

## The New Curriculum

*'While we're at it, let's rethink the school curriculum. Our young people should be taught entrepreneurship, and to think creatively – young minds must be opened and fired up, not turned off, as many students and teachers are, by a dull, dirigiste curriculum. Our universities, too, need freeing up to be the powerhouses of the regeneration. Much more should be made of our unique national history, especially in schools. As part of learning British history, children should also be taught to feel proud of our extraordinary nation and its values, of which they are a part.'* Sir Anthony Seldon, December, 2018

*'What is the point of trying to train up the 40% of underperforming children from deprived backgrounds in Britain when there is no evidence that they are capable of making the grade? If 3.5 million children have left school since 1999 without even a C grade in Maths – as Conservative research suggests – could that be because they are being taught academic subjects that they lack the ability to absorb? And if we really want to raise national standards, would it not be more effective to concentrate on those children who show an inclination to learn?'* Magnus Linklater (i) Times February 4, 2009

So what will this new curriculum designed to inhabit a new paradigm look like? We can start by asking where did the old curriculum come from and what was it a response to? Has anything changed? Of course, we might answer. We live in a different world, amidst an information and technological explosion unparalleled in our history, one capable of transforming our species. So how did we end up with this '*dull, dirigiste curriculum*' that we are currently hostage to? To what extent is our education modelled on an economic model that is either (a) out of date or (b) there to perpetuate a system predicated on different values, principles, goals than we now espouse?

And having started by asking questions, how should we take the curriculum we have and reshape it, not subject by subject, but by dramatically increasing and personalising our offering and the

means to do so? And in doing so, how do we ensure that we don't end up placing children in hierarchies based on exam results and on a narrow measure of ability rather than tapping into ability in a wider, non-biased way? And how do we recognise and reward people not on academic achievement, but on actual achievement? After all, our world is under the throe of people who have had the benefits of an independent school and Oxbridge education and yet whose lives appear predicated on profit and self-interest. Is this what our education is about, at its best?

Of course, I disagree with Linklater even accepting he is being disingenuous to make a point in one fundamental issue. This is his use of IQ or the results of our current examination system to denote intelligence. By doing so, we are ignoring the fact that the weakness of the definition resides in our misleading and narrow measure, which is not of ability, even intellectual ability, but only of what can be achieved by applying intelligence to a formalised learning and testing that is so restricted that creative or off-piste answers can be heavily penalised. Exams then don't become measures of what can be achieved, but something more nebulous with a dangerous corollary that such judgements are used to set and manage expectations and preserve a failing status quo. For too long, exams have driven education and the content is there for selective schools and universities to help sort the wheat from the chaff. Except they don't really know which is which, except by their own limited criteria. What they measure is a level of applied intelligence to a prescribed body of knowledge that is arguably less useful and less productive than other abilities which go unnoticed. That's all.

Whenever we are faced with attempts to redesign the curriculum there are two adages that come to mind. The first is 'anyone can tell me what's wrong. Who can tell me what's right.' The other is 'don't tear something down without the wherewithal to build it up again.' I'm mindful of both.

Before beginning it may be useful to define what we are writing about and where better to start than with Professor Mark Priestley's recent article (January 2019) entitled 'Curriculum: Concepts and Approaches' that offers us the following definitions:

- *Curriculum* – an umbrella term denoting the totality of the learning experience of children and young people in school. Considering the curriculum would thus include the questions of what, how and why listed below, as well as assessment (evaluation).
- *Curriculum purposes* – statements of what the curriculum is intended to achieve. These include narrowly defined outcomes or objectives, and more broadly defined aims or goals. This is the why of the curriculum, and is often (but not always) made explicit in official documents that comprise the curriculum framework.
- *Curriculum framework* – the documents that outline the structure of the curriculum and its purposes. This also usually includes and the content to be taught – the what of the curriculum.
- *Curriculum provision* – the systems and structures established in schools to organise teaching, for example timetabling. This is the how of the curriculum.
- *Pedagogy* (often referred to as instruction in the literature, especially American writing) – the teaching strategies and learning activities planned to achieve the aims and fulfil the planned framework. This is also the how of the curriculum.
- *Assessment* – the methods used to judge the extent of students' learning (e.g. tests, homework, observation). Assessment might be used formatively (to provide feedback to learners to inform future learning), summatively (to provide a grade) or evaluatively (to judge whether teaching has been effective).

