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How do some primary schools in England organise and implement the broader curriculum?

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How do some primary schools in England organise and implement the broader curriculum?

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Abstract

We are concerned by evidence of ‘curriculum narrowing’ in English primary schools. Inspection reports shed little light on the current situation, so we conducted a small qualitative study exploring breadth of curriculum provision. Eight teacher interviewees described eight different ways of organising and implementing the curriculum. While English and mathematics dominated many conversations, everyone expressed the importance of a broader curriculum and in some schools an engaging and genuinely broad curriculum is apparently alive and well. Assumptions about how best to teach English and mathematics may be one factor affecting curriculum breadth: in-depth case studies are suggested to examine this.

Keywords

curriculum, narrowing, implementation, breadth, core, engagement, learning, primary, education

Word Count

4196

Introduction

There are structural tensions around the provision of a broad curriculum for primary children in England.

On the one hand, a broad, balanced curriculum has long been seen as important. Back in 2002, some 14 years after Kenneth Baker's *Education Reform Act* (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1988) and the publication of the first *National Curriculum for England* with its ten subjects, The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services & Skills (OFSTED) reaffirmed the importance of breadth and found some evidence that it was indeed possible for schools:

...to fit everything that is required into the curriculum, maintaining breadth without the loss of depth in pupils' learning, all within a national context that puts a high premium on literacy and numeracy. ... Not only that, it can be done in ways that result in high standards in English and mathematics, as well as in the arts, physical education and the humanities.

(OFSTED, 2002, 33).

Seven years later, when the *Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum: Final Report* was published, one of its two key questions concerned the nature of a broad and balanced curriculum (Rose, 2009). There was a recognition that a broad curriculum should be based on the knowledge, skills and understanding inherent in individual subjects. The report echoed the views of many who also understood the need to consider the creative and the cultural in any effective curriculum (Robinson et al., 1999) as well as the need for children's 'active engagement in the different ways through which humans make sense of their world ... intellectual, moral, spiritual, aesthetic, social, emotional and physical; through language, mathematics, science, the

humanities, the arts, religion and other ways of knowing and understanding’ (Alexander, 2010a, 199). More recent governments have retained a reasonably broad curriculum, as reflected in the revised National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013). In OFSTED’s school inspection framework, curriculum breadth is a theme quietly running through the guidance (OFSTED, 2018). One indicator of outstanding leadership and management, for example, is that ‘the broad and balanced curriculum inspires pupils to learn...’ (OFSTED, 2018, 47), while a ‘range of subjects [that] is narrow and does not prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life in modern Britain’ is an indicator of inadequate leadership and management (OFSTED, 2018, 48).

On the other hand, schools are required to publish information based on data from just two core subjects, including results of standardised tests. Boyle and Bragg (2006, 569-570) argued that this ‘established territories of priority’ and that it has in fact led to a ‘drastic’ decline in the actual provision of a broad and balanced curriculum in schools. The *Cambridge Primary Review* also highlighted foundation subjects as ‘casualties’ of the standards agenda (Alexander, 2010b, 22). OFSTED itself gave up reporting on individual subjects after 2012 (Barnes, 2018) and, within their school inspection documentation, specific guidance is only given for inspecting the impact of literacy and mathematics teaching (OFSTED, 2018). Berliner (2011) argued that a high-stakes testing regime inevitably leads to ‘pernicious’ but ‘rational’ curriculum narrowing. It would not be surprising therefore if schools opted for a narrowing of their curriculum provision.

Recently, OFSTED has begun to show awareness of a trend towards *teaching to the test*, referring to this in both their report of 2016/17 and a prior message to inspectors (OFSTED, 2017). Teachers have known about this for some time (Hutchings, 2015). The perceived danger is that testing, in effect, can *become* the curriculum (Kohn, 2000, cited in Campbell, 2007). Some may even mistake test results as representative of the quality of curriculum provision overall. In July 2018, for example, the Education Secretary used the latest set of improved test results to make just such a point, commenting that the core results 'reflected rising standards in primary schools' (British Broadcasting Company, 2018). Both Sean Harford, OFSTED's Director of Education, and his boss, Amanda Spielman, have expressed concerns that schools do not appreciate the importance of curriculum breadth and that OFSTED are not fully equipped to capture it (Staufenberg, 2017; Spielman, 2017). 'Data' says Harford, should be 'a signpost, not a destination for inspection' (Harford, 2017). OFSTED is currently conducting a major review of the curriculum as it searches for ways to broaden its inspection scope once again. Such comments have been welcomed by school leaders, although with a twinge of regret that, for many who have received inspection judgements in recent years, the changes are coming too late (O'Connell, 2018).

