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## Review: repetitive curriculum and assessment reform in England since 1987



## A review of curriculum and assessment reform in England since 1987

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### Overview – the 30 years battleground

Over the last thirty years, education policy making in England has become more concentrated within the centre of government. Local and sector initiatives have been largely squeezed out of the policy making process. Curriculum and Assessment are no exception. The frequent change (five major changes in curriculum and multiple changes in assessment) reflects on the one hand, an ideological struggle between ministers and parts of the academic community and on the other, an absence of repeatable process.

Regardless of the merits of reform – and these would be contested from different sides – the frequency and nature of change is made at a high cost to the teaching profession and the working of schools and colleges. Policy churn has often reworked unsuccessful initiatives; practitioners have been alienated when their goodwill is necessary to implement reform and the use of evidence has become more selective - as policy is driven by wider ideological objectives.

There has been no long-term plan to guide changes in curriculum and assessment. Once established, the National Curriculum has become more prescriptive, narrower and tied to frequent testing and moderated exams (at all key stages of development). Opposition has required a more determined approach by legislators. This has included weakening and ultimately discarding standing committees; commissioning reviews but often ignoring recommendations; and consulting in unrealistically short times (or not consulting at all).

The National Curriculum Council was disbanded just five years after its establishment in 1988. Its replacement in 1997, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, was marginalised by the National Strategies, then weakened as it was broken up into the NAA, QCDA and STA. It was finally scrapped in 2011, giving unconstrained power to the Secretary of State. The recommendations of substantial reviews were ignored, including Dearing in 1996 and Tomlinson in 2004, (both on vocational curriculum and qualifications) and then Rose on phonics and curriculum in 2006 and 2008 respectively. Countless “consultations” were superficial or non-existent, including the one month “Three wise Men” report of 1992; National Strategies in 1998; the 2006 Education Act effecting curriculum change; the Rose Primary Curriculum in 2008 and the Cambridge Primary Review on SATS in 2009; Ebacc in 2010 and 2013; most of the Gove reforms and KS2 testing in 2016.

The waste, inefficiency and frustration caused by poor process and no long-term planning are considerable. This must beg questions about how the development of both curriculum and assessment are managed in England.

## The first National Curriculum 1988 – a heavy weight champion

In the first Conservative party conference after her landslide election victory in 1987, Prime Minister Thatcher announced ambitious plans for a national curriculum. Working groups were set up by the newly formed National Curriculum Council, to detail each subject, but with little representation of teachers working in state schools. The enthusiasm in the working groups overloaded the new curriculum: the history content alone could have filled half a school timetable.<sup>1</sup>

As the Cambridge Primary Review noted over two decades later, the problem arose not so much from the original 10-subject specification as from the way each programme of study was independently devised by a group of specialists eager to take advantage of the opportunity to secure the strongest possible foothold for their subject by spelling out content in irrefutable detail. More elements were subsequently added but none was removed. Indeed, there was no real debate about the 1987 proposals for a national curriculum.<sup>2</sup> The Education Reform Bill was published in November 1987. Despite 16,500 critical responses to the requests for consultation, not a single concession of any importance was made by the government.<sup>3</sup>

The National Curriculum Council was formed as part of the 1988 Education Reform Act (and abolished in 1993). It would be required to review all aspects of the curriculum and advise the Secretary of State, carry out programmes of research and development as well as publish and disseminate information relating to the curriculum.

A central criticism of the new curriculum was that it was conceived of entirely in terms of traditional subjects, with little or no acknowledgment of the curriculum debate which had been going on both inside and outside the DES since at least 1976. There was no mention of integrated studies, the environment, personal and social education, psychology, sociology, politics or economics.<sup>4</sup>

The National Curriculum was also criticised for what was seen as its ultimate purpose. It was seen by many as primarily concerned with testing, “the list of core and foundation subjects is simply designed to facilitate that testing”.<sup>5</sup> As one headteacher wrote the following summer, “children's individual accomplishments will at best be caricatured and at worst be altogether denied.”<sup>6</sup>

## Increased centralised control with the 1988 Education Reform Act

The long-term implications of the 1988 Education Act (often named the Baker Act after the then Education Secretary Kenneth Baker), caused further dissent. The Act delegated to

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<sup>1</sup> Wrigley 2014; p23

