Kelly, AV (1994)
The National Curriculum
A Critical Review

8

FIVE YEARS ON

It gives me little pleasure to be writing this additional chapter for the updated reprint of this book and, in doing so, to be effectively saying 'I told you so'. For it is not my *amour propre* that matters; it is the damage which has been done to the educational experiences of so many children through an insistence on the introduction of flawed policies, in the face of clear warnings not only from myself but also from many others.

Those warnings were completely ignored, even cast aside with derision; they were castigated as the ramblings of 'whingeing academics' or, as in the case of the objections of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) as 'ideological'. Yet every one of them has quickly been shown to be sound. And the results of ignoring them are daily becoming more apparent. We must consider shortly some of the more serious of these.

THE REJECTION OF PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

There is a general point to be noted first, however, and that is the evidence which this whole sorry story offers of the folly of ignoring, even rejecting, the advice of professional experts in any field. It was suggested in Chapter 7 that such folly would be immediately apparent to all if it were perpetrated in such fields as civil engineering in, for example, the construction of an airport terminal. It is now clear that the claim which was made there that it is equally disastrous in educational planning has considerable validity. Professional expertise is as important in the framing of social policies as it is in bridge building or brain surgery.

This process of deprofessionalization also goes further than the exclusion of professionals from policy-making. For, as we saw in Chapter 5, the National Curriculum has been deliberately framed in such a way as to minimize the scope for the exercise of the professional judgement of teachers in its implementation. We have seen that the sensitivities of the educational process demand that teachers have wide discretion in relation to the educational requirements of their pupils. The removal of much of this discretion is further evidence of the deprofessionalization which is the root cause of most of the flaws which the National Curriculum displays.

However, we live in a society which regards with great suspicion expertise of any kind, but particularly that in areas related to the social services – health, social work, counselling and so on, as well as education. Even our possible future monarch slips readily into equating expertise with trendiness. Worse, this suspicion is too often justified as in the interests of democracy. For, it is argued, if decisions are to be truly democratic, they must not be left to that small group which in any field possesses relevant knowledge and understanding.

If that were really the argument, it would be understandable. It would, none the less, be fundamentally mistaken. For, although it is true that, in a democratic society, policy decisions must be made by all, it is a mop-headed form of democracy which insists on making those decisions without professional advice of any kind. And that mop-headedness is illustrated better by the public disaster which is called the National Curriculum than by any other single piece of recent legislation, although there are others which run it quite close.

However, the real reason for this rejection of professional expertise is much more sinister than that. For it is not prompted by a concern, even a mistaken concern, to promote democratic forms of decision-making. In reality, it stems from quite the opposite kind of motivation, a desire to establish central control rather than to permit decision-making to be left to genuinely democratic procedures.

It thus seeks to propagate an anti-intellectualism, designed to marginalize and deprofessionalize all who have knowledge and understanding of a kind which enables them to identify the flaws in government policies and to alert the rest of the citizenry to those flaws. And a significant reason for this, of course, is a recognition that professionals will always be concerned to ensure a high quality of provision in the field for which they have responsibility, so that their recommendations will have financial implications which the government does not wish to face up to. In short, it is part of a policy for getting an education system 'on the cheap', and thus inevitably of settling for an inferior kind of product.

This is an approach to planning that can be observed in other areas of social policy as well as in education. And what makes it sinister is that it is characteristic not of democratic procedures but of extreme forms of totalitarianism, such as those of Nazi Germany and Maoist China. It is a device for discouraging the kind of informed public debate of policies which any concept of democracy must demand. And it must ultimately lead to a diminution not only of the quality of social provision but also of democracy itself, since it begins to take society in the direction of total control from the centre, and away from any serious manifestation of freedom of opinion.

