



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Primary Curriculum Review

Evidence Summary Report

Interim Report for 30 June 2008



About this report

QCA was asked by the Secretary of State to “take the leading role in providing the evidence required for the review”. After agreeing with Sir Jim Rose the evidence requirements, from April 2008 QCA began submitting a series of evidence summaries. These reports summarised a number of key research pieces that QCA has commissioned over recent years in relation to the primary curriculum.

In particular, the commissions included:

- Reports relating to international evidence taken from our International Review of Curriculum and Assessment (INCA) archives on different countries’ approaches to learner motivation, transition, primary models, early years’ models and the teaching of skills and competencies
- Several reports summarising the views of hundreds of headteachers, curriculum managers and teachers on a range of issues relating to the primary curriculum
- Insights from visits to hundreds of schools, including interviews with practitioners
- Outcomes from seminars with key stakeholders including system leaders, unions, headteachers and teachers, parents, governors and other interested parties
- A range of evidence collected from our partner research organisation, the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE)
- A literature review of key primary related articles, reports and publications over the last 20 years
- Responses from thousands of primary age children to questions on their views of the current and possible future curriculum
- The regular monitoring that QCA carried out over the last ten years with a statistically representative sample of schools across the country.

The nature of evidence

The evidence contained in these reports has been drawn from a range of methodological approaches geared to different monitoring and evaluation purposes. It includes quantitative data from representative, stratified and opportunistic samples, qualitative meta-analyses, systematic literature reviews, original case studies, semi-structured interviews and large scale surveys. The evidence has been made available through different vehicles ranging from peer reviewed academic journals and conferences to internal, commissioned QCA monitoring activities. The resulting evidence ranges similarly, from comparisons of the impact of comparable interventions through the analysis of trends through inspection data to large scale, surface level perception data geared to monitoring opinion about the current state of practice.

Although each of these different forms of evidence has a different level of validity for different purposes we believe that drawing the evidence together helps us to create the textured overview needed to inform an holistic review of the curriculum. For example, insights from visits to outstanding schools shows examples of what is possible, even in the current system, whilst views, opinions and perceptions of headteachers and teachers help us to understand the capacity and appetite for change and the potential barriers to implementation.

This synthesis of evidence to create an overview highlights a number of key issues that need to be addressed. These issues have been collected under twelve emerging themes that capture the characteristics of an effective curriculum. This summary report sets out these emerging themes and the evidence supporting them. The report also outlines the next phase of evidence gathering work to support the review.

Emerging evidence themes

The implications from the evidence summarised so far suggests that an effective curriculum involves:

1. Aims and design principles

The curriculum is underpinned by a set of underpinning aims and design principles that clearly articulate the distinctive purpose of the primary phase and demonstrate the contribution that education can bring to the vision of a just and sustainable society with opportunity and aspiration for all.

The curriculum aims as outlined in the new secondary curriculum, of successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens, are broadly accepted as a firm foundation for a new primary curriculum by academics and practitioners alike. The trend towards a greater clarity on aims and principles is seen across many countries. The international trend is also increasingly towards each country developing its own sense of identity and its place in the global economy and a sustainable world through education. In addition there is a growing explicitness about the need to use the education system to confront inequality and injustice.

2. Challenge and inspiration

The curriculum embodies principles and guidance in forms that encourages schools to challenge, inspire, engage and motivate all learners.

Pupil feedback on this issue is clear. They feel that they learn best when lessons challenge and inspire them and when the curriculum is broad, interesting and appropriately challenging. Our evidence from psychology supports the view that motivation plays a fundamental role in children's learning and that children are naturally inquisitive and exploratory. Further, an extensive review of meta-analyses of the curriculum, teaching and learning, indicate that learning is most effective when it is 'context-based' – dealing with ideas and phenomena in real or simulated practical situations - and connects with young people's experiences.

3. The development of well rounded learning skills, interpersonal skills and attitudes

The curriculum promotes a focus on children as well rounded learners through coherent support for the development of the identities, skills and attitudes to learning that will begin to prepare them for the future.

Stakeholder views and visits to a wide range of schools, including those deemed outstanding by Ofsted, indicates that a successful curriculum invariably includes, as one of the core central tenets, an explicit focus on supporting the coherent development of the child's identity, skills and attitudes. Indeed, in the most successful schools this is also explicitly embodied in the school's ethos and the leadership's vision. This core focus on the development of the whole child is also increasingly a common feature of international curriculum models and reflects the aspirations and outcomes of the Government's Every Child Matters agenda.

