

# A new semi National Curriculum is dumped on the country

**G**ove announced the final changes to the new National Curriculum as we went to press. In the time we had available to review it, it became clear that some small concessions had been made to critics. History now includes some world events, but the facts, personalities and chronological timeline approach remains. Fractions and times tables will be taught at an age two years before most of our European competitors even have children at school. The speaking requirement is back in at primary level English after an outcry, and primary schools will have complete choice over which foreign language their students study.

The main thrust though, is that the new curriculum is more academic – in the narrowest, driest sense of the word. Its drift is towards facts and rote learning. The image it conjures up is of teachers frog-marching children through timelines, times tables and SATs tests. No doubt teachers will do their best to make this all as palatable as possible. But this new curriculum is mostly significant, not in its detail, but in its desire to propel education in the opposite direction to our competitors. It is simply adding to the anomalies, contradictions and destructive distinctions in the English education system – although calling it any sort of system is a disservice to the term.

Anomaly number one is that Gove's rigorous new curriculum is anything but rigorous in conception. It seems to have been based upon no real research – the panel of educationalists put together to advise on it have disowned it and Gove has not been able, or even felt willing, to challenge the claim that it's a collection of personal prejudices (repeatedly cleansed and re-presented by officials at the DfE). In fact, it flies in the face of much educational research. Functional skills in maths and literacy may have improved at primary level, but research has repeatedly shown that the ability to use those skills in new contexts and to solve problems has declined and our performance at secondary level has, according to PISA, declined with it.

Anomaly number two is that the so called National Curriculum will be disapplied to over half of all secondary schools with academy status, a growing number of primary schools and of course, all free schools. Gove is actually campaigning for more schools not to have to follow his National Curriculum. This must be the most bizarre educational policy of all time.

Anomaly number three is that Ofsted – the government inspection service – is telling schools to teach more creatively, using new exciting pedagogies to engage students, while at the same time, the Secretary of State is demanding more rote learning, memorising, and exam driven teaching.

Anomaly number four is that the new semi-National Curriculum is being disapplied to primary school pupils in Years 2 and 6 (aged seven and 11) who will be taught maths, science and English using the old curriculum, because the key stage tests (SATS) to be held in summer 2015 will not have been revised in time to include the new curriculum. The same thing will happen to secondary school pupils in Year 10 (aged 15) in 2014 and Year 11 (aged 16) in 2015, with the old Key Stage 4 curriculum content taught in English, maths and science because GCSE exams in those subjects will not be ready in time to take account of the new content. What is the rush?

Anomaly number five, by far the most serious anomaly, is that together with reforms to GCSEs and A levels, the new curriculum puts English education travelling in the opposite direction to the real world of work – yet this was exactly the rationale put forward by Gove and Cameron to support the new curriculum. In the world of work, as business leaders are constantly stressing, you need to be able to work collaboratively, develop good problem-solving skills honed through team work, possess a strong, engaged attitude and have responsive and creative, as opposed to just functional, literacy and maths skills. None of this will be enhanced by the abandonment of project work and its replacement with sit-down exams and its corollary of memorisation and teacher-led instruction approaches to learning.

PISA (the education agency of the OECD which provides international comparisons of education systems) is quite clear that high-level problem solving using maths, ICT and language is the core of employability in the modern world, and that the UK has less students functioning at the highest levels than China, Singapore, Finland and many of its European competitors. Only in science do we have anything like international competitiveness. Singapore has always had a strong commitment to thinking skills and China is now looking for more creative pedagogic approaches, moving as rapidly as it can away from an over-reliance on drill. Even the USA – which is launching its new Common Core Standards to take full effect in 2014 – is centred on a deeper, more skills-based curriculum. As one commentary on the new Common Core Standards put it: 'Skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration will be built into the new maths and English curricula. That means an algebra lesson that would typically be taught using formulas and equations will instead be taught with real-world scenarios where students need to work together to solve problems'.

Let's hope Gove goes soon.

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