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Primary curriculum change: directions of travel in 10 countries

Introduction

Background

This is a report of an international research project undertaken between January and March 2008 through QCA's International Review of Curriculum and Assessment frameworks internet archive (INCA)¹ and the Eurydice network on education in Europe.² The research was designed to provide a snapshot of changes to the curriculum since 2005 in a selection of countries. The research was commissioned by QCA Curriculum Division's Partnerships and Evidence programme and is intended to inform the forthcoming primary curriculum review in England.

Research questions

The research questions were:

- 1. What changes, if any, have been made to the curriculum for primary education since 2005?
- 2. Are any further changes to this curriculum planned?
- 3. What was or is the impetus and rationale for these changes?
- 4. To what extent do these constitute major or minor changes?
- 5. What information is available on the actual or likely impact of these changes?

These questions were intended to give a sense of some recent trends in curriculum policy that could be investigated further in the next stage of the research. It was expected that the answers would provide a general overview of the recent changes, their rationale and, although it was thought quite soon for changes since 2005 to take effect, any early evidence of impact. This would inform an international comparative analysis with specific details about trends across selected countries.

Selected countries

The project gathered information for 10 countries. The number was limited to 10 in order to provide timely evidence for policy development in England. Countries were selected on the basis of the researchers' existing awareness of recent curriculum changes and the likely relevance of these changes to the policy agenda in England. The countries included in the research were therefore:

- France
- Germany
- Italy
- New Zealand
- Northern Ireland

- Norway
- Scotland
- Spain
- Slovenia
- Australia- Tasmania.

Summary of findings

This report contains a comparative analysis of information for 10 countries about curriculum changes since 2005 and the policy rationales for these changes. There was a lack of information about the impact of these changes at this early stage of implementation; this could be a focus of future research. This section provides a summary of the main findings:

- Each of the 10 countries had made changes to the curriculum and/or related assessment arrangements in the past few years and several had made changes in 2007.
- Several of the countries had made curriculum changes in order to raise standards, particularly in literacy and numeracy. International assessments were an important impetus in France, Germany and New Zealand. Changes in some other countries have emphasised broader learning outcomes that seek to prepare pupils to be lifelong learners and active participants in society.
- There has been some convergence in the range of content in the primary curriculum in the 10 countries of this study, as in many countries around the world during this phase. However, England differs from some countries in the non-statutory status it gives to PSHE, citizenship and foreign languages.
- There are differences in the way the content of the curriculum is organised. In some countries/states, the curriculum is typically organised through subjects and in others it is organised by areas.
- 'Subjects' tend to refer to curriculum content that is organised in relatively narrow domains, such as history and geography. 'Areas' tend to refer to broader domains of experience, such as Spain's knowledge of the natural, social and cultural environment or France's autonomy and initiative.
- The differences between 'subjects' and 'areas' are not hard and fast. Spain's areas also include mathematics. Similarly, New Zealand's areas include broader domains such as *Social sciences* and narrower domains such as *English*.
- However, the distinction is useful because curricula are predominantly characterised either by subjects (of which there will tend to be many) or by areas (of which there will tend to be fewer).
 The contrast between Slovenia's 15 subjects and Northern Ireland or Spain's six areas is clear.
- Of the 10 countries in this study, two recently moved away from subjects towards areas (Italy and Northern Ireland) and the organisation of the curriculum in six countries was already characterised by areas.
- The rationales for areas, where stated, related to: cognitive development; transition from preprimary modes of learning; curriculum integration to optimise learning; new importance attached to cross-curricular competences; a need to simplify the curriculum and its assessment; or, a need to make the curriculum more manageable.
- Only two countries organise the primary curriculum by subjects. In its reforms, Slovenia retained subjects- but sought more cross-curricularity in implementation. In the first stage of its primary curriculum, Norway moved from areas to the subjects already used in the second stage –to improve continuity.
- Although this experience in Norway may have implications for a transition from areas at primary to subjects at secondary, no such issues were referenced in the evidence collected for this study.

