMENT TO KNOWLEDGE

In the Education Bill currently before Parliament, the Government proposes to set up a single authority, The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) to deal with both curriculum and examinations. The authority will consist of between 10 and 15 members, including the chairman, all to be appointed by the Secretary of State, who will also appoint a (presumably separate) chief officer. Both Chairman and members of the authority will be paid for their services, although they will be subject to dismissal if they are deemed unable or unfit to discharge their functions.

In the White Paper preceding the act, the authority is charged with keeping the curriculum under review to ensure that it maintains both 'relevance and vitality' and with 'seeking rigour, simplicity and clarity' in testing and examinations. Further the authority 'will need to draw in particular on the advice of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, who will be an assessor to the Authority'. In the Bill, the Chief Inspector or a representative is entitled to attend any meetings of the authority or its committees and to receive its papers. So is a representative of the Secretary of State (ie. a civil servant from the Department for Education). Neither civil servants nor inspectors are to take part in the authority's decisions, as opposed to its deliberations.

It is now known that the Chairman of SCAA is to be Sir Ron Dearing, a former career civil servant and head of the Post Office, who has latterly had experience in running official bodies in higher education. It is much to be hoped that Sir Ron will continue the vigorous and independent-minded approach recently displayed by the curriculum and assessment authorities which was beginning to bear fruit.

Clearly SCAA and its brief will be central to the success or otherwise of the Government's reforms. In order to spell out what the brief for SCAA should be, the theoretical arguments for and against a national curriculum will first be considered, and the successes and failures of the curriculum as it stands will be evaluated. The paper will suggest that the overwhelming of diversity by curricular statute and the crushing of difference by mediocrity are not theoretical dangers only. The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority might become the Government's own educational Trojan Horse. Equally, SCAA could be the means by which we move to an education system which combines genuine diversity of schooling with rigorous standards for all our children.

1

The Idea of a National Curriculum

In the best of all possible worlds, it could be argued, there would be no need for anything like a national curriculum. A national curriculum is a nationally determined syllabus in one or more subjects of the curriculum, whether at school or for higher education. Under a national curriculum, the State, or some body acting on its behalf, decides just what should be taught and, ideally, learned. If the system is to be at all effective, then the actual performance of pupils and schools will be assessed against the national prescriptions, and some form of sanction applied to those who fail to meet whatever standards are regarded as the minimum acceptable. Thus individual pupils might be held back for a time and made to repeat the work. Schools and teachers whose records are worse than they should be will, in the last resort, be forced out of business.

It is certainly desirable that unlettered pupils and incompetent teachers and schools be effectively encouraged to pull their socks up. One result of having a national curriculum could well be the effective deployment of an instrument for doing this. When politicians are spending large amounts of our money on an education system, they wish to tell the rest of us that our money is well spent, and to devise means to assure us of this. Such a means could be a nationally and centrally determined system of curriculum and assessment.

Nevertheless, standards in education do not depend on the existence of either a national curriculum or even of a centrally determined system of examinations. In England and Wales, neither existed until 1988, and it was not always true that standards were universally low. Before comprehensivisation in the 1960's standards in grammar schools were high, though not enough was being done for non-academic pupils. It is a moot point whether comprehensive schools are currently doing better for the non-academic, than, for all their faults, did secondary moderns. In fact, a widespread belief that standards had slipped in the 1960's and 1970's from what they had been was one of the reasons for the introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act. This Act, for the first time in this country, gave the Secretary of State power over the curriculum and examinations. These powers do not extend to the

AN ENTITLEMENT TO KNOWLEDGE

independent sector, where economic pressure from parents remains remarkably successful in maintaining standards, and where the weakest schools very quickly and properly change or go to the wall. Standards in much of British higher education have remained high by international standards, again without any centralised control of curriculum or examinations.

So a national curriculum is not necessary to foster or maintain standards in education, even if, as will be argued, it is desirable in certain circumstances. But before elaborating what these circumstances might be, certain problems inherent in the very idea of a national curriculum must be considered.

Arguments against a National Curriculum

The arguments against a national curriculum are powerful. They are based on important truths, which must not be forgotten even if they are outweighed by the arguments in its favour.

Understanding the arguments against a national curriculum will enable us to formulate a conception of the national curriculum which is both more desirable and more realistic than it might otherwise be. The arguments against a national curriculum are based on two types of consideration, one to do with power and the other with knowledge. Both, indeed, will be familiar to conservatives and attractive to them, for they are derived from failings inherent in bureaucracy on the one hand, and from the autonomous and uncentralisable nature of knowledge on the other.

Bureaucracies centralise. They concentrate power. They often exacerbate the very problems they are invented to solve. They foster the illusion that with more power and more resources they can solve problems, problems which are often of their own making in the first place. Bureaucracies tend to serve their own interests or those of the producers rather than of those they are supposed to be serving. In the modern, largely collectivised state, far from being impartial servants of us all, bureaucracies tend to become weapons in a new type of war by all against all, in which interest groups strive to capture the bureaucracy and, by that means, some part of the bloated resources of the state.