4. Common areas of learning

The curriculum articulates the essential knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and attributes that we want our children to acquire. These are stated at a high level of generality rather than a detailed level of prescription. They are also usefully brought together into recognisably more coherent areas of learning and subjects that introduce children to the broad areas of human understanding, thinking and activity.

Surveys of existing and emerging local and international models indicate that there is a trend towards organising knowledge, skills, understanding, attitudes and attributes into broader, common areas of learning. They are also being described in general terms, whilst maintaining the focus on the essential elements of literacy and numeracy. This has been largely as a result of an increased focus on learners' development and outcomes and the application of their skills and knowledge as opposed to a focus on narrowly specified curriculum inputs.

5. Flexibility

The curriculum is articulated in the form of a common national framework which emphasises and promotes flexibility and encourages all schools to tailor the national curriculum framework to local and individual needs.

In a rapidly changing world, where services are increasingly being tailored and localised, evidence from QCA's monitoring of primary schools across the country over the last ten years indicates that the most effective schools are increasingly seeking to exploit existing flexibility in the curriculum in order to personalise their curriculum. This is in response to a changing environment with a number of forces operating on it. The most effective schools are seeking ways to personalise learning to meet children's needs and accelerate their learning. They have also used curriculum development to support capacity building of their school workforce and to increase manageability. Stakeholders have consistently said that a more flexible curriculum that moves away from long lists of prescribed content would improve manageability and that increased local ownership would increase commitment to successful implementation. They have also said that a stronger emphasis on local curriculum development has implications for teacher training and development and guidance and support materials.

6. Entire planned learning experience

The curriculum encompasses the entire planned learning experiences to which children are exposed including lessons but also connecting these with events, routines and out of school activities.

Schools deemed successful by Ofsted see the importance of recognising the learning that goes on in and beyond the classroom and capture it in their curriculum planning. This is increasingly recognised in some other countries including other parts of the UK (Scotland and Northern Ireland) and Norway. This is also reflected in systems with a strong vocational route providing extensive work experience, such as Denmark, Finland and France. This can raise issues of time and manageability. However successful schools are able to use this time creatively and confidently and collaborate with a number of key stakeholder partners from children themselves, their parents, the local community and

employers to ensure manageability. In doing this, schools are recognising the need to respond to continuing advances in Information and Communication Technology, to the challenge of extended schools provision and to opportunities offered by the Building Schools for the Future programme.

7. Repertoire of teaching and learning approaches

The curriculum promotes and supports a wide repertoire of teaching and learning approaches, including practical experiences, and encourages schools to match their different strategies to contexts and needs. It also recognises the interdependence of curriculum with pedagogy, the interplay between aims and desired outcomes and the use and application of skills and attitudes. This is to ensure that the curriculum aims (e.g. of developing successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens) are met.

Effective curricula illustrate how the knowledge, skills and understanding that children have developed in one area of learning can be applied and enhanced in another and how practical experience can be related to ideas and models. Evidence from meta-analyses and other research shows that structured dialogue and collaborative learning motivates children, that opportunities need to be created to identify and build on children's existing conceptual understandings and that effective learning involves reflection, consolidation and thoughtful intervention by teachers. Children are also clear that they want active approaches to learning and this is supported by the expression of the Government's Every Child Matters agenda in terms of active outcomes such as staying safe and being healthy. It is also clear that if one aim is to develop self-reflective or independent learners then opportunities need to be created that allow those attributes to be strengthened.

8. Progression in learning

The curriculum makes clear expectations for progression in learning and how these expectations relate to national standards and desired outcomes. It builds experience, knowledge and understanding progressively through levels of complexity and difficulty and promotes continuous learning. It also recognises the distinctive nature of the primary phase.

The national curriculum was designed to promote continuity and progression. Although the research evidence suggests that the primary to secondary post-transfer dip has significantly reduced, there is substantial evidence to show that children continue to experience a transitional dip in performance after the start of each new key stage. There is limited evidence of successful systematic practice available in relation to effective progression. Evidence from case studies of effective practice points to deeper inter-school collaboration and management of transfer process as critical success factors. Particular emphasis is given to progression features such as information sharing, teacher exchange and joint working, and collaborating over joint curriculum planning.

9. Knowledge of child development

The curriculum is built on good understanding of existing knowledge of child development and learning and encouraging schools to use these insights to support children's understanding.