- Across the 10 countries, there is a trend towards the application of knowledge through the usage
 of concepts of 'competences' or 'skills' in the curriculum. However, areas and subjects continue to
 provide the basic unit of curriculum organisation and tend to form the basis of assessments.
- Several countries have recognised personalised learning or related concepts as an important means of raising attainment and establishing patterns of lifelong learning.
- Several countries are seeking to involve the wider community in the development of the curriculum in order to make it relevant to and enjoyable for their pupils.
- In a few of the countries, recent changes have sought to give foreign languages a higher status at primary level.
- Citizenship education, now well-established in many countries, was recently introduced or is being made more prominent in the curriculum in other countries.
- Some countries have modified the age range or the ethos of their curriculum. They are trying to develop a curriculum that is appropriate to pupils' stages of development and that promotes continuity across pre-primary, primary and on into secondary education.

Detailed findings

Information collection, analysis and reporting

Initial data for the review was gathered from the INCA country archives and the Eurydice database of countries by the International Information Unit (IIU) at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The IIU manages INCA and is also the national Eurydice Unit for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This information was supplemented by a literature search of academic and policy sources that was managed by the IIU and undertaken by the NFER library. These two strands of the research resulted in the identification of a number of articles on curriculum changes (see bibliography in Annex A) and the development of a fiche of information for each of the countries (see Annex B). An analysis of the fiches and the articles was undertaken within the QCA International Unit and is reported here.

Evaluation of the information collected

The country fiches provided detailed information in response to the first question and second questions on changes, some useful detail on overarching and specific rationales for the third question, and indicated whether the changes were minor or major. The literature provided further information in response to these four questions for most of the 10 countries. There was little information in relation to the fifth question on impact in either the fiches or the literature review. Since many of the changes were implemented as recently as six months ago or were still pending implementation, evaluative information about the changes may only be available in due course.

Countries making changes

Each of the 10 countries had made changes to their curriculum since 2005. The only exception was Scotland, which, having undertaken a national consultation, was planning to gradually introduce changes from the 2008/9 school year onwards. Several of the countries had introduced changes to the curriculum very recently. This applies to France, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway and Spain, which all made changes in 2007.

Reasons for curriculum changes

Several of the countries had changed their curriculum in order to raise standards, particularly in literacy and numeracy. The results of international assessments had contributed to the impetus for changes to raise standards in France, Germany and New Zealand. In Germany, the 'PISA shock' of 2000 has been well documented³, France has seen itself as underperforming in international assessments and New Zealand has been concerned with disparities in the attainment of some groups of pupils. However, the subsequent PISA 2007 and PIRLS 2006 results are too recent to reflect any possible effect of the curriculum changes. Standards were also mentioned in the case of Spain but not international assessments.

In other countries, the changes to the curriculum emphasised broader learning outcomes. This usage fits with the recent definition of 'learning outcomes' as 'what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a process of learning⁴. In Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland and Slovenia, these outcomes related to preparation for lifelong learning and active participation in the economy or wider society. There were also notable similarities between Scotland and Northern Ireland in emphasising learners as individuals, citizens and 'contributors'. In Slovenia, the changes were seen as part of a wider process of convergence with the European Union.

The information on the rationale for changes in Italy emphasised autonomy for schools but the changes also seemed to reflect a new emphasis on competences and on citizenship. As in Tasmania, simplifying the curriculum was also part of the rationale. In fact, in Tasmania this appeared to be the primary rationale following a three-year consultative process characterised by 'co-construction' between policy makers and teachers. This had clarified values and purposes, then specified content, and then developed teaching and assessment practices. Both Scotland and Northern Ireland had also undertaken long and extensive consultations. Where it was available, further information about the reasons for specific changes is provided in the relevant sections below.

Curriculum content

The country fiches were not intended to provide information at the level of detailed curriculum content but the accompanying literature review did. There was evidence that the primary curriculum content of countries around the world has grown increasingly similar in recent years. A new report for the Cambridge Primary Review⁵ found that the primary curriculum content of countries around the world had converged. The content tends to include: first language, mathematics, science, information technology, design, history, geography, PE, art, music and RE. England conforms to this pattern. There also tends to be content relating to PSHE, citizenship and foreign languages but, unlike in England, in many countries one or more of these subject areas are compulsory rather than optional.

