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## **From School Management to Curriculum Leadership**

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### **Introduction**

I changed the original title of this lecture when I realized that a significant proportion of the audience were from primary schools. Much of the content and the overall argument has not changed. The shift in emphasis I am proposing is symbolized by my revised title **From School Management to Curriculum Leadership**. This does not mean that the routines of management are not still necessary. However it places the curriculum – the principles on which a school decides what to teach- as shaping all other responsibilities that face schools and their Head teachers. Secondly, Leadership unlike management is not the sole prerogative of Head teachers, especially in organizations like schools that are staffed by members of a profession institution.

My argument for a change of emphasis arises from my understanding of **the new policy context** that schools face. It also arises from my view of the curriculum. I say this with the proviso that my own work has been entirely concerned with the secondary phase of schooling. I have tried to bear in mind the very different situation facing those working in primary schools. However, I am aware that my examples are largely drawn on secondary schools- that was my own teaching experience. On the other hand, my starting point, the question ‘what are schools for?’ is not specific to any phase or type of school. I hope therefore that that what I say will engage the concerns of those from primary schools.

## **2. The new policy context facing schools**

I suggest that the **new context** that schools have to respond to has two aspects? Firstly, the new freedoms that the Coalition government claims to offer individual schools. Secondly, the inevitable fragmentation and competition that will be the inevitable outcome of the government’s drive for more Academies and more Free schools. I am concerned today primarily with the first of these aspects of the new context .

The curriculum has always been one the responsibilities of Head Teachers. What I think is changing is that decisions about the curriculum at school level(as well as at National Level) , will shape what schools can do more than ever before. It is a school’s curriculum priorities that convey to staff and students and to parents, what a school’s purposes are and what it can (and cannot) do. Schools are not social work organisations or agents of the health service and secondary schools cannot solve the problems of school leavers without jobs.

### **So, what can schools do that no other institutions in our society can do?**

Schools, I suggest, are the first and primary institution where young people can gain access to **knowledge**- not **any** knowledge, but **knowledge** that takes them beyond their experience in ways that are not possible in the home or in the community. It is the knowledge that prepares them to engage as future citizens in an increasingly the complex modern world. An Australian colleague and friend of mine put it more grandly-

*'it is the knowledge that enables the next generation to participate in a society's conversation about itself and its future'* Not a bad ideal, although not so easy in practice. It is, however, the democratic promise of schooling for all and it is, in my view, why we have schools and why those countries with few schools are expanding them as fast as they can.

What then follows for how we should think about the curriculum? And what is it about the present moment that has thrust Head teachers into being first and foremost curriculum leaders ?

### **What is a curriculum?**

1. If the national curriculum defines the knowledge a society wants students to acquire, this knowledge and hence the curriculum goals of a school **will be the same for all students** regardless of the different experiences they bring to school. A common curriculum represents the democratic promise of public education. It is in the most basic sense non-discriminatory- there is nothing discriminatory about Shakespeare plays or Newton's laws or the extent to which 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialization of this country relied on colonial military power, and in its early stages, slavery.

The implications of this point were highlighted by Alison Wolf in her recent report on 14-19 vocational education. She referred to research which interviewed a representative sample of mothers of pre-school children about their aspirations for their children. Over 80% hoped their children would go to university. I mention this not only to contrast it with the present reality in this country where the proportion of those going to university looks likely to go down for maybe the first time in history. Alison's point is important also because it demonstrates the dramatic change in the aspirations of parents in the last 50 years. The democratic promise of public education and access to university is not something teachers foist on unwilling parents.

2. Why then is **curriculum leadership** taking on a new importance? By curriculum leadership I am referring to the decisions and judgments that a school makes about what it teaches and how and the principles underlying those decisions. My argument is that in the new context, implicitly or explicitly, a school's curriculum priorities and principles will influence all the other resource, staffing, discipline decisions that they face.

### **The two faces of a changing context**

I find it useful to distinguish between two kinds of change in the context that schools face;

- those which emphasise **less national prescription** and **less guidance** for schools, and
- those which may lead to an **increase in prescription**.