That our own educational bureaucracy is by no means immune to the defects just mentioned is indicated by the fact that educational spending, per pupil, increased 42% in real terms from 1979 to 1991, without any discernible rise in standards: that in 1990 there were as

THE IDEA OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

many non-teachers employed in education as teachers (around 400,000); by the way in which special interest groups such as the race relations and equal opportunities bureaucracies, and the environmental and information technology lobbies managed to get well-recompensed footholds in education in the 1980s. Nor should it be forgotten how the teacher unions have wielded power and influence in educational policy, particularly, but not only when the Labour Party has been in power. They would do so again were Labour to be re-elected or were the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority to repeat what, according to Duncan Graham, its first Chairman, was the initial practice of the National Curriculum Council. This was, in Graham's words, to 'work closely' with teacher unions, and for them to suggest 'suitable names to serve on committees'.

It is hardly necessary to emphasise the way in which centralised control over the curriculum and examinations increases the potential for bureaucratic interference in education, and even for ideological indoctrination on the part of the government. For example, in the early days of the National Curriculum Council, ill-defined and often tendentious 'cross curricular themes' such as health and environmental education threatened to overwhelm an already over-weight curriculum (which, nevertheless, could find no room for the study of Latin or Greek, and which made it hard for schools who wished to pass on the ripest fruits of our civilization to find the space to do so).

Even if bureaucracies did not have ingrained in them a tendency to foster the interests of those who in one way or another manage to commandeer them, there would be no reason to suppose that they are the best or most efficient gatherers of information or wisdom. To the contrary, information which is widely dispersed among many individuals and groups is likely to resist explicit capture and formulation centrally. Even assuming efficient means of collection and dissemination of information (which in a bureaucratic system is unlikely as anyone who has worked in an office will know), the process of collecting and recording information lags behind itself and its own effects on those who give and collect it. This summary, moreover, is based on states of affairs which are now past, and, by the nature of the case, is unable to take account of what is happening at this very moment. Then again, the tacit wisdom vested in traditions and institutions is likely to evade formal capture in documents drawn up by bureaucrats. Finally, in a large society the agency collecting and

disseminating the information quickly becomes a player in the game itself, as, for example, the Treasury is in the economic sphere; and, as such, it will be no better than anyone else at surveying and calculating the effects of its own activities and decisions on other players.

Problems of these three types become magnified greatly when the information to be collected resides in individuals. Individuals react unpredictably to the transfer and reception of information and the greater the number involved, the greater the uncertainties and their effects. Arguments of the sort under consideration are most commonly deployed in explaining the failures of centralised economies to deliver what consumers actually need and want. The information needed to respond effectively and speedily to their demands is too dispersed and too unstable to be collected by or in a single agency. Nonetheless, if signals from consumers and producers are allowed to express themselves unhampered within the economy, there is some chance that individual entrepreneurs will anticipate and respond to particular demands, and some chance too that workers will respond to genuinely productive demands for their labours.

Although the arguments against the centralisation of knowledge are commonly applied to economic systems, they are actually quite general and abstract, and apply to any attempt to gather centrally knowledge and wisdom which is essentially dispersed. So they also apply to what is known within a field like education together with the component subjects making it up. Indeed, given that education is about the development of mind and minds, there are strong grounds for holding that free development and diversity must be encouraged if the whole process is not to stagnate. One ought indeed to be highly suspicious of attempts explicitly and definitively to capture the whole of what is to constitute 'good practice' in or the content of any subject of the curriculum. Much of what is involved in any form of knowledge is tacit or inexplicit, only half-consciously realised even by those experienced in it. As many writers on the subject have pointed out, this is true even in a field like natural science, which one might expect to be governed by explicit procedures. But this would be wrong; it has proved impossible to formalise the remarkably successful methods trained scientists follow in testing and assessing their theories. In addition, traditions of knowledge and expression develop and change all the time, according to the contributions and reactions of those involved in them. There is then no reason to suppose that any bureaucracy, however well

THE IDEA OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

intentioned, will be able to encapsulate all or even most of what one would want to transmit in education at any level, and plenty of reason to suppose that a bureaucratic attempt to do so will be stultifying and ultimately self-defeating.

Although there are dangers inherent in any attempt to prescribe centrally everything which should be taught or to map out in detail the whole school day, it does not follow that any conception of a national curriculum is flawed. What the dangers of bureaucratic growth and the limitations of centralised knowledge point to, is the desirability of conceiving any national control of the curriculum in minimalist terms. This, indeed is the crux of this argument.

Arguments for the National Curriculum

"This story shall the good man teach his son." In uttering these words before the Battle of Agincourt, Shakespeare's Henry V was not laying down an embryonic national curriculum in History. Henry's words certainly did not constitute an edict. Even though they may have been an important part of an exhortation to those as yet unbloodied on the field of battle, they were as much prophecy as exhortation to the good man.