Curriculum organisation

In contrast to the curriculum content, there has been some divergence in the organisation of the curriculum in different countries. Whilst the primary curriculum in England continues to be organised by 'subjects', other countries in the UK and elsewhere have had or have introduced 'areas'. Subjects tend to refer to curriculum content that is organised in relatively narrow domains, such as *history* or *geography* (see Slovenia). 'Areas' tends to refer to broader domains of experience, such as *knowledge of the natural, social and cultural environment* in Spain or *autonomy and initiative* in

The differences between 'subjects' and 'areas' are not hard and fast. Spain's areas also include mathematics. Similarly, New Zealand's areas include broader domains such as *Social sciences* and narrower domains such as *English*. However, the distinction is useful because curricula are predominantly characterised either by subjects (of which there will tend to be many) or by areas (of which there will tend to be fewer). The contrast between Slovenia's 15 subjects and Northern Ireland's or Spain's six areas is clear.

The curriculum in eight of the 10 countries in the present study is characterised by the use of areas. In two countries the organisation of the curriculum is instead characterised by subjects (see Norway and Slovenia). This enumeration is useful but should be interpreted cautiously; as is clear, countries with areas may also have one or two subjects such as the mother tongue, mathematics or science and the 10 countries cannot necessarily be taken as representative of all countries across the world.⁶

In 2007 there was a great deal of policy activity that related to the replacement of subjects with areas or to the introduction of new areas. Italy moved towards four *assi culturali* (cultural areas)⁷ to be achieved by the end of compulsory education but retained specific learning objectives for the conventional range of subjects. Northern Ireland replaced the subjects introduced in 1991 (mirroring those in England and Wales)⁸ with six new learning areas.

Northern Ireland's curriculum areas: the rationale

In Northern Ireland, research and policy evidence offer some insight into the rationale for the replacement of subjects with learning areas. The NFER Northern Ireland pupil cohort survey commissioned by CCEA (the organisation which advises on the Northern Ireland Curriculum) had found that "pupils' days were strongly compartmentalised into series of subject-based experiences with minimal opportunities for exploring the links across subject areas". 9

The subject basis of the curriculum had come to be seen as a barrier to cross-curricular learning. Indeed, the new curriculum states that 'Children learn best when learning is connected. Although the curriculum has been set out under six areas, further integration is encouraged to help children better understand the links between the different aspects of learning'. ¹⁰

This exhortation seems to anticipate concerns that the reform will lead to cross-curricular links within each area but not between the six areas. This has been reinforced by the production of exemplar topics for teachers called 'Ideas for Connected Learning' which encourage topic-based work.¹¹

Also in 2007, some countries slightly increased their number of areas. Scotland announced a 3-18 curriculum with eight areas to replace its 5-16 curriculum with five areas introduced in 1989. 12 New

Zealand moved from seven to eight learning areas ¹³, separating out English from its 'learning languages' area to reflect a renewed emphasis on second languages. The implication of this rationale is that one domain must be clearly defined as distinct from other domains if it is to be given due attention in classroom implementation. In France, a new emphasis on competences provided the rationale for the introduction of the new *socle commun des competences* (common core of competences) with seven new areas to replace the seven old areas that were taught at ages 6 to 8 and the four areas at ages 8 to 11. Tasmania, by contrast, is planning to reduce its 18 'components' down to seven areas by the end of 2008. It has the clear rationale of simplifying the curriculum and its assessment.

Spain's subject areas remain unchanged. Primary education consists of three cycles of two academic years and is organised into six 'global, integrated subject areas' and a further two such subject areas (citizenship and human rights and an optional second foreign language) towards the end of primary school. The six subject areas had been in place for some years prior to the 2007 reforms. Likewise, the 2005 changes in Germany did not generally affect the organisation of the curriculum.

Only the recent changes in Norway and Slovenia have favoured subjects. Slovenia's plans do not include any move away from the existing 15 subjects, but the content of each subject is being revised to include cross-curricular themes and interdisciplinary knowledge, reflecting a clear desire to join up learning across the curriculum.

