

# **The Aims of School Education**

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## **About the author**

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## **1. Towards an aims-based national curriculum**

When the National Curriculum appeared in 1988, it was all but aimless<sup>1</sup>. It consisted of a range of subjects, but lacked any account of what these subjects were *for*. Its creator, Kenneth Baker, seems just to have assumed that this kind of curriculum is a good thing. He unreflectively took over a traditional view of what constitutes a good school education.

The 1988 curriculum consisted of ten foundation subjects, of which three – English, mathematics and science – were 'core' subjects, the other seven being technology, history, geography, a modern foreign language, music, art, and physical education.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1988 the aims were as follows:

- [to] promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society
- [and to] prepare such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

These are maximally vacuous as well as, in some cases, bewildering. (Taken literally, one of the aims of the school curriculum is promoting the physical development of society). The inclusion of the word 'spiritual' has given succour over the years to advocates of religious education; but, apart from that, the aims have been ignored – not surprisingly – as the basis for curriculum planning.

Why these? Is there any good reason why we should think of a good school education in these terms? It is hard to think of any. If you start from scratch and think about what good schooling might be like, you may or may not begin from something like the account of aims proposed below in Section 2. Whatever your starting point, it is unlikely – unless you are seriously convention-bound – to be anything near what we have now.

There is no satisfactory rationale for the academic curriculum. The only way we can make sense of it is historically, by seeing how it grew up in the first place. If we do this, we *do* in the end come across a rationale; but it is one more fit for the eighteenth century than for the twenty-first.

### ***Origins***

The 1988 curriculum could almost have been lifted from the 1904 regulations for the newly created state secondary schools. As my colleague Richard Aldrich (1988) has pointed out, the subjects specified for both are almost identical. There is a big difference, of course, in the clientele for which the two were intended. While the academic curriculum of 1988 was for five-year-olds upwards across the whole social spectrum, the 1904 version was meant for five to ten per cent of the secondary age group. Since these were largely middle-class children, it is not surprising that they were provided with what by that time had been officially recognised as a middle-class curriculum.

This recognition had come about a generation earlier, in the Taunton Report of 1868 (Royal Commission 1868), one of three national reports of that period, each explicitly concerned with future educational arrangements for a specific social class. The Clarendon Report addressed the upper class (Public Schools Commission 1864), Taunton the middle, and Newcastle the working class (Royal Commission on Education 1861). While, roughly speaking, the leading public schools were to be based mainly on the classics and elementary schools for the masses on the three Rs, schools for the middle classes were to have a so-called ‘modern’ curriculum based on a comprehensive range of academic subjects.

Why the association between the subject-based curriculum and this specific social class? For a detailed historical account, see White (2006: ch 5). Briefly, the connection goes back to the eighteenth century and before. The dominant group in the nineteenth century middle class consisted of Nonconformists (Dissenters). Until the early part of that century these had been largely excluded from Establishment-led public life since the 1660s, in the wake of Restoration measures against Puritan groups that had previously been in power. Confined to their own world, Dissenters had set up their own schools and institutions of higher education, based, like their Presbyterian cousins’ schools and universities in Scotland, on their own radical form of Protestantism. Central to their religion and educational thinking was the notion of personal salvation as a member of God’s elect. Ignorance was a vice that had to be overcome as a condition of

being saved. Knowledge was essential, knowledge of the manifold glory of God's created universe. It had to be comprehensive, encyclopaedic. It had to be founded on a general framework of abstract enquiries in which more concrete phenomena could find their place. Teaching had to be in discrete, neat categories and timetabled accordingly so as to waste no time. Students had to be regularly examined, to ensure that their learning, and hence the readiness of their souls for salvation, was in good condition.