In the best of all possible worlds a national curriculum might not be necessary. Or rather, there would be a national curriculum, but there would be no need to lay it down centrally and explicitly. Good men would know what had to be taught to their sons and the sons of others. If they were teachers, they would endeavour to teach it; if they were school heads they would see to it that their schools covered what had to be taught, as appropriate to the age and ability of their pupils.

This knowledge of what had to be taught would not, of course, be gained purely by intuition. Each subject of the curriculum is constituted by an explicit body of knowledge, some of which all practitioners would agree is central and basic. Indeed, without a consensus of this sort we would not have anything which can properly be thought of as a subject. There are, to be sure, bitter arguments about the canons central to humanities subjects. But, on analysis and beneath the extreme rhetoric academics are prone to, these usually turn out to be more about extending and revising the canons in various directions than about displacing Homer, Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare, Racine and Goethe from their pivotal positions in the literature of Europe. There are also continual discussions in every society as to just what an

AN ENTITLEMENT TO KNOWLEDGE

educated person in that society should know. But there exists in our society rather more of a consensus about this than many educational theorists are prepared to admit.

'Everyone... must be trained in mathematics up to a certain standard... in language... and some literature...to a certain standard... It is not enough to be able to speak [your tongue]... you must know some of the literature. And you ... must have the basic structure of science'. Would anyone, teacher, pupil, parent or taxpayer, seriously disagree with this statement? And would anyone feel that schools were doing a good job if, by the age of 16, something along these lines had not been achieved? And surely, as a basic entitlement for all normal pupils, we should also expect formal education to include some coherent and structured teaching about the physical world, about the history of their country and of the rest of the world, about the religion of their country and something of other religions too, and also about the creative arts.

These additions to the basic list (the basic list was proposed by Mrs Thatcher in an interview in *The Sunday Telegraph* 15 April 1990) are not arbitrary, but reflect fundamental aspects of our nature and of the activities involved. As self-conscious intelligent beings, who are also embodied in a specific place and time and endowed with feelings we have a history, and we have developed spiritual aspirations and artistic traditions. Our culture is articulate and literate, and we are not going to grasp much of its scientific, literary, religious and artistic traditions, nor of our history or geography without disciplined, formal initiation into these areas of knowledge and experience. In distinction to crafts and skills which are best picked up as practical pursuits, the acquisition of knowledge of science, mathematics, literature, history, geography, religion and traditions of creative art benefit from ordered, explicit, formal instruction.

Indeed, knowledge of our science, mathematics, literature, history, religion and traditions of creative art can hardly be envisaged without ordered, explicit instruction, of the sort found in a formal education. Passing on these traditions of knowledge and experience, indeed, is the main justification for compulsory formal education. With the odd caveat and addition here and there, most of the population of this country would agree that this might be expected from formal education up to the age of 16. Given that teachers and educationalists are also part of the population, and not generally unrepresentative of it, they might be expected to agree too.

THE IDEA OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

If there is (and was) a broad consensus on what education should achieve, why then has the principle of a national curriculum come to be accepted by so many people since Mr Callaghan first proposed such a thing in 1976 (and not only by those currently in government)? The answer is that even though there is a broad consensus about what ought to be achieved in formal compulsory education, too often pupils leave school without actually achieving anything like what is desirable. To put it bluntly, a national curriculum is seen as desirable in order to counteract the causes of widespread education failure in our schools and to lay out for every child what might quite reasonably be seen as his or her entitlement in school.

It is sometimes said by defenders of the educational status quo before the National Curriculum was introduced in 1988 that there was no need for an imposed curriculum of the sort outlined, because most schools and most teachers were already doing what it would advocate. But if they were already doing it, then, while a national curriculum might be otiose, it is not anything they need get very exercised about either, providing it sticks to minimal entitlements in various areas. There would, of course, be grounds to object to a national curriculum which, as the current one does, extends over most of what goes on in schools.

But, a minimal curriculum was and is desirable because, as it actually happened, the type of ordered initiation into bodies of knowledge and experience advocated here was and still is very far from universal in our schools. The School Inspectorate has reported year after year that 30% of lessons are unsatisfactory. Nor indeed was it easy for parents and others to find out just what was going on within the closed and often secretive and defensive world of education. Apart from anything else, having a national curriculum means that the public at large now has 'a clear framework setting out what pupils should know, understand and be able to do at each stage of their schooling', as the Government put it in its pre-election statement on education.