As Jung Chang, in her moving and revealing book, *Wild Swans* (1993, p. 622), says of the, not totally dissimilar, situation in Maoist China, 'In the mad logic of the day, being good at one's profession ("expert") was automatically equated with being politically unreliable ("white")'; and later (op. cit., p. 624), 'I found this environment unbearable. I could understand ignorance, but I could not accept its glorification, still less its right to rule'.

A second aspect of this rejection of professional expertise, which has emerged since the publication of the first edition of this book, is even more disturbing. For it has become apparent not only that such advice continues to be spurned but also, further, that all evidence which would throw into question the validity of the claims made by the advocates of the National Curriculum or which would reveal the adverse effects of its implementation is, wherever possible, suppressed.

It is certainly the case that all research into the National Curriculum which is funded by the government is subject to restrictions of a severity which is quite incompatible with any notion one must have of the free availability of information in a democratic society. Publication of findings, for example, is now entirely at the discretion of the relevant government agency, and researchers are bound by the terms of their contracts not to publish without official sanction. Nor can they even discuss their findings with colleagues, in case they 'get out' by that route. Research funded by government agencies must come up with the 'right answers' or be consigned to oblivion. A prime example of this is the SEAC research on the testing of seven-year-olds in 1991, the evidence from which was suppressed because of the impending election (Graham and Tytler, 1993).

A rejection of professional advice and even of clear empirical evidence, then, is, to use the commercial jargon currently favoured by politicians, the bottom line. And it is from that refusal to listen to professional advice and to heed evidence that all the major flaws of the National Curriculum have stemmed. For, as we have seen, it has resulted in the imposition of a simplistic form of curriculum and scheme of assessment and in a failure to take account of the extensive understandings of the complexities of education and

curriculum planning which recent studies have made available – through both empirical evidence and conceptual clarification.

Those flaws were predicted by the professionals when the National Curriculum was first devised. And they are still in evidence now, even after the extensive revisions which have been undertaken. For, as we shall see, those revisions have sought to do little more than to modify the bureaucratic complexities of the National Curriculum and to do so mainly by reducing its content. They have failed to appreciate that, as earlier chapters have shown, the flaws can only be eliminated by a complete reconceptualization, and the adoption of a professionally informed rather than an ill-informed amateur approach to its planning.

THE CONTINUING FLAWS IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

It will be worth briefly recapitulating at this point the major flaws which those earlier chapters identified, and considering whatever evidence has subsequently emerged to confirm the – continuing – validity of the criticisms then made.

Instrumentalism and commercialism

First, it was suggested that a major and all-pervading flaw of the National Curriculum is its instrumentalism and commercialism, that it is aimed at promoting the economic health of society rather than the personal development of the individual, that, in the words of the Crowther Report (CACE, 1959, p. 54), it views educational provision as a 'national investment' rather than as 'the right of every boy and girl to be educated'. This, it was suggested, has important implications for the quality of society and, indeed, for its moral health.

Some of those implications have already begun to emerge. Without embarking on speculation concerning the causes of those 'law and order' problems, especially in relation to the younger members of society, which are increasingly dominating our concerns, it cannot be denied that the current curricular offerings of schools seem to be doing little to ameliorate these. And it must be made clear that to expect schools and teachers to take steps to provide the young with an effective form of personal, social and moral education is quite unreasonable within the curricular context that has been created for them.

The inability of the National Curriculum in itself to provide this has been admitted in the recommendations of NCC (NCC, 1990) for it to be

approached as a 'cross-curricular' issue. This is one of many examples of how the years since the 1988 Act have seen this kind of patching-up activity.

However, there are two reasons why this must be inadequate as a solution to this problem. First, there is the simple matter of the availability of time, and the likelihood of schools and teachers being prepared to devote time to activities which gain them no 'points' towards their league-table placings.

Second, however, and more importantly, it is difficult to envisage how any approach to this form of personal, social and moral education can be effective when it is undertaken in what is an essentially competitive context. Studies of moral education from way back have demonstrated the need for a learning environment which itself evinces the moral principles which one is attempting to promote, the need to practice what one is preaching. One cannot expect, therefore, to succeed in promoting an acceptance of the need for cooperation in pupils who are being required in all other contexts to compete with each other.

