

Subject to Change: New Thinking On The Curriculum

Introduction

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers, representing over 160,000 staff in a variety of educational institutions, believes that its members' working lives are affected as much by education policies as by pay and conditions decisions. The Government determines what teachers teach, how they teach, and how learning is assessed, which together form the heart of a teacher's everyday working experience.

ATL has a history of publications and policies contributing to debates on these issues. Its *Teaching to Learn* campaign ran from 2002 until the end of 2005. The campaign produced several successful events and 11 specially commissioned reports, including *A Learner's Curriculum: Towards a curriculum for the twenty-first century* by Mike Newby.

ATL judges that the time is right for a renewed national debate on early years and school curricula. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the uneasy settlement represented in the current national curriculum. The responsible UK agency, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), is itself stimulating a rethink, while the Primary National Strategy reconsiders the Foundation Stage as a stage for children from birth to age five. This position statement contributes to this debate and also provides a framework for future work by ATL, as it raises many questions beyond the scope of this short summary.

The bulk of this position statement relates specifically to England. The Welsh Assembly Government has used its devolved powers to make significant changes to the proposed early years provision and has produced the consultation document entitled *Flying Start*, which recognises the importance of 'play'. Also, the Welsh Baccalaureate Diploma represents a step in the direction of a broader curriculum in the 14–19 phase. Whilst in Northern Ireland, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has attempted to graft a skills framework onto a subject-based curriculum. This statement goes beyond this work.

A national curriculum?

The national curriculum was introduced by means of the Education Reform Act 1988, following a decade of debate. Central to that debate were linked the propositions listed below:

- all pupils should be entitled to access a broad and balanced curriculum;
- individual schools had complete autonomy on curriculum issues and many did not provide this entitlement. There was a strong tendency towards class and gender differentiation;
- the state should intervene to secure pupils' entitlement.

In 1988 there was a very large consensus in favour of a national curriculum, with the notion of entitlement at the heart. Social justice continues to demand an entitlement for all.

ATL remains committed to the idea of a national curriculum.

What kind of national curriculum?

Supporting a national curriculum does not mean supporting the present national curriculum, the drawbacks of which have become clear:

- its complete coverage is a substantial barrier to innovation, although ATL celebrates those professionals who have overcome this;
- its detail is over prescriptive;
- its design by committees of experts in academic subjects, and the associated assessment, has not resulted in a broad and balanced learning experience;
- the highly centralised model has produced a state curriculum, subject to the enthusiasms of passing ministers.

ATL seeks a national curriculum which eradicates these drawbacks

A question which has never been resolved with respect to a national curriculum is this, is schooling concerned with the whole person as a physical, moral, social and intellectual being, or is it about the acquisition of a narrow range of skills and knowledge, which are evidenced in a particular form, such as the written word, with diversionary activities for those who cannot cope? Whilst statements of principle emphasise the former, the curriculum as taught looks suspiciously like the latter.

A twenty-first century curriculum cannot have the transfer of knowledge at its core for the simple reason that the selection of what is required has become problematic in an information rich age. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development suggests that we live in a 'knowledge economy' but that we need to think carefully about what actually constitutes knowledge. It proposes four distinct types: *know-what*, *know-why*, *know-how* and *know-who* and suggests that there is growing demand for the latter three compared with the more straightforward factual knowledge embodied in *know-what*. The traditional school curriculum consists of the *know-what* category.

ATL proposes a national curriculum model which starts with pupil needs and interests and is designed in terms of the skills and attitudes that we want pupils to acquire and develop.

There should be a light national curriculum framework setting out the skills and attitudes which pupils need now and in the future for employment, caring roles and citizenship. These should be

generic skills, rather than an attempt to 'second guess' the actual skills which will be required, for example, by employers. ATL believes that there is a universal set of skills needed by all young people in the UK; the national curriculum should be truly comprehensive, with no need for different pathways for 'different kinds of pupils'.