With this framework and similar examples in mind, what follows can realistically only provide a framework, focusing mainly on content and provision, the why and the how, although it is inevitable that it will include reference to pedagogy and

assessment. After all, this page, this website, can never be more than a beginning, an attempt to identify a new paradigm of education and some suggestions as to how it should be inhabited

## **A New Curriculum**

### **(a) What needs Changing:**

(1) The idea of a single national curriculum predicated on a single favoured academic pathway predicated on university entry

(2) The idea of defining learning by location (ie school or university premises), by quantity of time spent on task (hours, weeks) and by restricting the teaching of knowledge to traditional subject boundaries (ii)

(3) Our adherence to the traditional means of delivering education, ie by schools, teachers, the use of specific technology, using the same pedagogy and in some instances the same curriculum that has remained essentially unchanged over many years.

(4) Our independence from vested interests determined to influence education for their own purposes. We need to ask what are schools for and whose interests are they serving? Children are often lost in the debate; when they leave schools, often hugely prestigious schools, to study law, accountancy, medicine without having been taught an ethical view on the course they are taking, then have been failed by their schools.

(5) Our assumption that knowledge is free from bias and political interference and is not-manipulated by societal pressures. That is naïve. Which is why every teacher, every discipline needs to subject itself to a rigorous ethical cross-examination.

(6) Our idea of the delivery as education as fixed and mono-purpose. We need the flexibility to use different methodology and pedagogy at different stages of education. So the way we teach infants and early primary school will be different to the way we teach intermediate years and seniors. Of course it is different now, but we need to see each stage as stand alone and requiring different methods of teaching and learning.

(7) The lack of direction and creativity in educational thought evident in the suffocating and self-serving education industry with its endless, internalised debates about the differences between constructivist and “personalized” pedagogies, progressivism and traditionalism, knowledge rich curriculum and skills based curriculum, cognitive load theory, assonance and dissonance, redacted educational philosophy in neologisms and acronyms and a focus on the current fads, resilience, mindfulness and self-esteem. We need to put all this to one side (but not dismiss for there will be transferable value in much of the research in a future paradigm). At present, education is too inward looking and dissectionist, concerned with how to make the most of a closed box by changing the colours, sounds and imagination without seeing that the problem is the closed box that precludes any paradigm shift and without that, however we dress it up, it will still be a closed box and part of a paradigm that is no longer relevant or working for more and more children each year.

(8) Education should respond to the major threats that face us: mental health, obesity, climate change, terrorism, artificial intelligence etc. Some responses are evident (i.e. Prevent), but too little.

(9) While there has been a good deal of writing and ‘new language’ to describe the ‘domains’ of knowledge which neatly divide the curriculum, it still begs the question about what makes up the curriculum and how fixed / dynamic should it be? A deeper understanding of the curriculum is not useful if what

poses as 'the curriculum' is interpretation based on what is not what could be. Simplicity is the key.

**(b) What do we need to replace it with?**

(1) As with the new paradigm, the essential part of a new curriculum is to underpin it with a new philosophy for education based on a redefinition of what education is about, its values and purpose and the ways of delivery. Choosing the body of knowledge to follow depends on getting this stage right.

(2) A far greater range of subject areas or subject domains although not necessarily dressed up as stand-alone topics and new ways of delivering learning by using technology.

(3) We need to change how we measure ability, progress and attainment.

(4) We need to ensure that with our emphasis on STEM subjects, that our students approach each through an ethical framework. When AI is able to replicate and transform itself, it is crucial that it contains the right rules and ethics.

(5) We should also see STEM for what it is – an outdated push into subjects that are no more important than the humanities and creative subjects they replace. Useful for some, but not for all.

**(c) How do we manage change?**

(1) It is not possible to achieve successful change without achieving some change in political will.

(2) We need to acknowledge that change will happen anyway; the key is managing change.

(3) Any change needs to be preceded by a recognition that we need to first, redefine the purpose of education. Without this, little will be achieved regardless of any change in content or pedagogy.