Before 1981, indeed, when local authorities were first told to develop curriculum policies, curriculum policy was entirely in the hands of schools, and neither local authorities nor central government had any say in the matter, although they did have a lot of say in the structure of schooling and, through the advisory services, in the appointment of heads and teachers. Were all well in schools, the ideal set-up might well be to leave the curriculum to individual schools, but by 1981 all

was very far from well. As one commentator from Scotland put it, while the best schools in England seemed to him better than those in Scotland, when it came to the worst (schools), 'I had never seen schools as depressingly poor. This was not because people were malicious but because of incoherent curriculums, a scattering of high profile eccentric teaching methods, and the totally soft-centered belief that children would learn if you left them to it, that children could somehow learn to read by osmosis.'

Thus Duncan Graham, reflecting on what the situation was before he became Chairman of the National Curriculum Council. What, in short, dogged and, to an extent still dogs, the state education system is not so much disagreement about ultimate aims. Teachers are not on the whole, malicious or insensitive, nor despite some well publicised examples, rabid extremists politically. The widely-acknowledged problems of under-achievement in the state system at both primary and secondary levels derive from a combination of child-centred teaching methods and professional defensiveness, even secretiveness about curriculum aims, far more than from malice or any desire to subvert our culture on the part of the majority of teachers.

Defenders of child-centredness maintain that their ultimate aim does not differ from that proposed here: that is, young people versed in the distinct forms of knowledge and experience enumerated above. The difference was simply method, and, the argument goes, a method based on real-life cross-curricular projects deriving from pupils' existing interests and experience was better and more stimulating than one more frankly didactic and subject-based. The trouble with child-centred teaching, though, is that in the first place, it is extremely labour-intensive. In normal circumstances, it requires special gifts on the part of teachers if it is not to degenerate in the way described by Duncan Graham. There is also the difficulty of conveying to either pupils and parents just what the specific subject content is which is supposed to emerge from a multi-disciplinary project on, say light or paper, a point continually emphasized in recent HMI reports.

Indeed, the whole gamut of practices which is associated with child-centred and child-relevant education has increasingly come in for criticism. Thus in 1991 Professor Robin Alexander's five year study of primary education in Leeds concluded that group work, thematic as opposed to subject-centred teaching, inquiry modes of pupil-teacher interaction and the practice of having different groups of children

THE IDEA OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

working at different times on different subjects may all 'subvert the quality of children's learning and frustrate teachers' monitoring of that learning'. The fruits of this subversion and frustration were amply demonstrated by the initial tests of seven year olds (also in 1991), which showed that around a third of those tested could, after three years of schooling, neither read, nor count to 100. Even by the end of primary school, a seventh of children are still functionally illiterate. Not surprisingly, when Her Majesty's Inspectorate visited French primary schools (also in 1991), which follow a subject-based national curriculum in formal, subject-based lessons, the conclusion was that 'French teachers provide a salutary reminder of a teaching method which many English teachers might reinstate for the benefit of their pupils.' (It would also be salutary, though unkind to ask HMI to examine its own role in leading teachers in England to drop formal methods).

In England, we were given a further reminder of beneficial teaching methods by the Alexander-Rose-Woodhead report on primary education in 1992. Stressing that teaching is not 'applied child development', the report emphasized that there are skills to be learned and subjects to be studied. It argued persuasively that to resist subject-teaching is to deny children access to some of the most powerful tools civilisation has devised for understanding the world. Indeed, in line with both the diagnosis and the remedy implied here, one of the most immediate and already beneficial effects of the ten-subject national curriculum has now been to get primary school teachers to begin to focus on subjects and content rather than on process and psychology, although as the HMI report on primary education of January 1993 shows, there is still far to go in this direction.

It is not, though, the case that secondary education is succeeding where primary schools have been failing. We are constantly assailed by reports of the innumeracy and cultural illiteracy of our school-leavers. At secondary level, in mathematics the lower half of our ability range is two years behind the corresponding section of pupils in Germany. The average Japanese 15 year old is better educated in maths than the top 25% of our 16 year olds. A recent sample of those gaining grade C at GCSE maths showed that many were unable to divide 360 by 5, subtract $\frac{3}{4}$ from 3, calculate a seventh of 28 or express .61 as a percentage. A significant number in the survey (including some who had got A or B grades at GCSE) thought that 48 was the result of

dividing 3264 by 8 -indicative, surely of failure both to master a basic arithmetical skill and to comprehend the quantities involved (reported in the *The Daily Telegraph*, 26/11/1992). These are surely strong arguments in all this for a rigorous national curriculum in mathematics, concentrating on the basics of the subject.

As far as cultural illiteracy goes, a very good indication of both its existence and its cause is given by the original version of the national curriculum for English. This syllabus in fact well illustrates the potential danger of a national curriculum which is extensive in scope yet soft on essentials. While it is true that some study of Shakespeare was required in it, no other author was required. Classic texts had to fight their corner with 'non-literary and media texts' (i.e. television, tabloid papers, teen magazines and the like). The curriculum waxed inanely about the 'richness of contemporary writing'. The teaching of grammar and phonics played no significant role in the curriculum. This curriculum clearly reflected existing practice in secondary school English teaching to a large extent, a practice which led to A-level examiners reporting on one occasion that 'it is frustrating to read scripts from candidates who are clearly sensitive to language but who are unable to describe its features', and which also led to a GCSE board putting *Neighbours*, *Coronation Street* and 'Allo 'Allo on an English literature syllabus. Not surprisingly, when the Government did produce an impressive and representative literature anthology for 14 year olds, covering many literary genres and types of writer from Chaucer to the present day, it was attacked by the self-styled National Association of Teachers of English for being 'stale' and 'unimaginative' in its choice of works.