In 2006, Norway moved away from organising the first stage (age 6 to 9/10) of the primary curriculum by areas. It is now organised according to the subjects already used in the second stage (age 10 to 12/13). The gradual introduction of subjects had been designed to ease the transition from preschool, but the current aim is to improve curriculum continuity and teacher co-operation across the subsequent two stages of primary education. The implication is that teaching according to areas and then subjects during primary education, rather than subjects or areas all the way through, may lead to discontinuities in learning.

Skills and competences

None of the countries uses skills or competences as the basic building blocks of the curriculum. As the previous section indicated, subjects or areas provide the basic design principle. However, in their recent changes, each of the countries involved in this study placed a high value on 'skills' or 'competences'. This fits with the finding of a recent study of the INCA countries and Norway that 'recent reforms in most countries, including England, pertain to... the emphasis on the *application* of knowledge and understanding and on learning *how to* learn' (italicised here for emphasis).¹⁷

In France, the *socle commun* introduces curriculum 'areas' that are similar to those found elsewhere, with the exception of the 'autonomy and initiative' competence, which is more comparable to one of the cross-curricular skills or competences seen in other countries. A forthcoming EU report described the *socle commun* as 'introducing ideas of basic and transferable skills and learning outcomes that are based on subject learning, but not limited to specific subject skills and knowledge'.¹⁸

Germany introduced standards of competence in German and mathematics to be achieved by the end of primary school in 2005. Germany is unusual in conceptualising language and mathematics as competences but this perhaps reflects the national context and culture. Pupils are now regularly tested in these competences at secondary level and pupils will be tested at primary level from 2011. It was the 2000 PISA results that provided the impetus for the changes.

In Italy, the new curriculum also establishes competences that pupils are expected to acquire by the end of compulsory education. Each of the four cultural areas (outlined above) comprises three or four broad competences, which in turn comprise ability/capacity and knowledge. 19

The New Zealand curriculum (primary and secondary) replaces the previous five skills with eight 'key competencies'. A new 'vision' and 'values' underpin both the learning areas and these key competencies. However, as in Italy, achievement objectives relate only to the learning areas.²⁰

Rather than such competences, the Northern Ireland curriculum defines eight skills. These include Communication; Managing information; Thinking, problem solving and decision making; Being creative; Working with others; Self management; Using mathematics; and, Using ICT. There are, however, several similarities between the skills defined by the Northern Ireland and the New Zealand curricula. The difference between these two countries therefore seems more related to terminology than actual approaches to the formulation of the curriculum.

In Norway, the curriculum now specifies the level of competence expected from pupils in each subject. There seems to be a stronger linkage between competences and the fundamental subjects in Norway than between the skills/competences and areas in other countries. In Norway, basic skills in literacy, oracy, numeracy and ICT have been integrated into all subjects in all year groups. This may have served to reduce the compartmentalisation of learning that might have accompanied the move from areas to subjects.

Digital competence in Norway

Since 2004, there has been a major policy emphasis in Norway on digital competence in all subjects and at all levels of schooling. This emphasis has challenged more limited conceptions of reading, writing and numeracy. It has also challenged learning that focuses on the school and teacher when 'young people gain most of their competence outside the formal institutions of learning'. This has formed part of a wider transition from teaching that is characterised by instruction towards learning that is student-centred and provides authentic activities.²¹

In Slovenia, the curriculum and its subjects are shifting away from emphasising the memorisation of facts towards learning skills and problem-solving. The underlying principle behind the change is a transition from the transmission of knowledge towards interactive and learner-orientated teaching that emphasises strategies of thinking and cognitive skills²² that recalls the example of Norway given above.

In Spain, since 2007/8 the common core curricula have included basic competences that pupils are expected to achieve during their primary education. As in other countries, the emphasis is therefore on achieving these competences by the end of primary school. Unlike the pattern in other countries, perhaps with the exception of Germany in language and mathematics, Spain intends to assess competences rather than just subjects or areas.