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge Primary 2009; p3

<sup>3</sup> Simon 1991; p.544

<sup>4</sup> Chitty 1989; p.209

<sup>5</sup> Aldrich 1988; p.23

<sup>6</sup> Armstrong 1988; p.75

successive Secretaries of State for Education extensive powers that made it easy for them to bring about sweeping changes in line with their particular philosophies of education and potentially, memories of their own schooldays. This created a situation characterised by rapid, contradictory and sometimes ill-conceived curriculum changes.<sup>7</sup>

The sea change this represented was summarised by Peter Wilby twenty-five years later. "Once, ministers largely accepted that "the experts" – schoolteachers and their unions, university lecturers, teacher trainers, local education authority officers – knew best and could be trusted to act, not only in children's and parents' interests, but also for the wider social and national good. The government's role was to provide sufficient resources, subject only to economic constraints and competing budgetary demands. From the mid-1980s, however, ministers behaved as though education were an ailing, near-bankrupt industry. Their role was to challenge, even denigrate, the views of 'insiders', to demand value for money, to impose performance management, to root out endemic 'failure' and to insist on what they saw as customer satisfaction."

### Ken Clarke, the Three Wise Men and the Primary curriculum 1990/92

John Major's first Education Secretary was Ken Clarke. Ahead of the 1992 General Election, the polls were tight, and Clarke was of the belief that a return to streaming and old-fashioned teaching methods in primary schools would be a popular campaign policy. In order to provide some authoritative theoretical underpinning for this campaign, Clarke commissioned Robin Alexander, Jim Rose and Chris Woodhead to produce, within a month, a discussion paper on *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools*.

Its introduction admitted, "We have had neither the time nor the resources to invite new evidence, visit schools or commission research. Instead, we have concentrated on reviewing, as invited by the Secretary of State, existing evidence, particularly that pertaining to the issues of standards, classroom practice and the implementation of the National Curriculum, bringing to bear our knowledge of primary education...We wish to thank the many individuals and organisations, who, unsolicited, wrote to us: we have taken account of their views." By the conclusion of the paper, that statement was a little more cautious. "We received unsolicited statements from a large number of individuals and organisations. We have attempted to take full account of all this material."

This selection of handpicked "independent" advisers, with little or no consultation reflected the dominance of government policymakers over practitioners. In 2009, Warwick Mansell wrote how, "in the last twenty years there had been a steady growth in the powers of central government, all overseen and directed by ministers and civil servants." This is personified in Ken Clarke recalling the personal touch he was able to introduce to the role. "I responded quite strongly to draft recommendations on the subject of music and the subject

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<sup>7</sup> Wrigley *ibid*

of sport, I think. I changed the history and geography curriculum from the drafts put to me.”<sup>8</sup>

## Dearing Review 1994 – refining the curriculum in the face of criticism

Just as teachers had begun to adapt to a heavy weight curriculum, the government announced its intention to slim it down. Clarke’s replacement John Patten commissioned Sir Ron Dearing to lead a review, “in response to widespread concern that the basic aims of the National Curriculum and its assessment arrangements were being undermined by complexity, over-elaboration, over-prescription and excessive content.”

The voice of those actually teaching the curriculum, was certainly this time audible. “It is clear from the consultation that has informed each stage of the Review that most teachers think that the National Curriculum as presently laid down cannot be taught in the minimum weekly teaching time recommended by the Department for Education (DFE).” In fact, the Appendix requires six entire pages to list all the organisations consulted.

Gillian Shephard, the latest Secretary of State, accepted Dearing's recommendations in 1995, so that, by the time the Conservatives left office, the Key Stage 4 curriculum bore little resemblance to the framework devised ten years earlier by Kenneth Baker.

## Dearing Review 1996 on vocational qualifications - largely ignored

A further review was proffered by Sir Ron Dearing in 1996, this time into further education, attempting to deal with the perennial problem of the prestige of A Levels relative to vocational qualifications (summed up by a contrast with Germany who had the same numbers of university-level qualified people in the population but more than double the proportion of vocationally qualified.)