### **Changes implying less prescription**

- The disappearance of Local Authority advisers and Inspectors, and for some schools, the severance of any links with LEAs
- The replacement of HMI by OfSTED and the loss of former's strong curriculum advisory role- 1992
- The abolition of the QCDA and its detailed prescriptions about what and how schools should teach
- The Secretary of State's commitment to substantially reducing prescription in the revised National Curriculum

- For secondary schools, the extension of the range of examinations recognized by the DFE (e.g the IGCSE, the IB and Cambridge Pre-U)

### **Changes implying more prescription- all these effect secondary schools but primary schools only indirectly**

- The Russell Group universities listing their preferred A levels
- The EBacc as the new accounting measure for secondary school League Tables
- The abolition of equivalence between academic and vocational qualifications and the changes in how vocational qualifications are recognized within performance tables.

Overall individual schools will have more choice. It follows that they will need to be far more explicit internally and to their parents and pupils about the basis on which they make their choices- in other words, their curriculum priorities

Schools will undoubtedly find themselves in an increasingly 'market-like' situation. This means that the most basic choice schools will have to make will be the extent to which they allow the market( for them, the preferences of parents and pupils) to shape their curriculum or whether, as I would argue, they use their curriculum as a tool for shaping that market.

In what ways might a school's curriculum shape the decisions of pupils and parents?

- In the range, groupings and sequencing of subjects that it offers and the assumptions that such decisions make
- In its messages to **pupils**- in helping them to define their goals, to identify the steps they have to take to achieve these goals, and in making clear the efforts that will need to achieve them
- In its messages to **staff** about their role as specialists and as members of the whole school community
- In its messages to **parents**, about what the school can offer, and why what the school values is really important for every child.

This last point might suggest an over-paternalist view of a school's attitude to parents. I reject this view. It is no more paternalist than the advice given by other professions- lawyers or doctors for example- to their clients or patients. To leave key decisions about a child's education to parents without trying to influence them is not consistent with teaching being a profession. In this country we do not give enough recognition to the professional judgment of teachers. It can lead teachers to forget the extent to which in all aspects of their work they necessarily make professional judgments.

Personally I think, that despite the risks involved, these are positive developments.. An optimistic way of expressing them is that schools will come to see themselves more as organizations making decisions based professional judgments and less as bureaucracies following rules laid down elsewhere. That will not make such decisions any easier. In fact schools without a clear and shared sense of their own purposes will find life much more difficult.

### **The new policies and the purposes of schools**

The current Secretary of State, Michael Gove, has a clear educational vision which we can agree or disagree with. At least he has one; an educational vision is not something his predecessors were noted for. It is symbolized by two in many ways contradictory priorities:

- his emphasis on subject knowledge- albeit a distinctly old fashioned and static view of subjects - the most recent example is his proposal that all children should learn a 2<sup>nd</sup> language from the age of 5.
- his belief in giving more **responsibility** to individual schools and teachers AND more **freedom** to parents to choose schools for their children.

It is the second of these priorities that has led him to encourage all schools to become academies and to fund parent groups to establish free schools. This is not my topic today; so I will only make one point. If Gove is serious about his curriculum vision, it will not be realized if he allows academies and free schools to disregard the National Curriculum which expresses his vision.

### **Curriculum alternatives**

Gove's emphasis on subjects (especially through the introduction of the EBacc) is of course strongly opposed by the Labour Party and many of the teacher unions as elitist, discriminatory and an imposition on a significant proportion of pupils. They argue for a more flexible curriculum and for making the 14+ curriculum more open to pupil choice. The problem with such an approach is that it gives choice to just those students who are least well equipped to be aware of the implications of their choices. Clearly Labour politicians have not read Alison Wolf's report. It is worth re-stating two of her arguments;

- no economies of the future are going to offer employment to more than a tiny fraction of 16 year olds whatever skills or knowledge they may have.
- the lesson from countries with more successful systems than ours is not a curriculum from 14+ more related to the economy; it is a **better general education for all**.

This takes us to the most difficult educational questions of all:

- what is an appropriate general education for all pupils in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- How far can the old ideas of liberal education which Gove endorses so strongly become the basis for a curriculum for all?
- Is such a curriculum irredeemably elitist- and if so what are the alternatives that do not as now, lead 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of each cohort to take useless quasi-vocational courses that lead them nowhere?