At a deeper level, one cannot expect to propagate democratic values in an environment which does not itself display those values, to promote respect for the rights and feelings of others in a context in which what really matters, and counts, is one's ability to outdo them. If one makes competitiveness a prime moral and social virtue, one cannot complain at the moral and social consequences which ensue.

Education, as we have said before, is not, or should not be, a competitive form of human activity. One of the most serious consequences of making it so is the negative effect this has on education as personal, social or moral development.

Inequality

This leads us naturally on to a consideration of the second serious flaw we identified in the National Curriculum. For a major feature of democratic values is their acceptance of human equality, of an egalitarian philosophy – difficult and complex as that may be to put into practice. And, in spite of the claims made in the supporting rhetoric of the 1988 Act that it will offer an 'entitlement' curriculum, it was argued earlier that the reality of its provision must lead to an extreme form of educational élitism.

This, it was suggested, is an inevitable result not only of turning it into a kind of national competition – between schools, teachers and pupils – but also of the insistence that the same curriculum content should be offered to all pupils, whatever their personal preferences or interests, and, especially,

regardless of their social, cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds. For, as Mary Warnock (1977, p. 26) has pointed out, 'there is a difference between claiming that everyone has an equal right to education and saying that everyone has a right to equal education'. And a genuine form of educational entitlement requires a curriculum which is 'genuinely suitable for all, not suitable only for the middle-class or most academic' (op. cit., p. 84). As we have seen, in a democratic society, entitlement should mean more than entitlement to access; it should mean entitlement to full and appropriate provision. And, as we have also seen, this necessitates the provision of a curriculum which is conceived and planned in terms which go a good way beyond lists of subjects, programmes of study and attainment targets.

The experience of what has happened since the National Curriculum was implemented have reinforced the claim that, in spite of its rhetoric, that curriculum is far from being an entitlement curriculum. And here we do have empirical evidence from a piece of research which was not funded by a government agency and so could not be suppressed. That research was undertaken by the NUT and the Leeds School of Education (NUT, 1993) and focused on the testing of pupils at key stage 1 (7+).

After analysis of the results of that testing programme, the report of the survey made the following assertions:

> . . . at both subject and Profile Component levels, significant differences were found in favour of *winter-born* children, in English, Mathematics and Science.
>
> (op. cit., p. x)

> . . . at subject level, there were significant differences in performance between the ethnic groupings in all four subjects.
>
> (op. cit., p. 51)

> . . . at PC level, significant differences were found in favour of English-speaking children on English PC2, Mathematics PC1 and Science PC1.
>
> (op. cit., p. 52)

> . . . in both Teacher Assessments and Standard Assessments there were significant differences in favour of pupils from *higher neighbourhood status groups* [the new term for 'middle class'].
>
> (op. cit., p. x)

It is streaming at 7+ and selective testing at 11+ all over again, despite the massive evidence of those studies we noted in Chapter 4.

We may also note the verdict of HMI themselves (DES, 1992, para. 28) that 'progress on equal opportunities is best described as patchy . . . too often the gap between policy and practice is unacceptably wide'. In doing so, we must also suggest that, for the reasons we have already adumbrated, this gap is an inevitable consequence of the policies encapsulated in the National Curriculum.

We should finally remind ourselves that this has particular implications for the education of non-native speakers of English (Gregory, 1994) and for those deemed to have special educational needs (Lloyd, 1994), a group we identified in Chapter 5 as being especially at risk. An increase in 'statementing', in 'disapplication', even in refusals to accept into the school children with certain kinds of need, all prompted by a desire not to put at risk the school's position in the league table, is evidence itself of that unsuitability of the National Curriculum for such pupils which we asserted earlier. It is also evidence that for such pupils educational opportunities have been diminished, as we foretold, rather than enhanced. 'For children with disabilities and difficulties, a developmental, child-centred, differentiated approach is vital from the earliest years. Many need extra opportunities to play, to interact, to experiment, to manipulate materials, to develop social skills' (Lloyd, op. cit., p. 185).