Dearing produced a thorough, wide-ranging and detailed examination of qualifications for 16- to 19-year-olds and made a large number of recommendations to improve rigour and coherence and achieve greater parity of esteem. However, Gillian Shepherd ignored most of them.<sup>9</sup> The white paper would not be changing the segregated academic education of the 16-19 group. It would stick to the separate 'A' level examinations in England and Higher Certificate in Scotland (or some new version of these). The qualifications system itself was not being unified; academic and vocational courses were not being integrated; and institutions were not being reorganised into a coherent system.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is similar to remarks made by his replacement John Patten upon the publication of the Dearing Review: “I've added my own twiddles to it; all children between 5 and 7 to have some British history; English to be given close attention in all subjects, whether it's geography or history...We'll have to see what teacher-land makes of it over the next three months.”

<sup>9</sup> The view of Helena Kennedy QC may here be relevant. In a June 1997 Further Education Funding Council publication ‘Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education’, she wrote of, “an appalling ignorance amongst decision-makers and opinion-formers about what goes on in further education. It is so alien to their experience.”

<sup>10</sup> Benn and Chitty 1996; p.17

## David Blunkett, national strategies and the Qualification and Curriculum Council

In 1997 David Blunkett became New Labour's first Secretary of State for Education. He immediately unveiled a National Literacy Strategy and National Numeracy Strategy. However, the national curriculum, by then the responsibility of the newly established Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, had also recently published programmes of study for literacy and numeracy as part of English and mathematics.

In January 1998, a delegation from the board of the QCA met the Minister of State to discuss the new arrangements and to express concern about the department's sudden decision to suspend the programmes of study for the non-core subjects in order to allow schools to concentrate on the new literacy and numeracy strategies and the achievement of the 2002 test targets for 11-year-olds. In the course of the meeting the delegation asked why, having only just set up the QCA, the government had immediately deprived it of responsibility for literacy and numeracy, which by any definition are pivotal to a successful primary curriculum. The Secretary of State's Standards and Effectiveness Adviser was present and speedily forestalled the Minister's reply: 'Literacy and numeracy,' he said, 'are standards, not curriculum, and standards are the government's responsibility, not QCA's.'

David Blunkett later announced another overhaul of the National Curriculum, particularly at primary level, to reduce the content in foundation subjects allowing more time to be spent on the core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science. A new National Curriculum was published in 1999, for first teaching in September 2000.

## Tomlinson Report 2004

A major Government consultation during the Blair era occurred with the 2004 Tomlinson Report on 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform. A former Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Mike Tomlinson's recommendations were supported by heads, by Chief Inspector David Bell and by the head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, Dr Ken Boston.

Perhaps the headline suggestion was for replacing GCSEs, A Levels and vocational qualifications with a new single modular diploma at four levels. Setting a tone for the general reception of the report, Tony Blair effectively told a meeting of the CBI on the evening the report was presented by Charles Clarke to Parliament, that GCSEs and A Levels were going nowhere.

By the time the Government were presenting their White Paper 14-19 Education and Skills, it was Ruth Kelly who as Education Secretary, had the job of explaining why the government would be rejecting the bulk of the report.

Tomlinson himself wasn't best impressed. "What is being proposed risks emphasising yet again the distinction between the vocational and the academic. It further fails fully to deal with the needs of those students for whom grade A\* to C at GCSE is simply not attainable. I

had hoped that the Government would have gone further on the need for a unified qualifications framework. This was a key part of the brief given to my Working Group, yet the white paper makes little or no direct reference to such a framework”.

## Rose Report on phonics 2006

At the other end of the age scale, early years reading was also the subject of a review, this time by Former Chief Inspector of Primary Education Jim Rose. It concluded that “synthetic phonics, offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers.”

Not everyone agreed. Nansi Ellis, deputy head of education policy at the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, declared, “We need a comprehensive and properly funded programme to develop the knowledge and understanding of all who teach young children to read, building on the wealth of experience that children already have. Teachers and children do not need a new literacy strategy that dictates what to do on a daily basis”.

Ruth Kelly however ignored them and continued to insist on the systematic and discrete teaching of synthetic phonics ... despite there being no research evidence to show it would improve understanding, as opposed to pronouncing the words correctly.<sup>11</sup> (Wrigley 2014:28).