Another feature of the framework should be a rebalancing of the status of different kinds of skills. The QCA is developing a curriculum model based on the five outcomes from *Every Child Matters*:

- be healthy;
- stay safe;
- enjoy and achieve;
- make a positive contribution;
- achieve economic well-being.

ATL's model has a number of similarities. If the curriculum is to meet all the needs of the whole pupil, without denying the importance of literacy and numeracy, it cannot be an 'academic' curriculum where pupils spend most of their time reading and writing and learning facts that have been organised into academic 'subjects'. Instead, the national curriculum should give equal weight to a variety of skills that will be useful in the whole range of adult roles, including but not limited to the economic role. These would include:

- physical skills of co-ordination, control, manipulation and movement;
- creativity;
- communication;
- information management;
- learning and thinking skills;
- interpersonal;
- citizenship.

This light framework national curriculum should be designed using a different process to that used at present:

- it should be built from the foundations up, i.e. from the Early Years Foundation Stage through to the successive Key Stages;
- it will specify what learners are able to do, rather than what they know.

In practice, this cannot be achieved by committees of subject specialists; early years and primary practitioners must play a more significant role.

There are already examples of models based on this conception, but they struggle to co-exist with knowledge-based assessment. The most challenging proposal for policy-makers and professionals is that traditional testing would be inappropriate in such a model. **A skills-based national curriculum requires assessment of pupil skills rather than pupil knowledge.** Some implications of this are discussed below.

The local curriculum

The present model is one of the most prescriptive national curricula in the world. The detail includes what pupils should be taught, the activities and contexts they should experience and statements of what they should know and be able to do, all within a framework of specified subjects. It lends itself to standardised external assessment but exacerbates the lack of

ownership by teachers and the deprivation of space for innovation. In theory it should prevent repetition and overlap, except where planned, although in practice this has not always been achieved. This is also the case with another suggested advantage of a prescribed curriculum, that of continuity for mobile pupils.

The light national framework described above should set out in broad terms a universal entitlement. Combined with appropriate accountability, it would ensure balance and breadth for all young people. However, it would not prescribe the detail or amount to a set of national syllabuses.

ATL believes that the curriculum as taught should be designed locally. It should be based upon a needs analysis which is set in the context of a national entitlement and strategy but is rooted in local circumstances. Local development should focus on the knowledge content through which the skills can be developed. This would enable teachers to provide curricula that are more relevant to their pupils' needs and interests, and promote greater spontaneity. This rationale can be applied from the Early Years Foundation Stage through to Key Stage four and is therefore cohesive.

ATL does not specify a definition of 'local', but would expect a variety of models to develop. These might be at school or cluster level, or perhaps at local authority or even regional levels, but they must contain the flexibility to respond to local and changing needs. A local curriculum raises many issues, some of which are addressed below.

Assessment and selection

A state education system inevitably has the function of selecting pupils for future learning and employment roles, so that some national assessment system is unavoidable. However, ATL has long opposed Key Stage national testing arrangements as being counter-productive in terms of pupils' learning. The adoption of a skills-defined and locally developed curriculum would produce more fundamental questions about assessment.


The broad range of skills described above is not amenable to mainly paper tests; an expert assessor must observe the skill in use. Some previous skills models have been broken down into competences which are capable of tick-box assessment, encouraging a limiting pedagogy which is the opposite of ATL's intention. By definition, a locally designed curriculum is not amenable to national testing.

International evidence now clearly links high pupil achievement with systems which postpone national assessment and selection. **There should be no national assessment system prior to a terminal stage.** This includes any national system of teacher assessment. ATL supported the Tomlinson proposals which included assessment reform at 16+ and 18+, with the implied replacement of the current GCSE and A level systems, and believes that further national debate is needed on a terminal assessment appropriate to our curriculum proposals.