And we must note further how much more the reduction of such opportunities is to be deplored in the case of those pupils whose only 'special need' is for their ethnic or linguistic differences to be acknowledged, catered for, even celebrated.

Alienation

The third major criticism which we must remind ourselves we made in our original attempt to identify the major flaws of the National Curriculum follows on from this concern about its inequalities. For we noted in Chapter 5 that a major factor in the inability of many pupils, especially those from working-class and/or ethnic-minority backgrounds, to take advantage of the educational opportunities available has been that alienation which results from the mismatch between the content of the curriculum they have been offered and their own values and interests.

Again the evidence is that this problem has, as was predicted, been exacerbated by the implementation of the National Curriculum. Again too, it is not unreasonable to suppose that there must be a clear link between alienation from education and those 'law and order' problems referred to above. It is extreme arrogance to attribute an apparent deterioration in the behaviour of young people to inadequacies in parents and in teachers and to attribute none of it to the kinds of experience the school curriculum is offering them for a significant proportion of their young lives. For, if the school curriculum were doing its job, then pupils would not be putting so much effort into escaping from it. And it reveals a great contempt for human, especially child and adolescent, nature – or a massive misunderstanding of it – to attribute truancy, disaffection and alienation to some

kind of weakness of character, inherent in parents or children or both, rather than to inadequacies in the kind of educational provision being made for them. An absence of motivation is more likely to stem from a lack of interest than from inherent bloody-mindedness. And in any case, where there is such lack of motivation, it is the task of the educational planner not to seek for scapegoats to blame it on but to take steps to combat it. This the National Curriculum does not do, nor does it offer teachers the scope to do it for themselves.

An increase in truancy, disaffection and alienation, then, was to be expected once the National Curriculum in its present form was imposed on schools. And perhaps the saddest feature of this is the recent emergence of this phenomenon, once largely confined to secondary schools, in the early years of education (Barrett, 1989).

The evidence for its appearance in the early-years sector further supports the case we have made out for a reconceptualization of curriculum and a return to a view of education as concerned as much with individual development as with economic utility and value for money. For it suggests that the loss of that kind of developmental emphasis from the early-years curriculum, of which it had long been the focus, is already having the detrimental effects predicted.

Education in the early years

This, then, takes us on to consideration of a further flaw we identified earlier, the particularly harmful impact which it was suggested the imposition of a subject-based curriculum was likely to have on the quality of educational provision in the early years, where all of the research evidence, as we have seen, points to the need for a developmentally appropriate curriculum.

It is only the stupid, the uncaring, the insensitive or the sadistic who can demand that children who have been in this world for less than 60 months (and especially those of less than 50 months old who are being pressed into reception classes in the interests of massaging government statistics on the provision of 'nursery education'), children who in most other countries would be regarded as too young for 'schooling', must be offered a diet of English, mathematics, science, technology and the other National Curriculum subjects. The enormity of this becomes apparent if we cease to call them children and recognize that they are in fact babies, or at least infants. They need a form of educational provision, a curriculum, which will address the highly complex task of supporting their development as persons and especially as social beings.

If we do not provide them with such a curriculum, but demand of them instead that they learn to perform certain tasks to satisfy the demands of national testing and selection procedures, we cannot be surprised if many of them begin to display those characteristics of disaffection we referred to above.

Nor should we be surprised at the emergence of evidence to suggest that this kind of provision is also having its detrimental effects on standards of attainment in the early years. For again we should note the findings of that survey by the NUT and the University of Leeds School of Education to which we referred earlier (NUT, 1993). Teachers, especially at times when they are overwhelmed by testing activities, report less collaborative working by pupils, less catering for their individual needs, less direct personal contact and support, less hearing children read and less talking to individuals about their work. None of this can be conducive to improvements in the quality of children's learning at this stage.