Our own interest in this question is fuelled by our work in initial teacher education (ITE), in which the same curriculum tensions are reflected. The time to develop student teachers' knowledge and pedagogy across the broader curriculum is very limited (Catling, 2017). Research has also pointed to a lack of experience across the broader curriculum once students take up their first post (Duncombe, Cale and Harris, 2016). Anecdotally, our ITE students have sometimes reported seeing little other than literacy and mathematics being taught in their

placement schools. We wanted to find out how well the broader curriculum was faring in schools around us, given the tensions discussed and OFSTED's current interest in curriculum narrowing. Rosen and Oxenbury (1989), in their wonderful book 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt', lead young readers through wavy grass, a deep cold river, oozy mud, a dark forest, a whirling snowstorm and a scary cave. Are English primary schools today also finding ways for children to experience the world's richness and diversity at first-hand?

Research Design

This is a small exploratory study, adhering to the guidelines suggested by Seale *et al.* (2007, 9 – 10). Having tried sampling school inspection reports carried out by OFSTED and available online, we discovered – as we had feared – that there was little useful information about non-core subjects. We therefore decided to approach a sample of schools directly.

We chose to conduct interviews because of time constraints, and as 'a very good way of accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality' (Punch, 2009, 114). We decided to interview teachers of children in early KS2, since they were less likely to be constrained by end-of-key-stage assessments in mathematics and English and therefore more likely, in theory at least, to be able to implement a broad curriculum for their pupils.

After 'cold-calling' some randomly chosen schools in our region to request interviews, with little success, we contacted schools with whom we already had professional connections. This latter strategy bore fruit, so our sample of eight interviewees is therefore both opportunistic and to some extent self-selected. Happily, this fits the purpose of our research and, as Rapley advocates, we did 'get a range of views on the topic' (Rapley, 2007, 17).

We asked three main questions, the first to orient the interviewee to the focus of our interest and the other two to allow scope for further information and opinion:

1. Can you tell me about a broader curriculum experience that the children have recently had, within their curriculum time?
2. Which aspects of the broader curriculum do you consider to be strengths of the school?
3. Are there any aspects that, ideally, you would like to see done differently?

We adopted a semi-structured approach, following up on interviewees' answers as we saw fit, to gain more detailed information and to explore and clarify the interviewees' viewpoints, opinions and perspectives (Rapley, 2007, 18; Flick, 2015, 141).

Whilst we found our interviewees very willing and open to talking about their practice and their schools, our interview material needs to be interpreted mindful of the following:

- Interviewees knew that we both work with student teachers on provision of a broad curriculum
- Interviews took place within interviewees' schools, sometimes in quite public areas

These influences will have tended to result in positive, up-beat portrayals of the provision and practices of the schools being described.

After transcribing all the interview recordings, we used an inductive approach to examine what we had collected, through an iterative process of loose coding, discussion of themes and further close reading of the transcripts (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) using comparison as 'the engine through which we can generate insights, by identifying patterns of similarity or difference within the data' (Dey, 2007, 88). We are not undertaking grounded theory research here. Nevertheless, we found some of its 'procedures and canons' helpful (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Working with our transcripts both individually and collaboratively was productive, since we have similar but

not identical realms of knowledge and experience, allowing insights to arise through our discussions.

Findings

Our data is presented in two ways. First, we offer a thumbnail portrait of each interviewee (of whom all except one are teachers of Years 3 and/or 4), intended to give a flavour of how the curriculum is organised in their school and how they feel about this. Secondly, we outline three main themes that we identified.