That real staleness and lack of imagination characterise opponents of literary teaching is illustrated by the following letter which was published in *The Independent* on 12 January, 1993:

I see that some teachers believe compulsory Shakespeare will "kill the enjoyment of literature". Last year I sat GCSE English. I studied no Shakespeare except for one sonnet, which I did out of choice. Instead, nearly all our books were written for teenagers and said so clearly on the back. Far from enjoying this, I found it patronising, boring and impossible to study. I wrote a longer and better essay on a 14-line sonnet than on a novel for teenagers. If teachers will not let us read Shakespeare, the Government is right

THE IDEA OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

to enforce it. All my friends agree that Shakespeare is more enjoyable than what we read.

Emma Hobbs, Old Cwmbran, Gwent

So much for the claim that Shakespeare has always been on the curriculum in some shape or other. The truth is that in the world as it is, a national curriculum is necessary if we want to ensure that no pupil is betrayed, bored and patronised by pedagogical fashion, but each is given what he or she is minimally entitled to.

2

Choice and Diversity

The arguments, therefore, against a national curriculum, rest especially on the disadvantages of centralisation and bureaucracy and the corresponding value of difference, initiative and innovation. On the other hand, as suggested in the preceding section, there is a real need to protect the public - pupils and parents - from corporate professional failure on the part of the teaching profession.

Parents already have an important weapon in their hands, a (limited) power to choose schools. Schools, too, can now opt out of local authority control and develop in their own way. But power to choose between schools is not the whole answer, if all or most schools are dominated by one particular form of educational thinking. If they have no room for manoeuvre on a centrally determined curriculum and which takes up all the available time, schools and teachers will be reduced to the role of franchise operators. Equally, from the other point of view, diversity and choice on their own, with no countervailing check, could lead to the formation of schools with inadequate and even socially divisive curricular. Thus, while equity demands that Muslims, say, be allowed to set up their own state-supported schools in the same way as Catholics or Jews, it would be right for the Government to support such schools only if they gave an education which, while Islamic in ethos, nonetheless reflected the fact that it was being given to British children in Britain (as, indeed, did my education in Catholic schools). This may, of course, be a big if, and while the Government rightly wishes to encourage diversity in education, it must remember that it has an important duty to ensure that all children in the country have access to those forms of knowledge and experience necessary for them to lead reasonably fulfilled lives in this country as it is. This a duty which has to be balanced against the equally important need to allow genuine diversity in education.

In 1859, in a famous passage in *On Liberty* John Stuart Mill wrote: a general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another..... (and) in proportion as it is efficient and successful, establishes a despotism of the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body.

THE IDEA OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

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CHOICE AND DIVERSITY

There is no doubt that some countries and some régimes have seen education in these terms, and have implemented the vision with varying degrees of success. Socialist thinkers and socialist education authorities in this country have not been entirely immune from so despotic a temptation, either. Nevertheless and thankfully, the state in this country has not generally seen education as an instrument of indoctrination. While the presumption has reasonably and rightly been that British history and English literature should play a central role in education in our schools, there has never been any governmental attempt to define the approach to be taken to these subjects on ideological grounds. Even in the National Curriculum, all that has ever been insisted on are the entirely reasonable demands that the history syllabus should cover the broad narrative flow of British history and that children gain acquaintance with some of the universally recognised classics of their literature, although there is still too much overcrowding with inessentials.

The two questions, then, are first whether in the end the state can fulfil its duties regarding education without having some say over the curriculum, and, secondly, whether it can have its say over the curriculum without becoming despotic.

As to the second question, despotism may be avoided if the state does not itself specify the manner in which the material of the curriculum is addressed. Despotism certainly would be practised if the state itself laid down 'politically correct' ways of handling given subjects. But whereas local education authorities have sometimes done this, central government has never done more than insist that extreme bias be avoided in teaching.

As to the first question, Mill himself admitted that a duty was owed to children. In this case, the state has a clear and correctly named duty of paternalism. While parents have the first duty in respect of education, the state has to protect the interests of those children whose parents fail. (Mill himself wanted parents who failed to educate their children fined). But in admitting that the state has a duty to see that parents educate their children up to a certain standard, Mill is implicitly admitting that the standard itself has to be agreed by the state. And this implies validation of public examinations in at least a tacit form and, by extension, oversight of curricula.