And those official reports from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) which proclaim improved standards in various areas of the primary curriculum are clearly speaking of levels of assimilation of subject content rather than of educational standards of a more sophisticated, and appropriate, kind. The *science* young children are studying, for example, may be of a higher standard than it once was; it almost certainly is; the educational advantages they may or may not be getting from that study are more problematic.

The political manipulation of the curriculum

Another, perhaps even more sinister, aspect of the insistence on a subject-based curriculum, whose content is dictated by central government through the office of the Secretary of State for Education, is the scope it offers for the manipulation of the curriculum. The dangers of this are perhaps most obvious in the case of older pupils, especially at key stage 4.

In a democratic society, educational provision should be predicated, among other things, on a commitment to freedom of opinion and the ability to think for oneself. In totalitarian societies, on the other hand, we have grown used to the practice of manipulating opinion through control of the content of the curriculum. The goal of education in a democracy must be empowerment; in a totalitarian society it can only be passivity. Yet it is precisely that kind of manipulation and control, the attempt to dictate opinion, which we have seen constantly practised since the advent of the National Curriculum.

For evidence of this one has only to look at the controversy, continuing into the present process of revision, over the content of the Orders for history and for English, and to note how many decisions of this kind have reflected the values, whims, even prejudices, of successive prime ministers, secretaries of state, junior ministers and their political advisers. We now even have the imposition of compulsory games for the 14–16s at the behest of a Prime Minister who happens to be a sporting enthusiast and a Chelsea supporter!

On all the major issues we identified in the first edition of this book as flaws in the National Curriculum, then, we find that subsequent experience and in some cases convincing empirical evidence have confirmed our concerns.

An assessment-led curriculum

And we should finally note that a major underlying cause of this is the testing programme, which we identified as the prime source of potential difficulties. For we have a curriculum, which is assessment led, in spite of the assertion of a DES bulletin on the Education Reform Act (DES, 1989d), which we noted in Chapter 4, that 'assessment should be the servant, not the master, of the curriculum'.

And so, where the forms of assessment which drive the curriculum are simplistic, the curriculum lacks sophistication and subtlety. Where the assessment is externally imposed, the curriculum is externally imposed in all respects, even politically determined, and the professional judgements of teachers in relation to the educational needs of individual pupils are seriously reduced in their scope and effectiveness. And, where both of these conditions apply, assessment becomes largely summative in its thrust, and the advantages to educational planning, and particularly individual provision, which can accrue from diagnostic and formative assessment, are largely lost.

BREAKDOWN AND REVISION

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the testing programme has been the major focus of criticism of the National Curriculum in practice, as, for example, through the total boycott of testing in 1993 and the continuing boycott now planned by the NUT. For, while this is easily branded as 'ideological' by the politicians, and thus attributed to that ever-growing body, the 'loony left', it does in fact reflect the very real concerns of those whose professional expertise and experience gives them genuine insights into the implications of the current testing programme. That programme has thus also become a major concern of those who have sought to redesign the National Curriculum.

For the, very few, years which have elapsed since the National Curriculum was first instituted have seen many cracks appear in its edifice, as was predicted. They have also seen many attempts made to stop up those cracks on what I have called elsewhere (Blenkin and Kelly, 1994, p. 4) 'the "Polyfilla" principle of government, by which you build, or rather jerry-build, a framework of social policy and then fill in the gaps and stop up the loopholes as they emerge'. Many cracks, gaps and loopholes have appeared in the National Curriculum and its testing progamme, even in such a short period of time, and many of them have been stopped up by temporary measures, sometimes, as in the case of excessive use of statementing, even by financial sanctions.