## Further change to the curriculum and testing 2006

Towards the end of the Blair reign, there was a further Education Act. Part 5 of the 2006 Education and Inspections Act amended the provisions of the *2002 Education Act* regarding the National Curriculum at Key Stage 4. The 2006 Act was passed with hardly any scrutiny of the curriculum changes buried deep within the text.<sup>12</sup>

Testing, more specifically its frequency, was also an area where the government and the educational establishment didn't see eye-to-eye. Ken Boston, Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, had admitted in a 2006 newspaper interview that pupils faced a huge and excessive exam load which had distorted the balance of what was taught in schools. However, in January 2007, Tony Blair's final Education Secretary Alan Johnson announced that pupils in England would face more (albeit shorter) national tests if pilot schemes in ten local authorities were successful. National targets and league tables would remain, described as, “non-negotiable.”

In response, the General Teaching Council for England called for all national school tests for 7-, 11- and 14-year-olds to be scrapped. It pointed out that children in England took around 70 different tests before the age of 16, making them the most tested in the world.

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<sup>11</sup> Wrigley *ibid*; p.28

<sup>12</sup> Wrigley *ibid*; p.47

## Rose review of Primary Curriculum 2008

In December 2007, Ed Balls instructed Jim Rose to produce the most fundamental review of the primary curriculum for a decade. With the interim Rose report issued on 8 December 2008 for 'consultation', the QCA was to have produced draft programmes of study for the six specified areas of learning by the end of the year, just two working weeks after the consultation period opened, and two months before it closed on 28th February 2009. QCA were to then consult 'informally' on these drafts in order have final versions ready for the full report a month later.

Writing in *The Guardian* in May 2009, the educational journalist Mike Baker compared the Rose review with the seminal Plowden report of 1967. He noted that the Plowden committee had had 25 members, including several heads, and had benefited from having six school inspectors and one local authority inspector seconded to it throughout. It had taken three years and produced 556. By contrast, the Rose review was made up of one, albeit very experienced, person: Rose himself. His advisory group of leading heads met just five times, his report was only 154 pages long and was restricted in scope - his remit did not even allow him to consider the question of tests. Ultimately it didn't matter. The report would be scrapped by Balls' successor in 2011.

## Disagreement on SATS 2006 to 2010

It was to be the continuation of the disagreement over testing, rather than the curriculum, which was to dominate the final years of New Labour.<sup>13</sup>

After nearly three years of consultation and planning, the Cambridge Primary Review, sponsored by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and led by Professor Robin Alexander, was launched in October 2006. By 2010 it had published 31 interim reports and its final report, *Children, their World, their Education*. The CPR had been the most extensive inquiry into primary education since the Plowden Report forty years earlier, involving 14 authors, 66 research consultants and a 20-strong advisory committee at Cambridge University. Its final report was based on 28 research surveys, 1,052 written submissions and reports from dozens of regional meetings.

On Key Stage 2 testing it concluded: "SATS put children under too much pressure, constrain the curriculum (especially arts and humanities), subvert the goal of learning for its own sake, undermine childrens' self-esteem and turn the final year of primary schooling into the wrong kind of educational culmination - a year of cramming and testing. As a result of the

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<sup>13</sup> The 2008 Education and Skills Act was however described as, "The most centralising education bill in history" by Warwick Mansell, who pointed out that the 153 new powers now allocated to Ed Balls, did not contrast favourably with the three provided to the Minister of Education in a previous Act in 1944. During an actual war. Barry Sheerman, Labour chair of the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, commented: "There does seem to be a general feeling out there, in the evidence the committee has received on several inquiries, of people desiring a swing back towards local autonomy. Ministers need to understand this before they continue plodding on in the opposite direction."

foregrounding of assessment for accountability, there is a complex assessment industry and machinery within and without schools in England that is not paralleled at all in our comparison group of countries.”

In the Commons on 14 October 2008 Ed Balls, Gordon Brown’s Education Secretary, made a statement about changes to the assessment and accountability system, including the discontinuation of statutory national Key Stage 3 tests. He continued, “However, I am convinced that externally marked key stage 2 national curriculum tests are essential to give parents, teachers and the public the information they need about the progress of each primary age child and of every primary school. Some argue that we should abolish the tests, but that would be the wrong thing to do.”

At the same time, Balls had set up an Expert Group on Assessment, consisting of five members: Yasmin Bevan (a secondary head), Tim Brighouse (former London Schools Commissioner), Gill Mills (a primary head), Jim Rose and Maurice Smith (former acting Chief Inspector of Schools). In May 2009, they reported that, “Key Stage 2 tests in English and mathematics should remain as a key accountability measure for all primary schools,” albeit they would be taken later in the term.