These are not just questions of academic interest to be debated in seminars- although they should be. They are going to be of immense practical significance for how individual schools design their curriculum. They address the most basic educational question- what do we want our pupils to know by the time they leave school?

Does a school commit itself to a 'subject knowledge for all' curriculum, for all students up to the age of 16? This would mean extremely difficult questions about pupil disaffection and its pedagogic challenges. At the same time we must be aware that having a common curriculum for all is not just an educational decision taken by a school- it is a decision about the kind of society we want.

## Thinking about the curriculum

In suggesting a way of thinking about these issues, I want to make ONE proviso and THREE distinctions that I think are important.

My proviso is that today my focus is primarily on the curriculum for students between 11 and 16. This means that I shall not address two equally important issues- the role of subjects in the primary curriculum and the issue of specialization in the post 16 curriculum and to what extent the inequalities perpetuated by separate academic and vocational qualifications can be reduced. These issues are important but - but they are topics for another lecture. With regard to primary curriculum, and the role of subjects, as I mentioned earlier I have no claim to expertise. However, I think there is one question we cannot avoid- especially in the context of the government's subject-based approach to the curriculum and the growing number of primary schools becoming academies. The private fee paying primary schools, usually known as preparatory schools, have a curriculum that is much more subject-oriented for pupils from the age of 7 or 8. Is this as those schools would doubtless claim, a better preparation for younger pupils than the more child centred focus of most primary schools? I do not have an answer to this question, but I am sure we should be asking it.

Let me turn to my *three* distinctions. They are as follows:

First, I suggest that we need two concepts when we refer to the curriculum- *National* and *School*. The *national curriculum* lays down the core knowledge to be studied by all pupils. That is what we expect the current Commission to come up with. The *school curriculum* refers to the curriculum of each individual school. Each school, in establishing its *School* curriculum will interpret and select from the *National* curriculum and its guidelines the range of subjects it offers and how they are sequenced from year to year. *School* curricula will reflect the *national curriculum* but also the staff available and, to some extent, the local context and history of the school.

Secondly, I want to distinguish between three types of knowledge - what I refer to as *conceptual* knowledge associated with subjects, *content* or factual knowledge and the everyday or *common sense* knowledge that pupils bring to school. A few words about each.

*Conceptual knowledge* refers to the ideas and concepts associated with different subjects that are generally agreed by subject specialists. It is the concepts in any subject which offer students the possibility of generalizing from particular examples. Subjects and their concepts are not fixed- subject specialists constantly revise them; however they have significant stability over time. Without the degree of stability that subjects provide teachers would find planning their school curriculum almost impossible. There is also a powerful argument that subjects with their clear boundaries, offer pupils an important basis for building their identities as learners. The degree of agreement on *conceptual knowledge* varies widely across different subjects- especially when the sciences are compared with the humanities. However this does not preclude agreement on what conceptual issues are important. Most history teachers, for example, share an idea of what they hope their students will learn by studying history.

The second type of knowledge I refer to as *Content knowledge; this* refers to all specific facts which may or may not be associated with a subject.

This distinction between conceptual and content knowledge is important because it underlies the government's proposals for a less prescriptive National Curriculum. It

will, we understand, specify the **concepts** associated with the different subjects but reduce the prescribed lists of specific **contents**. This does not leave content entirely up to individual schools because subject concepts are never entirely separate from contents- it is contents that give concepts meaning. For example as an ex chemistry teacher I taught about non metals as a concept but also about specific non- metals like phosphorus and sulphur as facts.

The third type of knowledge I want to refer to is what I call the common sense or **everyday knowledge** pupils bring to school- their experience in other words. Some educational researchers have stressed the differences between school(conceptual) and non school(factual) knowledge. Let me illustrate. A pupil lives in a city- they know about the part of the city they live in- its streets, its shops and so on. This is an example of the everyday knowledge that pupils bring to school- it will be different for each pupil. At some point, however, pupils will meet a geography teacher. Geography teachers have a very different kind of knowledge about cities- how they differ, their history and how they are changing. This is the conceptual knowledge of geography; it does not replace a pupil's everyday knowledge- it broadens it and enables a pupil to distance themselves from their immediate experience. This leads me to my third distinction- between **curriculum** and **pedagogy**.

