

THE CURRICULUM

Gallimaufry to coherence

Mary Myatt

'An absolutely sizzling synthesis of practical wisdom about curriculum' - David Weston

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Reviews

'This book weaves together theory, research, policy, and practice to provide educators at every stage of their career a practical guide to coherent curriculum design. Chapters divided by subject and strategy make it easy to keep coming back to, whilst Mary's humorous and intelligent prose make it a pleasure to read.'

Claire Hill, Head of English and Media Studies, Dover Grammar School for Girls

'This book has been invaluable and really balances theory, critical argument and practical applications for how we can achieve this in our curriculum planning and subject CPD.'

Aja Cortizo, Professional Development Team Lead, Glyn School

'This is exactly what I needed to read before the team goes to rewrite the curriculum this term. It is definitely a must-read to completely rethink the curriculum because it covers all aspects to truly ensure 'high challenge and low threat' across all subjects. I'm so excited about redesigning the teaching and learning to ensure children are engaged and inspired.'

Flora Barton, Headteacher, Crowmarsh Gifford CE Primary School

‘Globally, new attention is being given to curriculum principles and curriculum practice. Mary Myatt’s book is major contribution to this debate. She combines encyclopedic knowledge of schools with crystal-clear description of curriculum principles and few books range so effectively across curriculum theory and day-to-day practice in the classroom. Mary does this with huge authority and extreme clarity. A must-read for all those involved in improving education.’

Tim Oates CBE

Group Director of ARD, Assessment Research and Development,
Cambridge Assessment

‘This is an absolutely sizzling synthesis of practical wisdom about curriculum. Rooted in research and punctuated with inspirational examples, Mary has written an accessible and engaging guide to everything that a school needs to know to clarify, deepen and extend its curriculum thinking.’

David Weston, Chief Executive, Teacher Development Trust

This is a book of profound scope. Whether you are a recently qualified teacher or experienced senior leader, there is something in this wonderful book for everyone. The concise structure of the narrative means that, as a reader, it’s easy to access and the discourse simple to follow. However, the concepts that the book tackle are by no means ‘simple’ and all too often it makes you stop and reflect quite critically on everything that you once thought were true of a great curriculum. Mary reminds us that ‘we need to pay as much attention to the ‘soft’ stuff as to the ‘hard’ metrics’. This is a challenge that we all face in an era of ever-increasing accountability and dwindling resources. For this reason – and for the fact that it is so well-written – Mary’s timely new book should be read near and far so that we don’t all end up in the proverbial stew.

Andrew Morrish, CEO of Victoria Academies Trust and author of *The Art of Standing Out*

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Foreword

Tom Sherrington

Like all great teachers, Mary Myatt knows how to hook you in and get you thinking. She had me from the title of this marvellous book. Gallimaufry? Ok, I'll admit it. I had to look it up: *a confused jumble or medley of things – such as a stew made of humble ingredients*. Sound familiar? It does to me. The curriculum stew delivered in many of our schools is often the result of rather uncoordinated if noble attempts to squeeze the quart of curriculum demands into the pint-pot of time that makes up a child's school experience. Just think about that vast ocean of knowledge; the ever-growing list of vitally important things that people continually suggest that school should teach – with always just the same amount of time to fit it into.

Getting this right is a massive challenge and, as Mary points out, we need to live with the fact that 'it's never going to be possible to do it all'. However, she's also very clear that gallimaufry isn't good enough. Not if we're serious about providing the 'proper curriculum' that is the entitlement of every child. The goal of 'coherence' is a key theme of the book. If we're going to have to leave things out, the curriculum we do deliver needs to work as a whole with links and threads running through it so that it all makes sense; so that teachers can know how all their various bits of the puzzle fit together across subject domains and over time within each one.

After many years where teachers and leaders have been somewhat side-tracked by discussions of generic pedagogy, overly-nebulous ideas about character and skills whilst also being rather bogged-down in a mire

of accountability-driven assessment tracking, we're entering a time where the substance of what is taught is returning to the forefront. In my work it's common to find Headteachers who don't know which texts or periods of history are taught in their schools but will know the percentage of students in various subgroups who achieve some nominal standard. That, to me, suggests we've got our priorities wrong.

However, increasingly, across the system, people are talking about knowledge and curriculum, recognising that the solutions to overcoming achievement barriers lie in understanding the curriculum and in what children are meant to know. More schools are reviewing the structure of their curriculum frameworks and are starting to explore ideas about sequencing concepts for maximum success alongside the teaching tools needed to secure knowledge for the long term.