The rationale behind these notions goes even further back, to ideas about logic held by Calvinists and other radical Protestant groups in the late sixteenth century. The upshot for us today is that by the early eighteenth century the recognisably modern curriculum was in place, the most abstract subjects like mathematics and natural philosophy (physics) having pride of place. The Dissenters' interest in maths and science, coupled with their theological attachment to social improvement, played a huge part in the creation of the industrial and commercial society of the nineteenth century. As time went on, the religious reasons for favouring the modern curriculum over the classical curriculum of the Establishment blended not only with more utilitarian ideas, but also – and especially – with the notion that a cultured interest in academic learning for its own sake was a mark of belonging to an increasingly well-heeled and self-confident middle class.

### ***Recent developments***

The traditional curriculum imposed in 1988 was not always bereft of aims. When it first grew up more than two centuries ago, it had a clear and urgent purpose. It was part of the spiritual regimen required for salvation. By the late twentieth century its theological buttresses had crumbled away. What – predominantly – remained was a belief in high culture as a badge of status.

Whether or not the middle-class secondary curriculum of separate academic subjects of the 1860s and before was suitable in our age for children from five upwards from every social class was a question that Kenneth Baker did not consider.

But in the 1990s, more and more teachers *did* question this curriculum. They wanted to know what it was *for*. The Labour Government and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) responded and devised an extensive set of aims, to be found at the beginning of the new *Handbook on the National Curriculum* published in 1999 (DfEE and QCA 1999a, 1999b).

Although these aims were presented simply as a list, without any rationale, they are an interesting development. They place a good deal of emphasis on the pupil's personal well-being, practical reasoning and preparation for civic life. Sixty per cent of the items in the list are about the personal qualities we would like pupils to have. Knowledge aims are also important, constituting 30 per cent of

the list. This is not surprising, given the broad basis of understanding necessary for a flourishing life.

The problem, though, was that the aims came *after* the laying down of the subjects. Almost all of these subjects had been compulsory since 1988 and dominant for decades before this. How would the new aims map on to the old subjects? What match was there between the two?

The answer is: scarcely any. If you look at the requirements for the various subjects in the *Handbook*, very few of these have anything to do with the post-1999 aims. The closest match comes with the new subjects of PSHE (personal, social and health education) and citizenship – not surprising, since these are not primarily academically orientated but about what pupils need to lead a flourishing personal life and be a good citizen. Design and technology, with its similarly practical bent towards devising appropriate means to desirable ends, is not far behind. But the same cannot be said for many of the other subjects, where the match to the aims is often poor. Science, mathematics, modern languages, history, music, PE and to a lesser degree other subjects seem locked within their own internal aims and little interested in the bigger picture. They tend to concentrate on transmitting the skills and knowledge that proto-specialists require in their subject so that they can become more fully-fledged specialists at a later stage.

In 2005 the QCA began a new project, still ongoing, to bring the content of the curriculum more into line with overall aims. The idea of an *aims-based* curriculum has taken root, first in the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland, and more recently in the QCA. In other words, the starting point is to clarify what the aims of a good school education should be and from there to look at how best to promote them. Traditional subjects, or elements within them, will no doubt have a place among these vehicles. But there is no good reason why they should be the only, or even the dominant vehicles.

Enthusiasm for an aims-based curriculum has grown apace in the last few years. The Royal Society of Arts was an early leader in the field, with its *Opening Minds* project (RSA 2005), based on a number of core competences needed for life in the modern world. It now has a number of schools following this programme at Key Stage 3. In many cases subject teaching is played down in favour of cross-curricular learning based on the kind of theme- or project-based work that, in the years before the National Curriculum came on stream, was to be found in the more imaginative primary schools.

Society-watchers on the look-out for changes in national *zeitgeist* should take note of what is happening at grass-roots level in schools and in major educational agencies and pressure groups. The 1988 settlement is now widely rejected. While government may be cautiously reluctant about radical change for

fear of being accused of flirting with the soggy progressivism of the 1960s, professionals are increasingly taking things into their own hands.