***Interviewee 1 (i1)** is very enthusiastic about the provision of a broad curriculum in her school, advocating strongly for the school's approach. She describes cross-curricular topics as 'learning journeys' which start with a 'hook' and end with a 'celebration event'. All curricular subjects are included, except mathematics. 'It's the engagement of the children. Every topic we do, they run with it, they love it.'*

***Interviewee 2 (i2)** is also very positive about the broader curriculum. She feels supported and liberated by her managers. '.....it was always me, thinking I always have to do the English and Maths and everything has to be the same. And they always encourage, "no, it actually doesn't have to be this way"'. She considers planning, which is led by the children, as an enjoyable part of the work despite the effort involved. She enjoys working collaboratively with other teachers on tracking coverage and progression across the curriculum.*

***Interviewee 3 (i3)** is 'a creative person' and prioritises creative activities 'because I think it gives the children quite a memorable experience'. Pressure for progress in English and*

mathematics is keenly felt, however, and 'frustration' is mentioned many times. 'I can bang the creativity drum as loudly as I like, but at the end of the day, the school is measured on the data they churn out at the end of KS1 and KS2'.

***Interviewee 4 (i4)** considers that the broader curriculum should be memorable and fun. He strives to immerse the children fully into their 'topics' for full days at the beginning. He describes English and mathematics as 'hard core' and distinguishes them very strongly from the rest, expressing 'intense pressure' to cover everything. He says of the broader curriculum, 'We are going to forget about normal lessons and we are going to give these kids a proper experience'. He would rather devote assessment effort to noticing children's engagement than their attainment across the broader curriculum.*

*The head teacher of **Interviewee 5's (i5's)** school champions topic work, valuing children's engagement over complete curriculum coverage. The interviewee herself, while enjoying teaching this way, feels somewhat guilty about imperfect coverage in some areas. Her pupils choose each topic, through which English and mathematics are also taught as needed. Though the planning takes time, 'I love the way my year can be whatever I want it to be and what the children want it to be, and we can shape our own curriculum'.*

***Interviewee 6 (i6) (yr2)** designs 'wow' experiences in collaboration with other teachers, leading to children's questions which in turn inform the teachers' planning. She values all curriculum subjects equally. Her school allows for flexibility and she feels empowered. She is enthusiastic about her work - 'sounds weird to call it working' - and believes strongly in the collaborative approach. This interviewee feels fortunate to be working in a school which operates in a way 'that is most beneficial to the children' because 'I hadn't worked anywhere like it'.*

In Interviewee 7's (i7's) school, two or three days are devoted to introducing a key question based on one of the school's core values and involving one or two Humanities subjects. 'We try to give them lots of opportunities at the beginning ... because we know that once we're into the full swing of the term, maths and literacy does take over a little bit' - '80% of the time [is spent on English and mathematics]'. She is enthusiastic about these opportunities but expresses quiet frustration at the high expectations of children's literacy and numeracy and the corresponding lack of 'time, just generally, in the curriculum' - 'we have children who really need those other experiences'.

Interviewee 8 (i8) expresses sadness at the time-consuming nature of English and mathematics in her school 'because I always remember being at school and RE being amazing and – you know, you look forward to all of these other experiences'. In her large school, some subjects are taught by specialists. She doesn't get involved in these. Her curriculum is subject based, with the Humanities presenting opportunities for topic work, and links are sometimes tokenistic - 'where we make links, we do, just to tie it all together but it doesn't always work that way'. She speaks most positively about her English teaching, which is the area over which she has most control.

Three main themes emerged for us during analysis of our interview material:

- Interviewees talk a great deal about English and mathematics.
- Planning is another major focus for our interviewees, when considering children's learning across the curriculum.
- Interviewees share a common aim of seeking to engage children fully.

What we heard about mathematics and English

The core subjects are a high priority for our interviewees. Four of them distinguish strongly between ‘core’ and ‘non-core’;

‘We normally do the hard-core stuff [English and mathematics] first and the less hard-core stuff later’ ... there’s a lot of pressure to do Numeracy and Literacy and the expectations on the children are very high, and it’s so lovely to go right, we’ve done the hard-core stuff, now let’s make a stone age axe together which is great’ (i4)

For these interviewees there is a strong sense of hierarchy;

‘It [topic] is mainly useful in English, mostly, and reading’ (i8)

There is a sense of pressure too, leading to:

‘almost forcing the facts into them to give children something to write about’ (i7)

i3 distinguishes the core subjects as potentially stressful or oppositional parts of her day, arguing that there is too much emphasis on grammar, punctuation, book scrutiny and core subject expectations, which she describes as ‘a massive tension’.