## Extent of policy enactment and short time for consultation

Between 1997 and 2008 there had been 16 Bills, 64 Green and White Papers, more than 370 consultation papers and 1650 new regulations affecting schools - amounting to a new government measure every two days (ref: Lib Dem paper, conference 2009). No single part of the Department of Education was aware of the totality of what was being offered. Schools in England had been besieged by 79 policy consultations and least 300 announcements from the DCSF in 2008, and expected an even greater number in 2009 (House of Lords 2009). Given the short consultation timeframes often provided (as we have just demonstrated), it is inconceivable that considered and thoughtful responses would be possible, let alone probable.<sup>14</sup>

## Coalition Government 2010 and Michael Gove

The Coalition’s first Education Secretary, and also the longest in situ during the period under our examination was Michael Gove.<sup>15</sup> In opposition he had promised, “A Conservative government would ... free teachers and leaders in schools from bureaucracy to give them more space to innovate, to excel, and by excelling, to inspire others.”

Things didn’t get off to a great start. In September 2010, Michael Gove announced that the English Baccalaureate (GCSEs in English, maths, one science, one foreign language and one humanity) would be used as a GCSE performance measure in school league tables published in February 2011. Heads were furious. Ron Munson, head of Taverham High School in

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<sup>14</sup> This paperwork resulted in yet another body that would produce reports, this time in the form of a House of Lords Committee on The Cumulative Impact of Statutory instruments on schools

<sup>15</sup> Indeed since the war, only George Tomlinson and Sir Keith Joseph were there for longer than Gove’s 50 months.

Norwich, told the Guardian, "I really do not understand what the government is doing. And why is it doing it retrospectively, without having carried out any consultation, and without having published detailed plans beforehand?"

## Synthetic phonics 2011

In March 2011, the Government announced synthetic phonics check for 6 year olds. In June, the President of the United Kingdom Literacy Association David Reedy, wrote an open letter to Michael Gove, which was endorsed by the leaders of seventeen educational organisations including the National Association for Primary Education (NAPE), the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR), the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE), and all the major teacher unions, arguing against it.

In addition, the 2011 All Party Parliamentary Group for Education Report of the Inquiry into Overcoming the Barriers to Literacy warned that government plans to test six-year-olds on their reading ability would put children off reading for pleasure.

## Curriculum Change 2011 to 2013

Almost immediately following his appointment to office, Michael Gove commissioned an expert review panel to report on a framework for a new National Curriculum. Having abolished the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the Department of Education were now able to launch this in house.

The review was led by Tim Oates of Cambridge Assessment, and reported in December 2011, and its expert panel also included Professor Mary James of the University of Cambridge, Professor Andrew Pollard from the University of Bristol and Institute of Education as well as Professor Dylan William from the Institute of Education. In keeping with the times, there was also celebrity input from Niall Ferguson, Carol Vorderman and Simon Schama. There was also a great deal of comparisons with fellow nations in this report, with particular focus on Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Hong Kong.

The government produced a draft National Curriculum, followed by a final version in September 2013, for first teaching in September 2014. The responses were overwhelmingly negative, and came from all manner of places.

100 academics, including Terry Wrigley and Michael Bassey, signed a letter warning it promoted, "rote learning without understanding...This mountain of data will not develop children's ability to think - including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity."

Gove responded that the academics were guilty of, "valuing Marxism, revering jargon and fighting excellence," and that they were the, "enemies of promise."

In a different letter to *The Times*, 200 writers and academics - including Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy and Children's Laureate Malorie Blackman - said they were, "gravely concerned," and called for the reforms to be halted.

Indeed, even those within the tent, made their excuses. Andrew Pollards, a member of the expert panel denounced it as, “overly prescriptive in two ways. One is that it is extremely detailed, and the other is the emphasis on linearity - it implies that children learn 'first this, then that'. Actually, people learn in a variety of different ways, and for that you need flexibility - for teachers to pick up on that and vary things accordingly.” Celebrity history advisor Simon Schama also weighed in, calling it, “insulting and offensive” to teachers and that the syllabus was like ‘1066 and All That’, but without the jokes.

This criticism meant that the final revised curriculum included many changes from the initial draft proposals: schools would have more choice over which languages they taught; the much-criticised British emphasis in history lessons had been diluted; climate change had been restored to the geography curriculum; and English would, after all, include the teaching of spoken language skills.