Mary Myatt couches the debates that underpin the review process as a conversation. I love that sense of dialogue and debate that she conveys. In order to reach coherence, it's going to require teachers in schools to engage in the conversation; it's a journey we need to share if we're going to deliver a curriculum we understand and believe in.

Any conversation needs a language everyone can understand and, through a series of beautifully lean, crystal-clear chapters, Mary guides us through the key vocabulary we're going to need – the fundamentals and instruments as she calls them. There are a host of concepts that teachers and leaders should be grappling with and using with some fluency if they're going to make good decisions: purpose, coherence, mastery, pace, etymology and the brilliant concept of 'intellectual architecture'. She recognises that many of these ideas have to take form in subject domains. The final section of the book brings the generic elements of the conversation alive with an impressive array of examples from across the curriculum with lots of helpful, practical links for further reading.

Crucially, this book is much more than a being a neutral, factual guide; it's laced throughout with her campaigning zeal – a call to arms from someone with a genuine conviction that curriculum matters a great deal. If we're going to ensure that 'the marvels and the jewels' in our curriculum form an entitlement 'for the many' this is a conversation that is necessary; important; urgent. In her timely book, Mary makes it clear that the curriculum conversations we need to have should be driven by that vision. Inspiring and helpful in equal measure, this book is going to make a



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significant contribution to the work schools need to do to make the vision a reality.

Tom Sherrington

Former teacher and headteacher;
consultant and author of *The Learning Rainforest*

For Brian. And Tess

Introduction

This book is meant as a starter for discussion about the curriculum, not to be the last word. ‘Gallimaufry’ has been chosen to capture the mixed picture as it currently stands in relation to the curriculum in much of the sector. It is fair to say that the ‘stuff’ of curriculum content for subjects has been lost over the years, and now is the time for leaders to have real purchase on the quality and coherence of what their pupils are studying.

In the brief history of the National Curriculum, I trace the story of how we have come to the current version for schools. In the rest of the book, the main thrust of my argument is that a proper curriculum, grounded in the knowledge, concepts and overarching ideas of individual subjects is an entitlement for every child. A second strand of the book is that the curriculum we offer our children, through the lessons we teach, should be appropriately demanding: that we shouldn’t be tempted to dumb material down in a mistaken belief that our pupils can’t cope. It is our job to help them to reach into the marvels and the jewels which are contained within our curriculum. This is not an entitlement for the few, but for the many.

The book has seven sections: the first covers the history and some of the fundamental principles of a curriculum; the second is on planning; the third, assessment and feedback; the fourth covers some of the elements we need to include to make the curriculum really robust; the fifth considers elements which go across the curriculum; the sixth, some guidance for leaders and the final section on subjects is written as prompts and starters for conversations and includes links for resources and further ideas. Here’s to an honest, and careful conversation about what a really robust curriculum looks like for all our pupils.

Mary Myatt, May 2018

Section 1: Curriculum Fundamentals

A brief history of the National Curriculum

**‘The job of a good curriculum is to
inspire teachers, not instruct them.’**

Russell Hobby

The National Curriculum was introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland as a nationwide curriculum for primary and secondary state schools following the Education Reform Act (1988).¹ Before the introduction of a national curriculum, local authorities or schools decided school curricula. While some educational content was high-quality, findings primarily from the inspectorate found that, for many pupils, this was not the case.² The National Curriculum of 1988 set out ‘attainment targets’ – the knowledge, skills and understanding which children would be expected to have by the end of each key stage, the ‘programmes of study’ to be taught at each key stage and the arrangements for assessing pupils at the end of each key stage.³

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- 1 The National Curriculum does not apply to Northern Ireland and Wales since devolution. It also does not apply to academies and free schools.
 - 2 www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/des/framework-1980.html
 - 3 www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents

The need for a national curriculum was anticipated by Sir Jim Callaghan's 'Great Debate'⁴ speech at Ruskin College in 1976. In arguing for an entitlement for all pupils, Callaghan made the case for a 'core curriculum of basic knowledge.' He argued that education should 'equip children for a lively, constructive place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work.' While the Ruskin speech put the National Curriculum on the political agenda for the first time, it was the Education Reform Act of 1988 which turned it into reality.