As any DIY addict knows, however, good and effective as 'Polyfilla' is at filling cracks, it cannot hold the whole edifice together. And so, sooner or later, when that edifice is crumbling beyond the point of temporary repair, a rebuilding has to be undertaken. Even after so very few years, the National Curriculum edifice could be seen to have reached this stage of decay. And that many mistakes had been made was publicly admitted by the Secretary of State for Education.

An attempt has been made, therefore, to rebuild it in the light of the evidence of the mistakes made in its original construction. This rebuilding exercise began with a review of what were regarded as the central problems, and the results of that review are currently being translated into a revised National Curriculum.

However, this process began by making the same fundamental mistakes that the original planning had made, and thus demonstrated that little had been learned from the experience of failure or from the mistakes which were acknowledged. For the review was again placed largely in the hands of amateurs and, in many areas, no more attention has been given to professional advice this time round than had been given last time. Teachers and headteachers have been involved in the advisory groups which have undertaken the revision, but it is clear that, in many cases, their views have been largely ignored, except where they have coincided with those of the amateurs and the politicians.

Those teachers who served on the English advisory group, for example, have issued a public statement, which lists those of their recommendations which have been ignored and expresses concern that 'while we had every opportunity to express our views, submit suggestions and agree many recommendations, we are surprised that so many of the group's recommendations have been ignored or changed beyond recognition since our last meeting' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 13 May 1994, p. 12).

This problem has been compounded by the second major mistake which has been repeated in the process of revision – the adherence to that narrow view of curriculum which earlier chapters have criticized. It is clear that, even in contexts where the views of teachers and headteachers have been genuinely sought, the effectiveness of those views has been seriously inhibited by the constraints within which the review has been undertaken. For the remit given for the review reveals that the evaluation of what had gone wrong has been as simplistic as the original planning which had caused the problems.

Sir Ron Dearing, who was asked in April 1993 by the Secretary of State to undertake this review, lists the issues he was asked to cover as:

i. the scope for slimming down the curriculum;
ii. how the central administration of the National Curriculum and testing arrangements could be improved;
iii. how the testing arrangements might be simplified; and
iv. the future of the ten-level scale for recognising children's attainment.

(SCAA, 1994, p. 3)

It is clear from this remit that the only problems which had been recognized were those of quantity of content and complexity of administration, and that the solution was seen as to be achieved again by taking advice on how the content of each subject might be 'slimmed down' and how the tests might be made more simple. The curriculum, then, continues to be viewed as no more than a collection of subjects; and, in most of those subjects, learning is conceived simply as consisting of nothing more sophisticated than a trip through a hierarchy of attainment targets.

There is no recognition, therefore, that ever more simplistic tests imply an ever more simplistic curriculum, an even further departure from serious educational quality; nor that the simpler the tests are the less value they have in formative terms, so that they become increasingly summative and thus ever more uninformative; nor of the fundamental need, which this book and many other publications have highlighted, for a conceptualization of curriculum in terms other than those of the knowledge content to be assimilated and regurgitated.

As a result, the changes which have resulted from this review are merely cosmetic, and do nothing to tackle the fundamental problems which this book identified in 1990 and which, in the earlier part of this chapter, we have seen are, if anything, more disturbingly in evidence now that the National Curriculum is fully established than they were then. And this is as true of the revised Orders for individual subjects as for the programme as a whole.

All the developments which have occurred in the intervening period, all the changes which have been made during the 'Polyfilla' era, all the back-

tracking which has become necessary, have been undertaken at the same superficial level of largely inexpert planning which was responsible for creating the problems in the first instance. And this 'major' revision has itself failed to transcend that superficiality.

For Sir Ron Dearing's main recommendations for change, in a not unreasonable response to the brief we have seen he was given, focus mainly on the need to 'reduce the volume of material required by law to be taught' (SCAA, 1993, p. 7) and to 'simplify and clarify the programmes of study'. And, while this is part of a broader process, concerned to 'reduce prescription so as to give more scope for professional judgement' (ibid.), 'to make the Orders less prescriptive, and to free some 20% of teaching time for use at the discretion of the school' (ibid.), further recommendations appear to run counter to this.