We now know much more - from psychology, social science, educational studies and neuroscience - about how children learn and develop and how their brains work. This should enable us to make better decisions about how the curriculum should be laid out. For example we know that children think in the same way as adults but with less experience; that they need diverse experiences to help them reflect on their learning and that there are changing patterns of childhood – for example children are, on average, physically maturing earlier. We also know that early interventions in essential components such as literacy and numeracy have a positive impact on life chances. Much of this points to the need to develop a new, more holistic, primary curriculum better designed to reflect the changing needs of children at their varying rates of development and enables them to make more rapid progress and achievement. Evidence from neuroscience also tells us that when children are deprived of a rich and varied range of first hand and practical experiences their brains are less likely to physically grow and develop.

10. Assessment

The curriculum is underpinned by an approach to assessment which is integral to teaching and learning, offers children useful feedback on their progress and engages them actively in the learning process.

Evaluation of assessment for learning approaches and of the pilot work on Assessing Pupils' Progress suggests that children make better progress in contexts where they understand the desired outcomes of their learning, can reflect on the learning process and where their teachers can draw on the evidence gathered from good day-to-day assessment to make accurate, periodic judgements about their overall performance. International evidence supports this view as countries are increasingly specifying desirable learning outcomes for pupils at different levels.

Opportunities for self and peer review are seen as important to develop independent, self-reflective learners.

Finally, the consensus view across stakeholders is that some definition of national standards is essential, but that there is also a need for teachers to own these national standards and be able to work through them in school.

11. Effective evaluation

The curriculum promotes and models effective assessment practices for pupils through ongoing and dynamic whole school and system level evaluation practices, building up from day to day assessment for learning that shapes teaching and learning exchanges, through teacher reflection on practice, via school self evaluation to national level evaluation such as Ofsted reports.

National and international evidence indicates that effective schools tend to evaluate their curricula in relation to impact and outcomes and use the results to inform the development of focused improvement activities. Their curricula are evaluated and reviewed on the basis of a clear understanding of what the school is trying to achieve, how learning can be organised and the success measures of an effective curriculum. This view is supported by the emphasis placed by Ofsted

on the school's own self-evaluation when making their judgements about a school's effectiveness.

12. Implementation

The curriculum includes a close and sustained focus on effective implementation, including a full and detailed implementation plan, which is driven by clear education outcomes.

This can build on the strengths of the school workforce, parents, system leaders and other educational stakeholders and take account of the experiences of previous implementation. Evidence from the recent implementation of the new secondary curriculum indicates that schools need coherent and consistent support and guidance from QCA and partner organisations to ensure messages are effectively understood. Evidence from the recent successful implementation of a new curriculum in New Zealand indicates that transparency from the outset is more likely to ensure buy-in from stakeholders and therefore embed and sustain change.

Conclusion

The current national curriculum provides a firm foundation on which to base the Independent Review. Many schools successfully use the present framework to effectively meet the needs of their children. The present framework sets out broadly what we want as a nation for our children and most stakeholders support the need for a national curriculum which secures entitlement. It has also been the subject of international interest. However a significant proportion of schools report that they find the current curriculum crowded and cluttered and that it is hard to make it work for their children. Also there is growing evidence of children's' increasing disengagement in the later years of the primary phase with aspects of the present curriculum. Over time there has been a perception that the curriculum has also accreted additional requirements which do not always easily fit into the existing framework (such as community cohesion, healthy lifestyles, financial capability, culture, modern languages etc). This has given rise to a perceived problem of manageability of the curriculum. There have also been significant changes in society and in the expectations placed on schools. Previous attempts at dealing with manageability have focused on slimming down the curriculum. This has not necessarily increased the proportion of schools that say the curriculum is manageable. Also slimming down, on its own, cannot take account of changes in wider society or make the curriculum fit for purpose. However, schools that are interpreting and adapting the national curriculum to increase the coherence and relevance of young people's learning experiences seem to be having some success.

Our evidence shows that there is a widespread expectation of significant change to bring the curriculum up-to-date, make it fit for purpose and help prepare children who are growing up in the early years of the 21st century.

QCA recommends that:

- drawing on current best practice
- learning from international experience of curriculum reform
- undertaking the further design and development of ideas drawing in system leadership expertise at every level
- engaging widely with stakeholders especially schools, higher education and subject interest groups

will enable the design of a curriculum that meets the requirements of the remit and galvanises and inspires the educational system.