**Curriculum** as I have said refers to the concepts that are specified by the National Curriculum and how this is expressed in the school curriculum of each individual school. Why should a school curriculum be subject-based?

Subjects are derived by subject specialists from the academic disciplines that are the main basis on which new knowledge is produced through research. It is the link between subjects and disciplines that guarantees that school students have access to the most reliable knowledge we have in different fields.

**Pedagogy**, in contrast, refers to the activities of teachers and the teacher-led activities of pupils(in and out of school). Pedagogy draws on the specialist subject knowledge of teachers and their theories of teaching and learning. Two things are important to say about pedagogy.

First, pedagogy relies on the **professional knowledge** of teachers- their subject knowledge and their knowledge of pedagogy. Teachers acquire their subject knowledge in their first degree and their pedagogic knowledge in their initial training, through their experience as teachers and through their professional development. It is on the basis of this **professional knowledge** that the sequencing, pacing and selection of knowledge in a school's curriculum is undertaken in any schools - either implicitly or explicitly.

Secondly, **pedagogy** can be clearly distinguished from **curriculum**. In developing their approach to pedagogy teachers inevitably start, not only with the curriculum and their ideas about their subject *but with the experiences that pupils bring to school*. These experiences are the basis on which they introduce pupils to the concepts of the different subjects. They are crucial to pedagogy but have no relevance for the curriculum.

Enabling students to move from the common sense knowledge that they bring to school and to engage with the subject-based concepts of the curriculum is central to the purpose and process of all education. It involves pupils acquiring new concepts, but it is not a one-way transfer process. Pupils only really grasp subject-based concepts when they are able to use them to interpret and go beyond their everyday experience.

So while the *curriculum* excludes the experience of pupils- it points to where they are going; *pedagogy draws on* that experience- it starts where they are- and enables pupils to engage with the concepts defined the curriculum.

To summarise this section-

If you are reviewing your school curriculum or deciding how to engage with the new National Curriculum when it is announced, one starting point might be the three distinctions I have referred to:

- Between the national and the school curriculum
- between conceptual, content and common sense knowledge
- between curriculum and pedagogy

There is much more to be said about conceptual basis of subjects and there is really exciting work being undertaken teachers in collaboration with university-based researchers, that I am aware of -particularly in geography and history. I have no time to refer to it here.

Subjects represent a partly *conservative* element in the school curriculum but I am not using the term in its political sense- they are how we 'conserve' the knowledge acquired by previous generations. However, this conservatism is why some educational researchers have mistakenly seen subjects as a form of 'cultural tyranny'. However if subjects are not just 'any old knowledge but powerful knowledge that all should have access to, it is denying access to the concepts that have been developed by subject specialists that is conservative in the political sense. This denial is achieved in one of two ways- by how the curriculum is designed and interpreted to exclude access to knowledge for some, and by not making the necessary resources available to schools- especially to appoint subject specialists.

Without the tried and tested methods of subjects, each generation of teachers would have to 'start from scratch' and we would never get more reliable or innovative pedagogy. It is unfortunate that in their proposals for improving teacher education, the present government dismisses the idea of professional knowledge. They appear to imagine that new teachers can rely on the subject knowledge they gained in their first degrees, their early experience of teaching and 'tips' from current teachers- a kind of 'throw them in at the deep end' approach that no other profession would countenance.

## **Conclusions**

I want to conclude by returning to the alternatives posed by Michael Gove and those opposing him. This is not to see the curriculum as part of a political debate but as a way of raising the question of curriculum leadership. My points relate specifically to secondary schools; However the principles concerning the basis on which schools make curriculum judgments apply generally.

In her report, Alison Wolf refers to the 'the perverse incentives of our system', that are associated with the assessment regime, the Performance Tables and funding and their disastrous consequences. She demonstrates how these incentives have, in the case of secondary schools, led them to expand their provision of what she describes as 'worthless courses that lead nowhere'. The question is how far these 'perverse incentives' are systemic- giving very little opportunity for schools to act differently and how far are they a product of how some schools view the curriculum. A The final section makes a few brief points on this complex issue.