What we have to do here is to reconcile a number of apparently conflicting demands: the need to allow diversity in education with that

AN ENTITLEMENT TO KNOWLEDGE

of giving each child its educational entitlement; the consequent need for some state control of education against the disadvantages of centralisation and bureaucratic control; and finally the harmonising of parental and governmental responsibilities in the whole area of education. Bearing in mind the existence of a powerful, and not always well-directed professional interest in education on the part of educationalists and teachers, governmental imposition of a basic national curriculum which still allows schools and parents plenty of scope for choice and diversity among schools is a reasonable solution. In proposing this solution, though, there must be safeguards against a curriculum which stunts diversity by imposing too much on schools and teachers, and also against one which fails to safeguard the interests of children and parents, either by prescribing too little or by tamely accepting so-called 'professional' advice against the interests of individual pupils and parents and the community at large.

Where we stand: the National Curriculum in 1993

The National Curriculum, as it currently exists, has had some success. Despite initially and misguidedly allowing four non-statutory cross-curricular themes on to the curriculum, it has helped to stop the growing movement towards a curriculum based on tendentious themes rather than on subjects. Particularly in the area of primary education, it has helped teachers and others to focus on the content of what is taught, and also on the fact that learning in our culture is not a seamless web, but most efficiently transmitted when split up into discrete subjects, which have developed over time, each with its own content and methods. In getting primary teachers to focus once more on content and subjects, it has also exposed the weakness of group work and mixed-ability teaching, to such an extent indeed that in December 1992, an HMI report stated that 'it is increasingly clear that schools will have to reconsider their ways of grouping pupils, both within classes and across age groups'. In other words, after years of moves towards enforced equalisation within education (aided and abetted by the Inspectorate, it has to be said), the National Curriculum definitions of what is to be expected from pupils at particular stages in their schooling have pointed to the need to differentiate between pupils in terms of their ability, and to select accordingly.

None of this should be underestimated as an achievement in the world of British education, which has an inbuilt reluctance to grade and select pupils. Nonetheless, there is a lot wrong with the curriculum as it stands. This is certainly the case in the way it has moved to prescribe in greater detail what and how teachers should teach, rather than leaving them free to build on experience and success.

If creativity, diversity and individuality are to mean anything in education, a centrally prescribed curriculum cannot fill up much more than half the time children spend in school. Certainly, it cannot or should not prescribe the 80% or more of the school day which the current National Curriculum is said to fill; not only does such an over-loaded curriculum leave no room for diversity, it may also lead to a

lowering of standards by cramping the freedom of academic schools to pursue specifically academic subjects different from and beyond what is contained in the set curriculum. Nor does it seem sensible to ask primary teachers to plan and assess and report on 450 or so separate 'statements of attainment.'

In its advice to the Secretary of State for Education in January 1993, the National Curriculum Council itself spoke of the need to reduce the curriculum in each subject to 'an essential core of knowledge'. The current national curriculum orders do not 'focus clearly and sharply enough on what is essential ... the inevitable consequence of this failure to identify an essential core is that teachers ... are failing to produce work of sufficient depth'. By contrast in some parts of Germany, where there are many examples of work at various levels of greater depth and breadth than in England, it is stipulated that their National Curriculum orders should be coverable in 25 weeks in the school year, leaving a good third or more of school time for other material and other subjects. HMI reported in January 1993 that many teachers and heads in this country are convinced that teaching the national curriculum properly will take up all the available teaching time. This may not be true, but even if it is not, it should be made clear that the National Curriculum is not intended to take up any more than 50% of school time, and should not do so.

A highly detailed and extensive curriculum not only reduces scope for diversity within and between schools. It also is more likely to be wrong and, once the government has put in place an approved curriculum, if it is wrong, it can make the situation worse than before. Whether the situation is actually worse or not may depend on particular cases, but - and this brings us to a second line of difficulty - there are a number of specific defects with the current curriculum. This paper has already mentioned the way in which in English essentials are passed over in favour of a welter of inessentials. Primary school science and, to a lesser extent, mathematics contains a lot of very low level problem-solving work of dubious value even at the observational level. Science, in any case, is not a matter of unfocussed observing, but it is concerned with explanation and theory within a background of accepted knowledge which young children cannot find out for themselves. The technology curriculum has to make up its mind whether it is to focus (wrongly) on child-directed attempts on the part of even the youngest pupils to solve ill-defined problems, or whether it is to concentrate on

WHERE WE STAND

the study of designs and techniques of proven worth, giving pupils the materials necessary for the designs and practice in the techniques. Amazingly, even in the current revision of the technology curriculum, less than one third of pupils' time is to be devoted actually to making things, surely something which fails those pupils who, though unacademic, are still good with their hands. Then again, although, after a long struggle, 'knowledge' is now admitted as a crucial part of history, far too much stress is still given to the study of historical interpretation and of the use of sources, which are aspects of history likely to elude any but the already well-informed.