Competences and assessment in Spain and France

Spain uses the cross-curricular competences found elsewhere (relating, for example, to communication, citizenship, environment) but there is also a strong emphasis on the enjoyment of learning and on personal values informing relationships with others. During primary education these competences are assessed for diagnostic rather than summative purposes. ²³ There is also diagnostic testing during primary school in France. ²⁴ Several other countries emphasise competences but continue to assess their pupils through subjects/areas. Recent research found that assessing competences in general education presents a technical challenge. ²⁵ Further research could investigate the assessment of competences in Spain and France.

Personalisation of learning

The changes in several of the countries make reference to personalisation of the curriculum and related concepts. In New Zealand it is thought that personalisation will play an important role in tackling disparities in attainment. In Italy, the curriculum documents speak of the 'centrality of the individual'. In Norway, the emphasis is on student-centred learning and similarly in Slovenia it is on learner-oriented teaching. In Scotland, 'relevance' and 'personalisation and choice' are two of the principles of curriculum development. The Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence* indicates that pupil choice is seen as an aspect of personalisation: 'The curriculum should respond to individual needs and support particular aptitudes and talents. It should give each child increasing opportunities for exercising responsible personal choice as they move through their school career'.²⁶

Community involvement

A theme found in several of the countries was wider community involvement in pupils' learning. By involving parents, businesses and others from the local school community, countries intend that their schools will be able to make the curriculum relevant to the world of work and to wider society. This may also include enriching learning with 'real-life' experiences. New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland and Spain had all taken this path and Scotland had gone as far as introducing the idea of recognising learner achievements both within and outside of school.

Languages

Several of the countries' changes related to foreign languages. Where changes were made or planned, they increased the status of this subject/competence. The teaching of foreign languages sometimes reflected strong values relating to understanding other cultures, notably in New Zealand and Spain. In Spain, foreign languages are now offered from the beginning of primary school and a second foreign language may be taught in the final two years of primary education. Similarly, France now offers languages in its first cycle of primary school. Norway also offers languages from the beginning of primary school and is also now making it possible for schools to offer a second foreign language at primary level.

Citizenship education

Two of the countries had made significant changes to citizenship education at primary level. In both Italy and Spain, it had increased in importance. This reflected a change in values and a growing concern to prepare young people for constructive engagement with the people around them and society more generally. In Italy, 'education for citizenship' was given a prominent place in the reforms. This new cross-curricular theme replaced the more limited existing 'offer' of 'education for civil life'. Spain has just introduced citizenship education at primary level for the first time. 'Citizenship and human rights' is now compulsory in the third cycle (ages 10 to 12) at the end of primary school and there is a special emphasis on gender equality.

Curriculum phases

Just a few of the countries' changes related to curriculum phases; yet they are travelling in different directions that seem to contradict one another. On one side, there are Northern Ireland and Scotland, which are emphasising the different needs of children at the start of primary school. On the other, is Norway, which has turned away from this emphasis in order to respond to learners' needs as they progress through primary school.

Northern Ireland has extended the pre-primary, play-based and activity-led curriculum into the first two years of primary school. Its reforms identified this as essential to meeting the needs, presumably cognitive, of young children in this first stage of school. So, the revised primary curriculum now covers the foundation stage (ages 4-6), a shortened key stage 1 (ages 6 to 8) and key stage 2 (ages 8 to 11). It should be noted that, although England also has a foundation stage, this is for pre-primary children and relates to ages 3 to 5 rather than primary school and ages 4 to 6 as in Northern Ireland.

In Scotland, similar changes are afoot. The current curriculum for 5 to 14 year olds which covers the whole of primary education and the first two years of secondary education is being replaced with a single curriculum for 3 to 18 year olds. The intention is for the new curriculum to improve continuity across pre-primary, primary and secondary education. Indeed, similarly to Northern Ireland, the changes will see the ethos of the pre-school curriculum extended into the first years of primary schooling.

In contrast to these parts of the UK, Norway has moved away from a foundation stage-type curriculum in the first stage of primary school. As a result, the first stage, like the second stage, will now be taught along subject lines. This reform was intended both to reduce the curriculum discontinuity that pupils previously experienced during primary school, and to increase teacher cooperation across the two stages of the primary curriculum.