## **2. What might an aims-based curriculum look like?**

The short history of the National Curriculum has been an object lesson in how *not* to organise an educational system. The shift from professional to political control of the curriculum in 1988 made good sense. What the content of education should be cannot be wholly left to teachers. The curriculum should have some bearing on the shape of our future society. What this should be is a political question: in a democracy it is for the whole of the electorate to make decisions about it.

Where teachers *do* have a proper and unique expertise is in deciding how best to organise the delivery of a curriculum in the light of local circumstances – the interests and backgrounds of children in their class, school resources, the character of the outside community.

These considerations clearly point to a division of labour between politicians and professionals. The role of government is to map out the larger contours of a national curriculum – its overall aims, underlying values, and broad framework of requirements. It should leave detailed matters to teachers. There are a thousand and one ways of interpreting and realising a broad national scheme and professionals are the best people to do this.

The 1988 settlement got things the wrong way round. For many years after this date government paid no attention to aims – and it went far beyond its proper remit in prescribing detailed content.

The topsy-turviness of this policy is now widely recognised. The Government now wants to slim down national curriculum requirements, focus on ‘big ideas’ rather than specifics, and leave schools much more autonomy to devise their own programmes. At the same time, it is showing a greater interest in overall aims and values – seeing them no longer as high-minded mission statements that can be safely ignored in practice, but as ways of providing direction for school subjects and other curricular vehicles so that they can all work coherently together towards the same goals.

New national aims are now beginning to be formulated. When the process is complete, they need to be more than brief lists of desirable goals. They need to be accompanied by a rationale. Brief lists are likely to be abstract and general and open to multiple interpretations. The schools that have to operationalise the aims, to embody them in programmes and whole-school processes, need more determinate guidance. That is why a national aims statement needs a national

‘gloss’ – a reasoned explanation of what is meant by the items it includes and of their importance.

This does not mean issuing a philosophical treatise along with every copy of the aims statement. But neither does it mean avoiding the issue and making do with short lists, however neatly these can be packaged. Between the two extremes there is room for rationales at different levels and of different sorts. Any national aims statement needs to be accompanied by a *raison d’être* that indicates in broad outline how it is to be taken and the values on which it rests. But there also needs to be continuing face-to-face discussion with and among individual teachers and other professionals. This will help everyone towards a better grasp of the complexities of thinking at this level.

The more fundamental the concepts and values, the more fully they need reflection and discussion. Only in this way will practitioners be able to meet on common ground, see what scope there is for legitimate differences of interpretation, gaining a deeper insight into what can and must be shared. And only thus will they be able collectively to see the bigger picture and work together in a common enterprise.

Some may see this as a self-interested plea from a philosopher of education for teachers to have to immerse themselves in his discipline. I hope it is not that. Decades ago, initial teacher training courses were stuffed with educational theory, including philosophy as well as sociology, history and psychology. I was opposed to this then, and am so now. In a short pre-service course, there are greater, and more practical, priorities. But even so, there should be *some* room, even in a one-year course, for reflection on what schooling should be for and how its purposes may be best achieved. There is even more place for this in-service, when teachers have cut their teeth in their craft and can stand back a little to think about fundamentals. They need time for this – much more time than they can manage at present.

As a contribution to the wider debate we should now be having about what education should be for, I now present a first shot at a national aims statement. I am aware that, even with the brief rationale it provides along the way, it is abstract in places and may need further explanation and defence. I hope to be providing this in the near future.

### ***A statement of national aims for the school curriculum***

The English School Curriculum aims to help every young person to live a fulfilling life and to help others to do so. It does this within a framework of democratic citizenship in which each person is equally valued and each person is free to make her or his own decisions about how she or he is to lead her or his life.

Teachers and parents need a clear picture of the sort of person we would like a young person to become. This means thinking about the personal qualities he or she should possess – such things as wholehearted absorption in activities and relationships, kindness, respect for others as equals, independence of spirit, and enjoying working with others towards shared goals. In a modern democratic society, possessing these and other personal qualities requires a broad experience of a range of different activities as well as extensive knowledge and understanding – about human nature, the rest of the natural world, our own and other societies. It also depends on possessing the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT.