The original National Curriculum was an uneasy compromise between the ruling child-centred approach to education and an attempt to define the essential content of the various subjects. The result was that in many areas a great deal of inessential material was included, often indeed at the expense of basic knowledge. A significant indication of the sea-change being wrought by the National Curriculum, though, is provided by the fact that both the Secondary Heads Association and the National Association of Head Teachers continue to criticise the concept of a subject-based curriculum, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that only a subject-based curriculum has any hope of being both rigorous and limiting itself to the essentials.

The harmful influence of current educational orthodoxy was not confined to the curriculum. Child-centred problem-solving and project work is not only time-consuming and of dubious value in itself, it is also hard and slow to assess. The original national tests for seven year olds were apparently designed to be as unlike rigorous tests as possible, being given to small groups of children by their class teachers during class time (over a month or so). Tests for 14 year olds were also to be teacher-assessed, and there will be great teacher resistance to short externally set and moderated examinations - as there has been to the government's decision to limit the amount of coursework in the GCSE. Yet, as the National Foundation for Educational Research has recently confirmed, internal assessment is almost impossible to moderate nationally; moreover coursework is open to all sorts of abuse, and there continues to be an unacceptably high degree of subjectivity in determining the test results for seven year olds. The obvious solution to these problems is to set short and simple unseen national tests, based on the limited content of a revised national curriculum, itself shorn of the inessential and the subjective. Many in education will doubtless

AN ENTITLEMENT TO KNOWLEDGE

complain about the "mechanistic" nature of this proposal, to which the answer is that neither the proposed curriculum nor its associated tests are intended to cover everything. While both curriculum and tests will leave plenty of time and scope for the creative teacher to teach imaginatively, imagination is of little value in the absence of a core of knowledge.

As well as being bloated, the original national curriculum was saddled with a complex ten stage model of progression (the TGAT model), supposedly applicable across the whole curriculum. In fact, the model was not in the end applied in the case of Art, Music or Physical Education. Nonetheless, while it is important to define progression through a subject, there is well-nigh universal agreement that the TGAT model is not the right way to do it for all subjects. It is well-known that in the history curriculum, qualified historians have been unable to distinguish correctly the order of tasks of supposedly increasing difficulty. In addition to thinning the curriculum down, the applicability of the TGAT model to specific subjects should be re-examined. It is indeed very largely adherence to the TGAT model which makes reporting on achievement in national curriculum subjects so unnecessarily onerous to teachers, who in this respect at least have good grounds for complaint.

The Way Forward: the Task for the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority

The setting up of SCAA clearly represents a considerable concentration of power in the hands of its Chairman and 14 members. One could, indeed, imagine a worst-case scenario in which SCAA combines with Department for Education officials and the Inspectorate to impose a single and all-encompassing curriculum and form of assessment on the whole of the maintained sector of education, and so stifles the emergence of the diversity and independence which the Government rightly wants to encourage. For some of those who have sat on Government advisory bodies on education, very little imagination is needed to fill in the details: lay members of some of these bodies have sometimes felt overwhelmed and outmanoeuvred by interventions at their meetings by a combination of departmental officials, HMI's and officials from Wales (who are also to be entitled to sit in on SCAA meetings and receive its papers). It is also noteworthy that while the Department for Education and HMI officials are entitled to receive SCAA's papers, and to sit at its meetings and those of its committees, there is no reciprocal arrangement whereby SCAA's Chairman or members are party to DFE or HMI papers and deliberations. One does not have to be too cynical but only a little knowledgeable in the ways of bureaucracies to read some significance into this.

The Government's education policies have reached the crossroads of their development. There are, this paper argues, two strands to the policy. There is the centrifugal tendency, encouraging parental choice and responsibility, competition and differentiation. Then, to rein back irresponsible diversity and to guard against bad schools and professional conspiracies there is the centripetal tendency. The manifestation of the centripetal tendency is the National Curriculum and national testing.

Both tendencies are necessary, but they need to be kept in balance. The danger inherent in the bureaucracy emerging from the centripetal strand (SCAA, in other words) is that it will effectively smother

AN ENTITLEMENT TO KNOWLEDGE

diversity. It need not do this if it conceives its role in minimalist terms and if it has the strength of purpose to stick to a minimalist brief and to resist the calls for greater concentration of power which will inevitably come even sometimes for the best of motives from departmental officials. In a way the situation here is similar to that of the free market itself. The market needs strong central government to set and uphold the framework for its operations, and to ensure fairness in its workings. But it does not need - indeed, it will be destroyed by - comprehensive and interfering government. Similarly, in education, the Government needs to set a framework to protect individual pupils and parents, and to ensure their entitlements. But it and its agencies will stifle the growth the framework is supposed to allow to flourish if it moves away from minimalism and from the 'rigour, simplicity and clarity' of the White Paper. The Government may do this for the best of intentions, so as to close all loopholes through which bad teachers and schools may escape. But it should remember that not all abuses can be cured by statute, and that in introducing comprehensive statutes it may kill the very thing it wishes to encourage.