1. The reality that between a half and a third of each cohort lose a sense that the curriculum has any meaning for them by the age of 14 or 15 is a genuinely difficult and not a new issue. It is not helpful just blame the curriculum supported by the previous government. They were not ill-willed in encouraging schools to look for new ways for widening participation anymore than the schools were ill-willed in developing such courses. However, the question neither government nor schools asked was what were they providing access to in offering such courses; a false sense of success, perhaps?

My argument is that these courses offered **access** – more students stayed at school, but not access to powerful knowledge- knowledge that would connect them to the world outside schools and examination Boards. Educational access is not like the access associated with opening a door- it is a process that takes place over time; it is more like entering a community; in the case of many so-called vocational courses the only communities were those that linked schools and examination Boards- they offered no connections to the wider world. In contrast, entering a community of subject teachers puts students in touch with the much wider community of physicists or historians in universities or in the case of applied subjects- the communities associated with accountants or electrical engineers in real workplaces. That is what real educational access is about. It does not point to easy answers and it puts a heavy responsibility on both teachers and students.

2. It is also mistaken to put the blame on schools for the problems of low achievement and useless courses. Schools are part of an increasingly unequal society and those inequalities will inevitably be expressed in what schools can do, whatever curriculum they adopt. Worthless quasi-vocational courses are example of this; in the 1980s it was YTS or Youth Training, which took students out of school. This does not mean schools are powerless. What options are there?

Realities and options for schools

1. We must be clear about our commitment not just to *schooling for all* but a **common curriculum** for all. We also need to be clear that a common curriculum is not an imposition like the Marxist Leninism that was imposed on all students in the Soviet Union.

A common curriculum is not an imposition for two reasons. Firstly learners are always active participants in giving meaning to the school's curriculum. Secondly, a common curriculum is or should be based on the most reliable ideas that we have in any field of knowledge. This knowledge- I call it powerful knowledge- is the nearest we get to truth, and knowledge, unlike dogma is open not closed even if at times as a student, even at university, it does not seem like that. A good example of the openness of knowledge is the Italian physicists who have recently measured neutrinos moving faster than light. If their findings are accepted by the physics community, Einstein's theory of relativity (and his famous equation  $E=mc^2$ ) which underpins all modern physics, will have to be changed. I am not a physicist but my bet is that they will find a flaw in the experiments and Einstein's equation will be saved- for but only for now!

Secondly, as educators we are responsible for making the most reliable knowledge we have in any field so far available to all- at least as far as we can. What Newton discovered and the plays Shakespeare wrote are not elitist even though they are taught at Eton and Winchester. What is elitist is excluding some students from that knowledge. This of course is not a justification for making all courses 'open to all'. It is not being professional to accept students on to an A level course who do not have the Grades at GCSE that your experience tells you are necessary.

Thirdly, we should recognize that in our kind of society, our responsibility as educators is difficult to fulfill and not immediately achievable by all students. Committed teachers confident in their subject knowledge and their professional knowledge of teaching and learning can substantially increase the proportion of students who achieve but this will not include all students. The parallel for me is that we do not blame doctors when someone with a particularly severe illness dies.

Fourthly, A subject based curriculum is not necessarily about demanding compliance with what is given, although in my view Michael Gove's approach is not far from this. It involves accepting that subject learning is the nearest we have to access to the truth and like anything worthwhile is difficult. It is sometimes a sweat- more like 'manual labour of the mind'!

I began with the question of leadership and the decisions that a Head teacher and her or his staff have to make about their curriculum. I will end with two quotes from- Keith Grint- Professor of Leadership at the University of Warwick . You might like to think- if you are a teacher, whether the two quotes describe your Head and if you are a Head whether they describe how you try to do your job as a Curriculum Leader!

*"leadership describes the way that individuals are wrestling with really complicated, complex problems that don't have simple answers"*

*"The success of leadership is about how comfortable people are with uncertainty"*

I think these statements capture important elements of the role of the Head as a Curriculum Leader; it also implies that it is not only Heads who are involved in leadership in a school- teachers are curriculum leaders everyday in the classroom. On the other hand, uncertainty has its limits as a virtue when decisions have to be made. What Keith Grint misses out are two equally important things:

- Your professional expertise and experience as a Head or a teacher
- Your educational vision for the school and its curriculum as a Head and the extent to which it is shared by your staff, your pupils and your parents.

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