(4) We need new societal goals and a return of education to the abiding question viz. what is the best education we can offer to our children in the here and now

(4) Debates about class sizes, pedagogy, methodology, organisation will follow decisions made about the why and how.

Many of these debates will be nullified or seen as redundant in a new paradigm.

**(d) What will a new curriculum look like?**

(1) Education will be staged. Foundation subjects such as reading, writing, spelling and numeracy (ie the numeracy and literacy that functioning adults require) would be taught in formal settings with an emphasis on memory, repetition, etc

(2) Different subject boundaries will emerge. While some subjects may remain less affected than others (English, Classics, languages) others will need to be subject to even more regular revisionism (sciences, geography etc). History and Economics will need to be recalibrated in line with ethical considerations (ie the Economic Doughnut, a history curriculum predicated more on history than national mythology – which has its own place!) while there will be a growth in lifeskills, not as an add-on, as proposed with the new health curriculum, or calls for cooking to be an integral part of the curriculum, but at the heart of it. Self-management (not self-awareness) and personal outreach (empathy, charity, acceptance) will be amongst the traits embedded in the new curriculum.

Where there are new areas of knowledge (coding, artificial intelligence, Genetic engineering, nanotechnology, Climate change etc and where some issues clearly overlap (ethics pertaining to environmental issues or politics and business and ethics in AI) then decisions will need to be made about categorization. Above all, it should be a response to the world our children live in; if obesity is costing hundreds of lives, then personal fitness and exercise should be part of a new curriculum.

Apart from looking at what is currently on a school's curriculum, the new curriculum needs to look at non-university academic pathways to ensure education is relevant to a wider proportion of our youth. This in turn, would require significant changes in our traditional measures of ability and intelligence with greater emphasis on functionality and applicability.

- (3) The start to formal education will be delayed until age five. Before that the focus would be on cultivating an interest in, and joy of learning and a realisation of learning being a life-long pursuit by redefining its parameters and benefits.
- (4) All schools should be able to deliver all current curricula by making greater use of e-learning and distant learning. Courses should be accessed worldwide according to need.
- (5) There will be ramifications for schools and universities. With e-learning, the institution may become less important. New community institutions for community education may emerge. Schools will employ a combination of lectures, teaching, on-line providers and bespoke tutoring. Teacher training will significantly change to accommodate the new role of tutor / teacher. Other providers will enter the market place, particularly big tech companies.
- (6) At 16 years or earlier, the vocational / academic divide will be redefined with university only one of several equal-status pathways for students to pursue.
- (7) The future of GCSEs should be considered carefully and likely, abandoned. Ebacc would be abandoned in favour of a curriculum that favoured creative subjects including music and art
- (8) Personal and Physical Health / nutrition / Life Skills / budgeting / cooking / basic first aid, CPR, etc would be incorporated into a holistic curriculum
- (9) Different measures of ability will result from the use of new algorithms which will render selective schools redundant.
- (10) Ideas on what a new curriculum would include are expanded in the curriculum boxes (below). These are aligned to

Key Stages rather than more traditional (and useful) stages of development and individual topics (ie environmental education) which relate to more than one box are identified as such and included where they first appear or where they are most relevant. The underlying principles and purpose, established in the early years, clearly underpin what follows. An index will be included in this section in due course.

(11) The content of various subjects would be significantly reduced. Knowledge versus skills is one of the most ludicrous binary debates, but that hasn't stopped educationalists turning it into a meal ticket.

**Footnotes:**

(i) In 'The Bell Curve' by Charles Murray, cited by Linklater, the author suggests that IQ may be determined by genetic differences. Murray's book caused a huge uproar and Linklater, not surprisingly, distanced himself from its central premise that intelligence had genetic foundations, but did argue that educational thinking has been in an intellectual straitjacket for too long and that we should broaden our education and not expect everyone to do the same. This was all by way of issuing a challenge to Carol Vorderman who had been asked by David Cameron about how to improve Mathematics standards.

(ii) Curricula like the RSA's Opening Minds focused on helping low-achieving pupils by breaking down the boundaries between academic subjects and the knowledge that pupils can acquire outside school. However, as stated in a recent article from the Chartered College of Teaching, *'much research has emphasised that it is these subject boundaries and the specialisation of knowledge that they are associated with that are a condition for pupils to progress and acquire new knowledge.'*