For the review of the Orders for each subject is to be 'primarily concerned with dividing the content of the present curriculum Orders between a statutory core and optional material for use at the discretion of the school' (ibid.) – a discretion, therefore, within tightly fixed parameters. And 'the first priority for discretionary time must be to support work in the basics of literacy, oracy and numeracy. Beyond this, the bulk of time released should be used for work in those National Curriculum subjects which the school chooses to explore in more depth' (ibid.) – again something of a Hobson's choice. And, finally, 'in addition to the National Curriculum subjects and religious education, time must also be found at key stage 3 for sex education as required by law and for careers education and guidance' (op. cit., pp. 7–8).

The personal, social and moral dimension of education, then, continues to be left to chance. In fact the whole notion of education as a process of individual development continues to be conspicuously absent, as it must be in a curriculum planned on this model. And the discretion for the exercise of teachers' judgements in relation to the educational requirements of their pupils, which a more developmentally appropriate curriculum would demand, continues to be too limited to make such a curriculum possible. The process of deprofessionalizing the teaching profession, then, is maintained, and the promise to 'reduce prescription so as to give more scope for professional judgement' (op. cit., p. 7) is revealed as yet another piece of hollow rhetoric.

The admission of the mistakes made and the attempt to put them right are of course to be welcomed. They must be recognized, however, for what they are – acts of rescue from self-created hazards. And they must not be regarded as policies which will necessarily raise the quality of educational provision in England and Wales.

For, on the contrary, they continue to represent opportunities missed. A genuine understanding of education and its potential not only for promoting the economic health of society but also for enhancing the quality of life in society for every citizen, both as an individual and as a member of a democratic collective, would have led to a National Curriculum of a very different kind. Instead, the education system continues to be driven by the needs of the economy and nothing beyond that; it continues to be a 'national investment' rather than 'the right of every boy and girl to be educated' (CACE, 1959).

OTHER RECENT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

This adherence to a flawed educational ideology is particularly to be deplored, and indeed wondered at, when the last few years have seen powerful arguments in support of contrary views being offered from a number of different sources, and not only by 'whingeing academics' or 'trendy experts'.

The National Commission on Education, for example, a group which did make good use of a wide range of professional expertise and understanding, has made a number of recommendations clearly predicated on a view of education which is much more far-seeing than that which underpins the National Curriculum, even in its new slimmed-down form.

The report of that commission (Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 1993), while rightly placing great emphasis on the economic importance of the education system of any country, recognizes that that economic function itself requires a form of education which promotes the development of adaptability to rapid change, and thus must be characterized by flexibility rather than by rigidity – a point the Crowther Report (CACE, 1959) once emphasized in its notion of 'general mechanical ability'.

Further, it acknowledges that education must also be viewed from an individual perspective. The first statement of 'The Commission's Vision' is that 'in all countries *knowledge and applied intelligence* have become central to economic success and personal and social well-being' (Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 1993). And the last statement of that vision asserts that 'it is the role of education *both* to interpret and pass on the values of society *and* to stimulate people to think for themselves and to change the world around them' (ibid.).

This is a very different vision from that enshrined in a National Curriculum which emphasizes the assimilation of predetermined knowledge content, even, as we have seen, in a subject like history, and thus seriously inhibits the development of the power to think for oneself. In a genuinely democratic society, individual empowerment must be a major goal of an education system. This is recognized by the National Commission but re-

mains unacknowledged by the architects of the National Curriculum, both Mark I and Mark II.