The evidence from beyond the UK suggests that management of the transition to more formalised forms of learning during primary school is fraught with difficulty. The implementation of changes in Scotland and the bedding down of changes in Northern Ireland will provide further insights into the issues. The risk is that a focus on continuity on entry to primary school may lead to discontinuity during primary school. However, the rationale for changes in Norway suggests that teacher communication and planning across the divide is crucial. Indeed, the work of several authors in England and elsewhere suggests that schools' management of transitions is the most important factor for continuity in learning.²⁷

Conclusion

This report has provided a brief comparative analysis of changes to the curriculum in 10 countries since 2005 and their supporting policy rationales. The findings may have implications for policy in England and elsewhere. The main findings are drawn together in the *Summary of findings* section that appears towards the front of this report.

References

Annex A: Bibliography of literature review

Annex B: 10 country fiches from INCA and Eurydice

¹ www.inca.org.uk

² www.eurvdice.org

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⁴ Leney, T., Gordon, J. & Adam, S. (2008, forthcoming). Learning outcomes across Europe. Thessalonika: Cedefop.

⁵ Hall, K. and Øzerk, K. (2008). Primary Curriculum and Assessment: England and other countries (Primary Review Research Survey 3/1). Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

⁶ For details of curriculum areas in several countries, see Pepper, D. (2008, forthcoming). Curriculum areas in countries around the world (INCA probe). London: QCA.

⁷ Italy's 'cultural areas' are: Languages, Mathematics, Science & technology, History & society. Agenzia Scuola (2007). Il nuovo obbligo di istruzione: cosa cambia nella scuola? Agenzia nazionale per lo sviluppo dell'autonomia scolastica (ex Indire), Firenze.

⁸ Marriott, S. (2001). 'Things can only get better? Curriculum change in Northern Ireland', Education, 31-5.

Op. cit. Cousins, S. (2005). 'Curriculum reform in Northern Ireland.' In: West-Burnham, J. and Coates, M. (Eds) Personalizing Learning: Transforming Education for Every Child. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

¹⁰ The Revised Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum: Key Stage 1 and 2 (undated). http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/background/curriculum review/FINAL WebVersion PrimarvPropsals KS1 2.pdf p.10

¹¹ CCEA (undated) http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/connected_learning/icl/index.asp

¹² Carr, D., Allison, P. and Meldrum, G. (2006). 'In search of excellence: towards a more coherent Scottish common school curriculum for the twenty-first century', Scottish Educational Review, 38, 1, 13-24.

¹³ New Zealand's eight new areas are: English, The arts, Health and physical education, Learning languages, Mathematics and Statistics, Science, Social sciences, and Technology,

¹⁴ The six areas taught throughout primary education are: Knowledge of the natural, social and cultural environment, Arts education, Physical education, language and literature, Foreign language, and Mathematics.

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¹⁶ Eurydice Unit, Spain (2003). The education system in Spain (2001/2002), www.eurydice.org

¹⁷ Hall, K. and Øzerk, K. (Ibid.).

¹⁸ Leney, T., Gordon, J. & Adam, S. (Ibid.).

¹⁹ Agenzia Scuola (Ibid.).

²⁰ Full details of the structure of the New Zealand curriculum were found at: http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/the new zealand curriculum

²¹ Erstad, O. (2006). 'A new direction? Digital literacy, student participation and curriculum reform in Norway', Education and Information Technologies, 11, 3-4, 415-29, pp.5-6.

²² Kalin, J. and Zuljan, M. V. (2007). 'Teacher perceptions of the goals of effective school reform and their role in it', Educational Studies, 33, 2, 163-75.

²³ Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia (Ibid.).

http://www.inca.org.uk/1385.htmlLeney, T., Gordon, J. & Adam, S. (Ibid.).

²⁶ Learning and Teaching Scotland (undated). Curriculum for Excellence. http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/5to14/about5to14/curriculumforexcellence/principles.asp

²⁷ For a discussion of the international literature on transfer and transition see Pepper, D. (2007). The Key Stage 3 dip: myth or reality? London: King's College London.