Kevin Courtney, Deputy General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), still wasn't best pleased however. “In less than a year teacher will be expected to implement a curriculum that they have had no say in. This will almost certainly lead to confusion and chaos and comes on top of reforms to GCSEs, A Levels and vocational qualifications, all of which are also being rushed through with little thought given to the practicalities of implementation, never mind the content.”

Following more careful consideration, the role-out of the new curriculum was staged between 2014 and 2016 – in part to align new assessment arrangements.

## Changes to GCSEs, boundaries, AS and A level - 2012 to 2015

Having concluded his work on the curriculum, Michael Gove set to work on the means of assessing what had been learned. In a 2012 letter to Ofqual, Gove said he wanted universities to determine the content of A Level syllabuses and set the exam questions, as they had when A Levels had been introduced in the early 1950s. But universities, heads and examiners expressed concern. Pam Tatlow, representing 26 of the newer universities, said academics had told ministers that the A Level system was, “not broken” at a meeting earlier in the year, but added, perhaps unnecessarily, “Ministers appear to have ignored this advice.” In January 2013 Gove declared that, from 2015, AS Level would be a stand-alone qualification, and new A Level exams would be introduced to encourage, “deeper thinking”. Leading universities would help devise the academic content.

In January 2012, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) exam board raised the threshold for C grade GCSE passes from 54 per cent to 66 per cent. There was widespread criticism: Labour urged Michael Gove to order an inquiry into the effect of the change, the Welsh government launched its own investigation, right-wing Conservative backbencher John Redwood described the change as, “unfair”, and John Townsley, a head teacher much admired by the education secretary, said that, “what has taken place in the AQA has been butchery.”

Although these changes had been very much in line with policies he had been pushing for since joining the Shadow Cabinet in 2007, Michael Gove denied that he had put pressure on

the exam boards. Speaking to the Today programme, he also ruled out ministerial intervention: 'It would be absolutely wrong for me to give instructions to Ofqual. It would be a genuine scandal if ministers were to interfere to make exams easier or more difficult.'" The proportion of students getting good GCSE grades fell in 2012 - for the first time in the exam's 24-year history

By midway through the coalition's five year term, schools were facing the introduction of new O Level-type exams in English, Maths and Science, redesigned GCSEs in other subjects, and tougher A Levels - all at the same time. Ofqual Chief Regulator Glenys Stacey warned the government that attempting to push through too many reforms at once risked failure and a senior exam board official privately described the timescale as, "madness." One head told The Guardian, "It's chaotic. I wake up every morning and wonder what is coming next."

## Ebacc and continuous change

What was coming next was further upheaval. As the 2012/13 school year began, Gove returned to a conversation he had started two years previous. In their report on The English Baccalaureate, published on 28<sup>th</sup> July 2011, the Commons Education Select Committee had noted that there was, "significant support for the principles of a broad and balanced curriculum<sup>16</sup>, but that the majority of the evidence we received was striking in its lack of support for the EBacc."<sup>17</sup>

Announcing to the House of Commons that his proposed English Baccalaureate would be based on traditional end-of-year exams in English, maths, science, history, geography and languages. Hansard reports Michael Gove telling the House, "Critical to reform is ending an examination system that has narrowed the curriculum, forced idealistic professionals to teach to the test and encouraged heads to offer children the softest possible options. We believe it is time for the race to the bottom to end. We believe it is time to tackle grade inflation and dumbing down, and we believe that it is time to raise aspirations and restore rigour to our examinations. We want to ensure that modules - which encourage bite-size learning and spoon-feeding, teaching to the test and gaming of the system - go, once and for all. We want to remove controlled assessment and coursework from core subjects. ... We plan to call the new qualifications in core academic subjects English baccalaureate certificates, recognising that they are the academic foundation that is the secure basis on which further study, vocational learning or a satisfying apprenticeship can be built."