Furthermore, that commission also recognizes the important role the right kind of early education plays in this process of educational development. In doing so, it is responding to the massive evidence which has emerged in recent years from studies especially in the United States, which demonstrate quite conclusively that good-quality early educational experiences not only enhance the individual's educational prospects but also influence to a dramatic extent future social behaviour. In the context of the American High/Scope project (Beruetta-Clement *et al.*, 1984), for example, it was calculated, that 'for every $1,000 invested in the children who attended the pre-school programme, $4,130 was returned to the taxpayer (after controlling for inflation) by way of savings on social provision required by the control group later in life' (Sylva, 1992, p. 685). Those cost savings are found in the massive reduction in public expenditure on such things as criminal proceedings, special education, social benefit to single parents and so on, which results from high-quality nursery education.

In the light of those law-and-order concerns which we noted earlier, one cannot but be surprised at the unwillingness of government to take the findings of this extensive research very seriously.

Again it is clear, then, that there are good economic reasons, as well as strong educational and humanitarian arguments, for providing every young child with an appropriate set of early educational experiences. Again, however, this is not acknowledged by the architects of the National Curriculum who, even in their revisions, have refused to move from a subject-centred approach even in the early years, and continue to wish to apply national tests of attainment to six and seven-year-olds.

Finally, we must note the NUT's own efforts to place an alternative form of national curriculum on the government's agenda. In a publication, *A Strategy for the Curriculum* (NUT, 1990), it offers a critique of the National Curriculum as unsuited to the educational needs of the 1990s. And it advocates its replacement by a form of national curriculum based not on traditional subjects and preselected content but on 'areas of experience'. It is thus reasserting that concept of an entitlement curriculum adumbrated, as we saw in Chapter 6, by the last of the politically free HMI (DES, 1977), and defined by their list of 'eight adjectives', collectively describing the kinds of experience which would seem to add up to a proper form of education.

The concept of an experiential curriculum requires a good deal of very careful analysis, but it is clear that it provides more scope for the creation of a genuine form of educational entitlement and for individual development and empowerment than a curriculum which offers little more than a list of subjects to be studied, 'facts' to be learned and attainment targets to be hit. And there is evidence of this both in the success of those attempts to implement such a curriculum in the early years which the National Curriculum has now largely snuffed out and in the detrimental impact which that curriculum is already having at that level (Blenkin and Kelly, 1987, 1992, 1994).

And so we see in these attempts to redress the difficulties of the National Curriculum a confirmation of both aspects of that general point with which we began this chapter. For they underline the adverse effects of that lack of professional input which we identified as the major source of the inadequacies of current policies. And they confirm that a major reason for the rejection of such professional input is the desire to cut costs, to obtain an education system on the cheap.

For, wherever the attempt has been made to inject a professional contribution into the education debate, that contribution has taken the form of advocating a curriculum which is conceived and framed quite differently from the National Curriculum. In particular, what is advocated is a curriculum which will seriously seek to meet the needs of pupils as individual human beings as well as to satisfy the economic needs of society. Furthermore, there is a clear acceptance, made explicit, for example, in the report of the National Commission, that, if this costs money, then it will be money well spent, that 'the additional spending is essential if its vision for the future of education and training is to be realised' (Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 1993, p. 407).

IN CONCLUSION

The National Curriculum is revealed, then, even in its revised version, for what it is, an attempt to provide an inferior form of education on the cheap for the children of those parents who cannot afford to purchase something better. As such, it is of course in harmony with that general philosophy of self-help and competition which has been foisted on society during the last decade and a half. It is important, however, to recognize this, and not to be misled by the rhetoric of 'entitlement', 'raising of standards', 'quality', 'relevance', 'progression', 'continuity', 'breadth', 'balance' and the rest, all of which are contradicted by its realities.

The government, then, continues to short change the mass of the nation's children in its own short-term interests, and to disregard what are being proclaimed elsewhere as the long-term interests of our society and of its individual members. Revised or not, the National Curriculum continues to be a poor, and unacceptable, substitute for real education, however that might be defined.