Presented below is a fuller account of these personal qualities, experiences, and kinds of understanding. Basic skills will henceforth be taken as read. For convenience's sake, the account is divided into four sections, but there are no sharp divisions between them. The first section is about the young person's own well-being, but this overlaps with the second and third, which are both about helping other people to flourish. The last section is about further personal qualities we all need in order to succeed.

## **[i] Personal fulfilment**

We want all young people to have a successful life. This means success in worthwhile activities and relationships that they have freely chosen and that they pursue wholeheartedly. Teachers and parents should help young people to:

- enjoy learning: be motivated to learn at school and in later life
- experience a range of absorbing activities (for example, community involvement, artistic and literary activities, the pursuit of knowledge, helping others, forms of work and enterprise, sport and exercise, making things, love of nature)
- make choices within this range and engage fully in certain activities
- participate wholeheartedly in preferred activities
- achieve success in different areas of activity
- engage in and sustain close and caring relationships when young and in later life
- acquire knowledge and understanding necessary for all the above.

However they find fulfilment, all young people have basic needs that will have to be met. So teachers and parents should help them to:

- live a healthy lifestyle and understand what makes for this (for example, diet, exercise, safety, emotional well-being)
- make competent decisions in relation to managing money and planning their finances for the future
- become discerning and critical consumers
- understand the basic prerequisites of a fulfilling life (for example, health, food, clean air and water, housing, income, education, various freedoms).

### **[ii] Social and civic involvement**

We have seen that what makes for one's own fulfilment is closely intertwined with other people's. With this in mind, pupils should be truthful, fair, trustworthy, decent, tolerant, generous, respectful, friendly, well-disposed towards others, sympathetic, helpful. Teachers and parents should help young people to:

- enjoy working with others towards shared goals and in a variety of roles
- relate to and communicate with other people appropriately in various contexts
- understand and manage interpersonal conflicts, negotiate and compromise where appropriate
- reflect on our human nature, its commonality and diversity, its heights and depths, and its relation to other parts of the natural order.

Pupils, as citizens in the making, should also be committed to such basic democratic values as political equality, self-determination, freedom of thought and action. They should treat each person as being of equal intrinsic importance, challenge discrimination and stereotyping, and be concerned for the well-being of other people as well as themselves, in their own society and beyond it. With this in mind, teachers should help them to:

- play a helpful part in the life of the school, neighbourhood, community and the wider world
- participate in democratic practices within the school and the community



- understand and respect cultural and community diversity, in both national and global contexts
- be aware of their own and others' responsibilities and rights as citizens
- critically assess the social roles and influence of the media in a modern democracy
- gain an understanding of the modern world and the place of England and the UK within it
- be aware of some of the ethical issues arising from scientific, technological and social change
- critically reflect on the aims of their schooling and on how to prioritise them.

### **[iii] Contribution to the economy**

Interesting work can be a major contributor to personal fulfilment as well as being beneficial to others. Young people should have the qualities required in a changing economy such as enterprise, flexibility, independence, cooperativeness and willingness to take risks. They should also be sensitive to the environmental issues connected to economic changes, locally and globally. They should respect the needs of both present and future generations and conflicts that may arise.

With these values in mind, teachers should help young people to:

- work collaboratively in the production of goods or services (for example, the school, people in the local community, people overseas)
- be aware of the rights of workers and employers
- critically examine how wealth is created and distributed, nationally and world-wide
- understand the economic interdependence of individuals, organisations and communities locally, nationally and globally
- understand the wide range of jobs from which they may choose
- be aware of the impact of science, technology and global markets on work patterns and prospects

- understand the local and international implications of lifestyle choices and economic development for the environment.