QCA believes, and has evidence to support the view, that it is possible to develop a curriculum that challenges the false polarities that are often debated. It is possible to have a curriculum which has:

- knowledge and understanding **and** skills, attitudes and values
- opportunities for the power and passion of specialist teaching **and** thematic teaching that makes connections between subjects
- direct focused teaching **and** child led exploration
- good standards of attainment **and** well-rounded learners
- a focus on literacy and numeracy **and** a broad and balanced curriculum
- time to develop some skills regularly and often **and** time for deep immersive learning over extended periods of time

- learning that introduces children to the big ideas and events from the past that have shaped the world **and** connects to the contemporary issues of our times, such as sustainability

Our evidence points to the following essential ingredients of a curriculum:

- Clear aims that highlight the importance and value of the primary phase of education
- Areas of learning / subjects that set out the essential 'cultures' that need to be passed on to our children
- Skills that help children to access learning, such as literacy, oracy, numeracy and the use of ICT – and wider skills such as team work and self-management
- Aspects of personal development that identify the skills, attitudes and attributes that children need to develop to become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens
- Desired outcomes and standards that set out expectations
- A flexible curriculum framework, including the entire planned learning experience and supported by clear principles to inform curriculum design at school level.

The curriculum needs to be an essential part of a strategy to raise standards for all children and close the gap in attainment; articulate what is important now and will be in the future; describe what we want our children to know, understand and be able to do; provide a statement of standards, expectations and entitlement and promote equality.

We hope that this evidence provides a robust base on which to build this new primary curriculum.

Next steps

The evidence QCA has collected so far covers a wide range of responses from the academic research paper to the informed opinion of the practitioner. It is a mixture of what has happened since the national curriculum was first designed, the current state of practice, views and perceptions of what could happen and what needs to happen.

This report is the first stage of securing the evidence base for the independent review of the primary curriculum. The next steps in the evidence process will include:

- a detailed engagement strategy with the widest spread of stakeholder groups to canvass views on the design of the new curriculum
- further reviews of existing work, both nationally and internationally and commissioning of specific studies as required
- consideration of how QCA can best measure the impact of the new primary curriculum over time to be able to confidently describe its effectiveness
- a second evidence report in December 2008 which will set out the evidence gathered through the next stage of stakeholder engagement and outline proposals for measuring its effectiveness.

This is part of QCA's long-standing commitment to collect evidence to support its work and is an element of its statutory remit to keep the curriculum under review.

Engagement

Evidence collected from interviews and seminars organisations including:

Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trusts	Mantle of the Expert
Association of School and College Leaders	Museums, Libraries and Archives Association
Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly	Muslim Council of Britain
Birmingham City Council	Muslim Youth Foundation
Bishop Grosseteste University College	National Association for Primary Education
Board of Deputies of British Jews	National Association of Advisers in Computer Education
British Association for Early Childhood Education	National Association of Head Teachers
British Educational and Communications Technology Agency	National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers
British Humanist Association	National Children's Bureau
Brighton and Hove Council	National College of School Leadership
Buckinghamshire County Council	National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations
Burnley Borough Council	National Co-ordinators of Governor Services
Canterbury Christ Church College	National Governors' Association
Catholic Education Service	National Primary Headteachers' Association
Church of England Board of Education	National Primary Schools' Association
Clear Vision Trust	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
ContinYou	National Union of Teachers
Coventry City Council	Network of Sikh Organisations
Cumbria School Centred Initial Teacher Training	Northamptonshire County Council
Derby City Council	Nottingham City Council
Dorset County Council	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council	Office of the Children's Commissioner
ESCalate	Primary National Strategy
Free Churches Federation	Professional Association of Teachers
Friends of the Western Buddhist Order	Roehampton University
Gateshead Council	Service Children's Education
General Teaching Council of England	Somerset School Centred Initial Teacher Training
Hindu Council of the UK	Specialist Schools and Academies Trust
Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government	The Hindu Council of the UK
Information Service for School and College Governors	Training and Development Agency for Schools
Institute of Jainology	Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers
International Society of Krishna Consciousness	University of Brighton
Joint Council of Anglican and Afro-Caribbean Churches	University of Cumbria
Learning Through Landscapes	University of Derby
Lincolnshire County Council	University of East London
Liverpool Hope University	University of Manchester
London Borough of Islington	University of Plymouth
London Borough of Lewisham	Warwickshire County Council
London Borough of Tower Hamlets	Zoroastrian Trust Fund of Europe
Manchester Metropolitan University	

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