In contrast, our other four interviewees seem to treat mathematics and English as *equal* partners with other subjects, whether taught separately or as part of a holistic topic or ‘learning journey’ (i1). The language of i1 implies a topic-based fusion of all subjects, putting emphasis on the sense of progression through ‘hooks’, ‘journeys’ and ‘celebrations’. i5 and i6 also present a strong sense of integration between core and non-core, to the point where, for i6, they become indistinguishable (i6 is a Yr 2 teacher, and this may be significant here):

‘... it’s never that “we’re doing our maths, we’re stopping our maths. Now we’re doing writing”. It’s really all linked up. So they see it all as their learning. Rather than “now we’re doing maths, now we’re doing Art, now we’re doing Geography”. The children wouldn’t talk about it in that way, because it all overlaps and it’s all interlinked’ (i6)

There seem to be two distinct mental models in the way our eight interviewees conceptualise the relationships between core and non-core subjects. One model centres on a feeling of ‘opposition’ between the demands of teaching mathematics and English and the joys of teaching other subjects. Topic work is often used to serve what are perceived to be the essentials of the core, particularly writing. There is sometimes a sense that the core subjects are a necessary evil. The other mental model centres on a strong sense of integration. There is less of a sense that topic work serves the needs of the core, and any distinguishing line between core and foundation subjects is vaguer.

From our data, it appears that interviewees feel a sense of frustration when mathematics and English dominate curriculum time, but enthusiastic when all curriculum areas are allowed to flourish. This could be a result of the research itself. We are inevitably controlling the narrative through our very choice of focus, and ‘testing our views’ (Flyvbjerg, 2007) against the material we gathered in this study. However, it could also reflect real unease amongst educators, felt also by OFSTED now, that a narrow curriculum is not good for children’s learning.

There is tremendous variety in the way schools organise and implement their broader curriculum.

Our interviewees talk at length about planning for children's learning. They all describe the use of a theme-based approach of some sort, whether this is called topic work, theme or learning journey. This apparent commonality, however, belies huge differences between the schools. For example, the proportion of children's time spent on subjects *other* than English and mathematics is variable from school to school, ranging from 'most' (i5) to less than 20% of all curriculum time (i7). Topics can be short, front loaded and 'immersive' (with themed days and a collapsed curriculum - i4 and i7) or more sustained, with a sense of a beginning, middle and end (i1). Mathematics often stands alone, while English is often based on topic work to some degree.

What goes into a topic can be a management, team or individual decision. The size of school seems to be the main factor that influences whether teachers plan topics alone or with others. Where there are parallel classes, the teachers describe planning with their colleagues. i2, i5 and i6 largely let the *children* decide the topics and endeavour to ensure certain learning objectives are included, or retrospectively record what was achieved and check coverage against the National Curriculum at that point. Even if children do not choose the overall topic, i1, i4 and i7 let children contribute ideas that influence the details of what is covered.

Some interviewees think primarily in terms of subjects rather than topics. i8, for example, does not teach all subjects to her class because the pupils are taught by several teachers each week, and she does not know what her pupils are learning in some subjects, appearing highly focused on English and mathematics. Her pupils do have occasional art days and British Values days, but ongoing topics are limited to a small amount of work in the Humanities with token links made elsewhere.

At the other end of the subject-topic dimension, those interviewees (like i1, i2, i5 and i6) who say they put a great deal of effort into planning for learning across the broad curriculum also demonstrate a strong sense of fulfilment from the process and its outcome:

‘You have to create the planning yourself ... yes [it is a lot of work] but it’s enjoyable ... I think once everything is in plan it’s very easy ...’ (i2)

‘At the moment I’m doing ‘Military in Motion’- that’s what I’ve named it – because they wanted to learn about the army and the navy and tanks and aeroplanes and things....

Whilst I love the way my year can be whatever I want it to be and what the children want it to be, and we can shape our own curriculum, it does make it hard sometimes to plan in advance and have the resources that you definitely need. ... I’ve really had to think long and hard for this topic, ‘Military in Motion’ ... because I don’t know anything about that and I would never have picked to teach that, ever. But actually I’m really enjoying it.

And I’ve started watching little documentaries at home, about the navy shows and things!’ (i5)

Our research indicates that some schools organise and implement a broad curriculum much more effectively than others.