#### **[iv] Practical wisdom**

Whatever we do in life, in order to succeed we all need good practical judgement. Parents and teachers can help young people to acquire it. Young people need to be able to think rationally, imaginatively and flexibly about means to ends – and to keep priorities and conflicts among their goals and values under review. In acting on their decisions they need confidence, perseverance and patience. They have to sensibly manage their desires (for example, for food, drink, sex, attention and recognition) and emotions (for example, their fears, sympathies, feelings of resentment and of low self-worth). They have to learn to cope with set-backs, changes of circumstance, and uncertainty. They should be taught to resist undue pressure and challenges from peer groups, authority figures, the media, public opinion and self-deception. They should learn how to manage their own time, take the initiative, strike a sensible balance between risk-taking and caution. They also need good judgement on the intellectual side. This depends on possessing such qualities as clarity, objectivity, respect for evidence, and independence of thought.

### **3. From aims to curriculum**

There is no reason why the only, or even the best, ways of furthering these aims should be traditional academic subjects. There are other vehicles – projects, topics, practical enterprises, interdisciplinary work, and, not least, whole school processes. Of course, some historical, mathematical, scientific, literary, geographical understanding is necessary if students are going to attain the aims laid out above. No doubt, taken all together, it will be quite considerable. But it will focus on the kinds of understanding required by the overall aims and these may diverge from the traditional content of academic courses. In mathematics, elementary statistics that help people to critically assess the claims of political and other pundits may rise in perceived importance as compared with algebra and geometry. A grasp of the complexities of British and world twentieth-century social and economic history may also weigh more heavily in the balance, and the traditional trail through English history since the Romans somewhat more lightly. Some of this more academic learning may take place within subject boundaries; but much of it could be included in larger interdisciplinary projects, especially where imaginative approaches make learning more meaningful and enjoyable for the many pupils turned off by traditional approaches.

Grassroots rethinking of curricular patterns is proceeding apace, if only patchily. In the Suffolk village of Bealings, for instance, the primary school has reorganised its whole curriculum around carefully-constructed role-play. How far

schools in general may be expected to go in such imaginative directions is uncertain. Realists will point out that we have to start with what we have got – a framework in which the subjects are prominent and powerful. Teachers are used to thinking in subject categories and trained as subject specialists; parents generally see education in those terms; examiners assess within the same framework.

But at least one can put pressure on the subjects to bring their offerings into line with overall aims and to work more closely with other subjects to that end. This is what national curricular agencies in the UK are now doing. They are all working on overall aims, getting them into better logical shape. And they are devising ways of encouraging the subjects to see themselves more as servants of the aims than as self-contained worlds of their own.

#### **4. Assessment**

What implications might an aims-based curriculum have for *assessment*? There must first be clarity about the aims of assessment itself. We might, for instance, want to know how well a particular *pupil* is doing – for example, for diagnostic reasons, or in reporting to his or her parents, future educators or employers. Or we might use pupil assessments as performance indicators of how well a particular *school* (or larger system) is doing. I will look at each in turn.

##### ***Pupils***

If we reconceptualise schooling so that aims become more important and the particular means to achieving them less important, this has profound implications for how and why we assess pupil performance. The main thing we will want to know is how well the student is progressing in terms of the general aims. This means looking at personal qualities, practical reasoning and major forms of understanding and skills, as in the example of an aims statement above. We will want to know how far students enjoy learning, relate to other people in shared tasks, respect cultural diversity, and are competent in managing money. We will want them to understand what makes for a healthy lifestyle, be aware of ethical issues arising from science and technology, and understand the place of the UK in the modern world. In an aims-based system it will not be enough for pupils to understand such things in a hived-off way, as pieces of self-contained information. Part of what we will want them to learn is the bearing of the knowledge they acquire on the larger picture. We will want to assess their grasp of how facts about diet, exercise and other aspects of health illuminate what it is for people, themselves and others, to lead a fulfilling life.

Two considerations are important at this point.