The creation of SCAA, then presents both a danger and a challenge. The danger is that it will become an ever-growing, centralising and imperialistic bureaucracy. The challenge is to become a new type of bureaucracy altogether, one which self-consciously limits itself to its central function, one which - let us say - actually practises the doctrine of subsidiarity. Of any proposal before it, it should not ask whether it might be good if it were enacted, but rather whether it is any of its proper business to do so. On the curriculum the Chairman and members must restrict their ambitions to specifying the essential content, that to which any child in this country should be introduced but which should not take up more than half the time allotted to any subject.

This will not, of course, be easy. It is far easier to do what has been done, that is to produce documents full of jargon and waffle, and far less contentious. But once the principle of a National Curriculum is granted, if the thing is to have any bite, decisions on content have to be taken. As we saw in the case of music and are currently seeing in the case of English, battle lines will be formed between those convinced that education is a matter of introducing children to the best that has been thought and done, and those who would patronise and ultimately bore them. So specifying the minimal content of the curriculum is in

THE WAY FORWARD

no sense an uncontentious task, even if the sting of some criticism of any attempt to do so may be partly drawn if it is clear that the minimal curriculum still leaves plenty of time in school for other things, even for pop music and teenage fiction, were any schools misguided enough to introduce them and provided parents were able to choose other schools which did not.

On examinations, SCAA should ideally confine its brief to the simple validation of tests concerned with the implementation of the National Curriculum. Before 1988 there did not exist national tests at 7, 11 and 14, and, given that these are crucial stages in schooling, there are strong reasons for having public tests at them, so as to compare the performances of pupils and schools. There is also something to be said for SCAA setting clear, rigorous and simple exams at these stages, as presently being developed by SEAC, the body currently in charge of examinations. But it should not act as a monopoly provider, outlawing any attempt on the part of other agencies to enter the market in setting and marking examinations. It should, where appropriate, be ready to validate examinations other than its own where they satisfactorily cover and assess the national curriculum. There is always the possibility that other examining agencies might set better examinations than SCAA, or ones which reflect different, but nonetheless valid approaches to the requirements of the National Curriculum.

Where independent examining agencies already exist, SCAA should be prepared to endorse their examinations when their syllabuses do include the content of the curriculum. In effect, this is what now happens with the GCSE, which is set and marked by autonomous examining boards.

Rigour and simplicity imply that the tests will be externally set and their marking externally moderated. Inconsistency in applying standards is endemic in tests which are internally set and marked. Having short, objective paper and pencil tests is not only more accurate and objective; it is also far cheaper and less time consuming than internal teacher assessment. SCAA should ensure that any examinations it is involved in are clear, objective and to the point.

SCAA should certainly not take it on itself to chip away at 'A' levels, as prominent educationalists are continually urging. If SCAA is to involve itself in post-16 education, it should concentrate its efforts on the neglected but necessary task of assuring the content and quality of vocational and sub-academic qualifications, rather than in attempting to

AN ENTITLEMENT TO KNOWLEDGE

undermine an examination which is both rigorous in itself and an excellent predictor of those who are capable of undertaking honours degrees in universities. Indeed, SCAA might well turn its attention to encourage the development of genuinely vocational schemes of study from the age of 14 upwards. Although our education system does fail the more able in its endemic tendency to equalise and to cramp the ambition of the best, its failure is, if anything, worse when it comes to the non-academic. By the age of 14, many pupils have shown that they have neither academic ability nor, more important, motivation. Where they might well profit from genuine apprenticeship work, it does them no favours at all to insist that they follow a watered-down academic curriculum which allows them little scope for the practical. A curriculum for the less academic which focuses on practically-based work from the age of 14 upwards might nonetheless contain a leavening of the gentler arts. Indeed a scheme of work in which the less academic can develop non-academic talents will actually contribute to their self-esteem, and this may well spill over into their academic work as well.

The bureaucratic imperative is always to unify and to homogenise, but where education post-14 is concerned, specialisation and differentiation are clearly desirable and will in one way or another happen anyway; this should be reflected in a broad diversity of both courses and examinations for different types of subject-matter and different levels of student ability.

SCAA is to have the duty of advising on examinations, but it should not construe this duty as imposing a single scheme of examinations on every part of the school world at any stage, or, even less as setting all examinations itself. Rhetoric about the classless society should be construed not in its collectivist sense of imposing the same on everyone, but in the benign sense of treating all types of pupil with equal concern and respect.

SCAA's duty under the Bill is to keep the curriculum and examinations under review, and to advise the Secretary of State on both curriculum and examinations. It is a body which is assumed to be separate from both the Department for Education and the Inspectorate, although expected to keep in touch with both. But the intention in setting up SCAA as a separate body is clearly to make recommendations to the Secretary of State independently of either the Civil Service or of educational professionals. As standing mid-way between the Civil Service and the educational profession, on the one