ATL recognises continuing concern with proficiency in literacy, numeracy and IT skills. It believes there is a case for a national proficiency test arrangement in these areas, so that pupils can take a test from a national bank on a when-ready basis.

Academic/vocational – a sterile dichotomy

ATL understands how dissatisfaction with the current secondary curriculum has led professionals to embrace a 'vocational' alternative. Indeed, many 'vocational' courses have the benefits of a better focus on pupil needs and a pedagogy emphasising skills. Yet the present



'academic' offering is dissatisfying to the successful and unsuccessful pupil alike. The model proposed above rejects the current direction for two reasons.

Firstly, the skills identified in a new national curriculum would be required by everyone, and for the whole range of their adult roles. There is growing evidence that the skills wanted by employers of starting employees are exactly those needed by people in all the adult roles they will perform. This is why ATL believes that the new national curriculum should be universal, with no optional pathways, at least until the approach of a terminal assessment.

Secondly, the introduction of pathways must involve a de facto pupil selection which reduces aspiration, motivation, and overall performance. If the underlying reason for introducing 'vocational' courses is to improve attitudes to learning, ATL believes that a locally designed skills-based curriculum for all, with the more active pedagogy which it will produce, will address that need more comprehensively. Indeed, for pupils of all ages it has the capacity to increase motivation, to reduce disaffection, truancy, bad behaviour and exclusions; to tackle under-achievement and to promote disability, race, class and gender equality.

Staffing a new national curriculum

The changes proposed above would entail huge changes for school staff, particularly teachers, but the changes would be entirely in accordance with ATL's policies. Its position statement entitled *New Professionalism* regards teaching as essentially intellectual as well as practical. Teachers ought to be equipped and empowered to lead a continuing debate within their schools about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The current balance between professional autonomy and prescription by government and managers is inappropriate; teaching has to be a learning and innovating profession with a real entitlement to continuing development. ATL asserts that the collective intellectual power of the teaching force should be recognised as a major national asset and be utilised to create a more vibrant education system. Such a system would be both more attractive to and more successful for learners.

Persistence of the current model of teachers as technicians, implementing the decisions of others, would lead to the progressive reduction of the national stock of knowledge about curriculum theory. ATL accepts that the implementation of a locally designed curriculum based on skills would require a very substantial programme of teacher education and development, but this would be welcomed by the profession if appropriately explained and provided.

ATL remains committed to finding further solutions to the issues surrounding teachers' workload, but recognises that this is not a simple case of counting hours. Teachers are concerned about control of workload, whether a task is imposed or self generated. The workload issue would be transformed by teacher ownership of the curriculum. Teachers are suspicious of changes to assessment systems on workload grounds, but a local curriculum would have no national assessment and no reporting except for the terminal system described above; this alone would remove time-consuming tasks.

Although teacher ownership would be a major benefit of a new curriculum, ATL believes that teachers should be accountable. The curriculum should be designed in partnership with local stakeholders such as parents and the community. Government also has the right to accountability; with the removal of the present test regime, a government is likely to need assurance on alternative mechanisms. ATL will produce proposals for rationalising the current overlapping systems of teacher accountability in due course.

Conclusion

This statement proposes very substantial changes to the national curricula for England and Wales. The proposals can only be set out in broad outline, with references to the very substantial implications for assessment systems and pedagogy. ATL recognises that a long period of debate will be needed before any decisions can be made by government to pilot such change. In the interim, ATL will approach 'real world' developments within the context of the philosophy outlined above.

ATL will continue to work on the detail of a locally designed skills-based national curriculum, including the kinds of associated assessment, as well as issues of teacher accountability that arise. ATL will seek to work with other stakeholders to generate policies with the widest possible sponsorship. However, ATL is convinced that the version of national curriculum arising from a highly centralised imposition of detail has served its purpose and must be replaced. A government committed to further improving public services will recognise the workforce as its major asset, and set it free to produce those improvements.