First, whatever assessment procedures are adopted should be in line with overall aims and not run counter to them. If, for instance, we want all pupils to want to go on learning, we should not opt for a system that alienates pupils, undermines confidence and makes them anxious, or feel they are no good. Key Stage 3 tests on a Shakespeare play may be an example of the sort of thing to avoid. If, too, we want pupils to make the connections just mentioned between the details of what they learn and the overall aims that provide their rationale, we should not devise assessment systems that reward them for blinkered attention to specifics.

Second, insofar as personal qualities – intellectual and ethical qualities, including forms of practical judgement – are prominent among the new aims, the best people in a position to assess pupils have to be those who know them well. Dispositions cannot be measured by one-off performances. To know whether someone is enjoying learning, able to resist peer pressure, playing a helpful role in the life of the school, one has to see how the pupil behaves over time in a range of different situations. Only someone close to him or her, like a parent or teacher, is in any position to make such judgements. All this raises questions about the limits of impersonal, for instance nationwide, tests. It also invites thought about how to ensure the more personal forms of assessment are truly unbiased.

This second consideration also applies to some kinds of understanding and skill as well as to personal qualities. It may be possible to assess in an impersonal way, perhaps by a nationwide test, certain discrete and uncomplicated phenomena such as whether a child can spell certain words correctly or carry out arithmetical operations. (I leave out the problem caused by children being unable to do these things well in a test situation, even if they can usually do them perfectly). But the more one is looking for a wider and deeper understanding – of how one thing connects to another, of underlying principles and their application, of how the knowledge in question bears on ethical matters about how individuals and societies can best flourish – the more one needs to know the person being assessed, the interpretations he or she is making, and the way he or she sees things. This is, once again, something that cannot be expected of an impersonal national tester. Only someone in daily and indeed relatively intimate contact with the examinee is in an appropriate position to make good judgements.

Both sets of considerations point towards there being a strong case for some sort of records of achievement. In constructing them, there will be a major role for teachers, especially those who know the pupils in question really well. There is also every reason why parents should participate in the process, and also pupils themselves.

### ***Schools***

I turn finally to assessment of how a school is doing. How far is the school on track to achieve overall aims? In face-to-face visits and in other ways, inspectors

could try to find out, among other things, how well the school organises its work to achieve the aims – within lessons and via whole school processes. How well do staff work together in the pursuit of these goals? What is the school's own self-evaluation of how well it is meeting the aims?

With secondary schools one could look at staying-on rates. For all schools, assessors could look at anonymised samples of records of achievement; at parental and pupil perceptions of how well the school is keeping on track; and perhaps at material from websites about the school. It would not be possible to grade one school against another in a fine-tuned, let alone quantifiable, way, based largely on assessments of individual pupil performances. But it *would* be possible, using the means suggested, to make suggestions about improvements and to see whether a school is following them. Overall, once again, we need to have more trust in local and more personal data.

## **Conclusion**

We have come to take for granted a certain way of thinking about school education. We take it as read that this should be based around a traditional range of school subjects. But we need to start further back. The traditional curriculum may have had a plausible rationale in the past, given certain religious assumptions, but it is an odd starting-point for the twenty-first century. We need to ask fundamental questions. What is school education *for*? What should be its aims in a society like our own? How can these aims best be realised in the timetabled curriculum and in the wider life and ethos of the school? How can we best assess to what extent pupils are receiving an education in line with these aims?

There is no point in hanging on to a curriculum that may have suited an up-and-coming social group in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but needs radical reshaping today. We talk of pupils' entitlements. What this often means is specific – to learn to read and so on. A more fundamental entitlement is to a curriculum that hangs together, that is working to the same desirable goals. At present, most children *do not* have this. They have a curriculum of isolated units. For some of them this makes little sense and they switch off. Others take it that those in charge know best and that it all adds up somehow. But it does not add up. We all owe it to all children to give them an education that makes sense, and equips them for a fulfilling personal life and for helping others to lead one.

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