The importance of engaging children in their learning

Wanting to engage children is a strong and consistent theme amongst interviewees. In some cases, this is coupled with a sense that engagement is frustrated by the priority of English and

mathematics, though it does describe engagement with texts. But as Rosen leads his characters in a first-hand exploration of the world on his 'Bear Hunt' (Rosen and Oxenbury, 1989), so too our interviewees are keen, in some cases passionate, about diversity of direct experience as a driver for engagement.

'I just think it's far more exciting, interesting - engages the children a lot more. And it means that things aren't sort of taught in isolation' (i1).

While none of the interviewees referred specifically to learning theory or educational theorists, terms like 'immersion', 'enjoyment', 'memorability' and 'engagement' were frequent. This sense of *holistic* intention is one that has its roots in the ideas of educational thinkers such as Pestalozzi (Heaford, 1967), Montessori (Smith, 1997), Dewey (Johnson, 2010) and Kolb (1984): an approach to learning through the hands, head and heart; the pre-eminence of the senses over the mind; the essential importance of ongoing engagement with our environment; and a focus on learning through experience coupled with thoughtful reflection. The implicit understanding of the embodiment of learning, and the danger that this might be neglected in the scramble for test scores, preoccupies many of our interviewees. Without exception, they express to varying degrees the idea that 'intelligence is partly embodied: it is there, in the unfolding of action and not merely in a mind standing behind it' (Levy 2017).

Discussion

The findings of this small study reflect the tensions on schools outlined in the introduction. While all the interviewees perceive the importance of a broad curriculum and its potential to engage children in effective learning, their schools appear to vary significantly in the actual

provision of curriculum breadth. This seems to be a direct result of the perceived pressure to ensure that children do well in their core subjects. English and mathematics affect some interviewees' thinking profoundly as the 'territory of priority' (Berliner, 2011).

However, the interviewees from those schools with an engaging and genuinely broad curriculum vouch for its positive impact on learning in mathematics and English too, and these interviewees seem to conceive of English and mathematics as just part of the spectrum of children's learning:

'I know that other schools do programmes for this and this and they follow this and that. And we don't do that, even for Maths. Or for writing. We don't have units of writing, we don't have units of Maths. We teach the children what they need and for how long they need it.' (i5)

This echoes what OFSTED used to know and advocate, before their pendulum swung away from curriculum breadth to focus on 'the core' (OFSTED, 2002).

It must be noted that our participants are not necessarily representative of primary teachers generally, as they are all based in schools known to us through our broader curriculum work as teachers and teacher-educators. It is likely, therefore, that the current situation in 'typical' English primary schools currently is even more patchy in terms of curriculum breadth.

This is a small study, based solely on interviews. In-depth case studies of the schools that, according to some of our interviewees, *do* manage to implement a broad, rich curriculum would be a fruitful next step. A research methodology such as that of Brundrett and Duncan (2015) should prove useful in gathering rich data. Such studies should explore the extent to which case-study schools succeed in resolving the current curriculum tensions, and should analyse how they accomplish this, in order that other schools might benefit. In particular, our current study

suggests that there are fundamental differences between schools in the way they consider ‘core’ subjects in relation to the curriculum as a whole. In depth case studies could examine what schools’ starting assumptions are about the curriculum: do they feel that a broad curriculum needs to give way to ‘core’ learning or that ‘core’ can best be taught *through* implementing a broad curriculum? Are these starting assumptions significant to the way case-study schools organise and implement their curricula and apportion children’s time and effort?

Such in-depth case studies would be timely, given the growing focus on curriculum breadth from OFSTED. Their current head, Amanda Spielman, admits that ‘school inspectors in England have put too much weight on tests and exam results when rating schools’ (Sellgren, 2018) and her team are considering how to evaluate schools’ curriculum breadth and quality effectively. Hopefully this means that OFSTED’s pendulum is about to swing back, leading to a re-balancing of the curriculum tensions currently felt by schools. If schools can plan their curricula without feeling that they have to choose between ‘core’ and ‘broad’, this should benefit children’s learning. As one interviewee put it: ‘I realise naturally because of all what they’re doing and that wider curriculum the writing opportunities are quite phenomenal.’ (i1)

Conclusion

Our research hints that one way for schools to develop a broad, rich curriculum could be to accept the premis given by OFSTED back in 2002 (and quoted at the beginning of this article) that it *is* possible to have a broad, balanced curriculum *and* good standards in ‘the core’. It does not have to be a choice.

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