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Primary Policy Watch – National Curriculum review report

In the week before Christmas, when most teachers were either putting the final touches to this year's nativity play or putting their feet up with a well-earned eggnog, the Department for Education released a report by the National Curriculum review expert panel. Entitled *The Framework for the National Curriculum*, it put forward a number of recommendations for how the National Curriculum could be improved. At this stage these are just that – recommendations intended to generate discussion and contributions to the review process – but they give an interesting glimpse into the direction in which the expert panel would like the National Curriculum to go.

A Primary National Curriculum based on these recommendations would look profoundly different in a number of ways:

Key stage structure

Key Stage 2 would be split to form two new key stages (Lower and Upper KS2), each two years long. This is an alternative to the year-by-year specification that had been widely anticipated (although the review may recommend that Primary maths follows a year-by-year structure). Schools would be encouraged to set out their own schemes of work on a year-by-year basis, and to publish these 'for scrutiny by both parents and inspectors'.

Children would be assessed by teacher assessment at the end of Year 2 and by external testing at the end of Year 6, as is currently the case. They would also now be teacher-assessed at the end of Year 4 (i.e. the end of Lower KS2).

The review panel feels that this would 'balance the freedom offered by removing the prescriptions of the National Strategies with the need to maintain expectations in terms of subject coverage'. In particular, it would avoid what they see as the current lack of pace and ambition in Years 4 and 5.

Subjects

The National Curriculum would continue to be split into core and foundation subjects. It would specify the detail of essential knowledge and attainment targets in core subjects, but focus on a more limited set of expectations for foundation subjects.

All existing National Curriculum subjects would be retained 'in some statutory form'. However, some would be 'downgraded' from the National Curriculum to a 'basic curriculum'. In other words, they would still need to be taught, but schools would be free to choose how they provide them, and no essential knowledge would be specified.

Core subjects would, as now, be English, maths and science.

Foundation subjects at KS1 and 2 would be geography, history, PE, art and design, music and modern foreign languages (possibly at Upper KS2 only, possibly throughout KS2).

Subjects in the 'basic curriculum' would be design and technology and ICT.

Progression, Attainment Targets and level descriptors

Under these recommendations, Primary schools would be encouraged to focus on fewer things in greater depth. The review panel believes that this is a key factor in the success of high-performing countries.

In one of the report's most controversial and wide-reaching recommendations, the review panel believe that all pupils in a class should have an appropriate understanding of key elements before the class moves on to the next body of content. This is sometimes referred to as a 'mastery model', although the review panel prefers the term 'high expectations for all'.

The panel recognises that adopting such an approach would raise a number of issues, including stretching and challenging pupils who grasp a particular body of content more quickly than others, and for children with SEND. However, they feel that these issues are not insurmountable and that, based on international evidence, this approach is likely to lead to higher standards and a lower spread of attainment at the end of the Primary phase.

Current Attainment Targets and level descriptors would not be retained. Instead, the Programmes of Study would make it clear exactly what children should have learned by the end of each key stage, and assessment would be used to show whether or not children have reached these targets and are ready to progress to the next stage. Performance tables would be based on the proportions of pupils in any cohort having reached the 'ready to progress' level at the end of the key stage.

Oral language

Oral language should be a particular feature of the new curriculum, both within the Programme of Study for English and across all core and foundation subjects.

What happens next?

Early drafts of Programmes of Study for the core subjects have been produced by the review team, and will be shared with a wider audience next year. The radical nature of some of their suggestions has led the government to decide to delay the introduction of the new curriculum. The previous intention was that Programmes of Study for English, maths, science and PE would be available from September 2012, for statutory teaching from September 2013, with other subjects following a year later. Now, however, all subjects are on the same, later, time frame, meaning that schools will not be required to teach the new curriculum until 2014.

The question is, if schools convert to academies at the rate the government hopes, how many will actually be left to adopt the new curriculum by then?

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