There have been a number of revisions to the National Curriculum since 1988, mostly intended to simplify and slim down the content. The prelude to the current curriculum started with the coalition government in 2010. The 2007 changes were shelved and an expert review panel was commissioned to report on a framework for a new National Curriculum. This was led by Tim Oates and reported in December 2011. The government produced a final version in September 2013, for first teaching in maintained schools from September 2014, with the expectation that it would be taught to all year groups from September 2015. Free schools and academies do not have to follow the National Curriculum, but as a requirement of their funding agreements, the curriculum needs to be broad and balanced and they have an obligation to provide English, maths and science as well as religious education.

In 2010, Tim Oates' paper 'Could do better - using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England'⁵ established the principles for the review. The background research for this paper found that those countries and jurisdictions which have the highest levels of pupil and student outcomes are characterised by a clear rationale for what is to be taught and explicit subject content to be covered. Again, there was an ambition to slim down curriculum content: 'The reduction in bulk is important; there is strong evidence of teachers moving with undue, enforced pace through an overladen curriculum ... deep learning must be a principal goal of the national curriculum, with learners able to retain and transfer learning.'⁶ For this to occur, adequate time on topics must be possible. This is not an argument against adequate pace and progression.

4 www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html

5 Oates, T. (2011) Could do better: using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England, *The Curriculum Journal*, 22 (2), 121-150, DOI: 10.1080/09585176.2011.578908

6 Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998) *Children, Schools and Families Committee 2009*

It is a recognition that an overblown curriculum specification can give rise to undue pace, and that undue pace erodes deep learning, promotes a 'tick box' approach to learning amongst both teachers and learners, and compromises genuine accumulation of learning (characterised by retention and redeployment of knowledge and skills.)

On the basis of international comparisons, the paper argued that 'a well-defined and enhanced national curriculum, based on concepts, principles, fundamental operations and key knowledge can lead to learning processes which are more focused on deep learning with fewer topics pursued to greater depth, and to assessment processes of greater validity and which have beneficial wash back into learning.'⁷

The new curriculum also removed levels. Oates' work had identified a number of problems with the use of levels. Their original purpose had been to indicate what a child of seven, eleven or fourteen might reasonably be expected to achieve by the end of a key stage. What happened in practice was that the levels became overcomplicated and drifted far from their original purpose. For example, the use of levels for accountability – schools, local authorities and Ofsted all paying close attention to the percentage of children who had reached the end of key stage levels. This put further pressure on teachers to hurry their children through the content.

The end result of the latest iteration of the curriculum was intended to be a slimmed down curriculum, focusing on key ideas and concepts, which are essential for learning in any particular subject. At the start of each of the subjects in the National Curriculum is the introductory purpose of study and aims. These set out the rationale for teaching this subject to pupils and have been written to ensure that the key messages are clear. What follows the objectives are the fundamental ideas and material to be taught for each key stage. Apart from English and mathematics, the material can be taught in any order. The attainment targets show what pupils are expected to know, apply and understand from the relevant programme of study.

'The National Curriculum' and 'the curriculum' should not be confused – it is vital to distinguish between them. The curriculum – taught and untaught – represents the totality of the experience of the child within schooling (aims, content, pedagogy, assessment). It includes wider

7 Oates *op. cit.*

elements, including opportunities to acquire vital 'personal' and 'social' capitals. A national curriculum cannot specify and control all elements of the 'real' curriculum and is likely to run into difficulty if it attempts so to do. A national curriculum operates as a means of giving all pupils access to a common body of essential content.

And so, how has the latest National Curriculum been enacted? Well, some parts well and others not so. For many schools, the pressure of ensuring that pupils meet the expected standards at the end of Key Stage 2 has often squeezed out the wider, rich range of subjects to which they are entitled in order to focus on English and maths. Similarly, in many secondary schools, the focus on pupils' achievement at the end of Key Stage 4 has meant a diminished diet for many at Key Stage 3. While the reasons for a restricted curriculum are understandable, it is nevertheless important that schools revisit their rationale for what they provide for their pupils.

A further problem is that the aims and objectives within the National Curriculum subjects are often only skimmed, if at all, and the focus goes straight to the detail of what needs to be taught. This misses the point. What needs to be taught needs to be set in the context of a bigger picture, informed by the purpose and aims. The National Curriculum is not a scheme of work; it is a framework, which allows for considerable contextualising.

To summarise: there are three important things to keep in mind about the curriculum. The first is that it is both more complex and simpler than we have come to think. The second is that its status and content now have a higher profile than in recent years. And the third is that it is never going to be possible to do it all. And we need to live with that.