Once more, the Secretary of State needed to recognise a disappointing response. Former Conservative education secretary Kenneth Baker warned that, "it was vital that schools and colleges provide education which develops practical skills and personal qualities as well as

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<sup>16</sup> In its submission, the Department for Education drew attention to the, "broadly similar arrangements to the English Baccalaureate," which it said existed in a number of countries, including Singapore, Germany, France, Japan, Sweden, Canada and the Netherlands. However, the Committee found that these were not all directly comparable examples.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, whilst the report concluded that the vast majority of its submissions were against the EBacc, the subjects included fitted exactly with a YouGov poll for the Sun that year, asking respondents which subjects should be considered core (excluding Latin, which was not deemed a priority by readers of Britain's favourite newspaper).

subject knowledge.”<sup>18</sup> The British Dyslexia Association said a renewed emphasis on exams rather than coursework could disadvantage candidates with learning difficulties. Leading figures in the arts world said the decision to leave arts subjects out of the EBacc, “could destroy Britain's creative economy within a generation.” Glenys Stacey warned Gove that the proposed EBacc was, “not ideally suited to forming the sole basis for accountability measurement’ and could lead to more limited teaching as schools crammed students to pass.” Finally, in its January 2013 report ‘From GCSEs to EBCs: the Government's proposals for reform’, the Commons Education Select Committee (CESC) warned that the government risked destabilising the entire school exam system by rushing through its plans.<sup>19</sup>

A week later, amid rumours that Downing Street had intervened, Michael Gove was forced to abandon his plans for the EBacc. However, GCSEs would still be reformed, with a focus on exams and tougher questions, and league tables would in future be based on two measures: passes in English and maths, and a value-added measure.

This in truth marked the passing of the apex of Gove. With an election in the offing, he was seen as too divisive to stand front and centre of any national campaign. In July 2014, he was replaced by the seemingly more emollient Nicky Morgan.

## Nicky Morgan high stakes testing 2015

Nicky Morgan began her tenure as Education Secretary by declaring war, albeit a “war on illiteracy and innumeracy.” Year six pupils were to undergo new tests for multiplication tables and writing, which if they failed, their schools' leadership would be replaced. National Association of Head Teachers leader Russell Hobby commented, “This is pure electioneering, but the constant churn and bluster make any concerns expressed about tackling workload ring hollow. Apparently headteachers will be sacked should any - yes, any - child fail the test.”

## Continued disagreement on KS2

Morgan and her successors were also still fighting the long war over testing at KS2. By the time Damien Hinds became Theresa May's second Education Secretary (after Justine Greening), testing at Key Stage 2 remained unresolved. Hinds argued in favour of the status quo: “There are few duties on me that are more serious than ensuring that children are literate and numerate by the time they leave primary school...The importance of testing has been one of the main things Labour and Conservative governments have agreed on in education policy over the past quarter of a century.”

## Postscript – objective or expedient use of “evidence”?

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, Baker's own curriculum development in 1988, had been described, “a reassertion of the basic grammar school curriculum devised at the beginning of the twentieth century,” (Aldrich 1988: p.23)

<sup>19</sup> While the Committee agreed that, “significant improvements were needed to restore public confidence”, they were concerned that the government was, “trying to do too much, too fast.” They were still unconvinced by Michael Gove's claim that a new qualification (the EBacc) was required.

Michael Gove's first white paper promised an independent review on KS2 testing. This duly arrived courtesy of Lord Bew in June 2011. The independence of the paper was somewhat compromised by the remit. In commissioning the Review, Michael Gove had asked the panel to adhere to two positions, including that, "external accountability is a key driver of improvement in education and particularly important for the least advantaged."

There were over 4000 respondents, whose voices Bew summaries as follows. "The range of opinion in this area has been striking. It is inevitable, given the strength of feeling and the wide range of views, that much of the evidence and feedback is conflicting or contradictory. However, we have been surprised that every suggestion has generated substantial drawbacks and risks, and that every proposal which enjoys any significant support from some respondents can prompt a negative reaction from others. As many respondents have agreed, there is no single, simple solution to this difficult problem. It became clear early on that, based on the range of evidence and opinion and the complexity of the issues in our remit, it would not be possible for this Review to recommend a series of solutions which would command universal support. However, this has presented a real opportunity to make recommendations based purely on what is educationally the right approach. This is not a subject where finding the middle ground between differing opinions would be enough. Simply reaching a compromise between the different views would not do justice to pupils, parents, teachers, and head teachers, who will want to be absolutely confident that this part of the system is right."

The conclusion was all important. "There is widespread research evidence which suggests that external school-level accountability is important in driving up attainment and pupils' progress, and we find this evidence compelling".