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Preparing for power

Policy making around the school curriculum from 2010

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About the author

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Introduction: 2010 and the 'Gove revolution'?

As the UK heads into a general election, and political parties begin to consider innovation and shifts in educational policy, it is important to scrutinise contrasting views of what is – and is not – working. It also is important to consider what should preparation for government consist of. I will explore both in this short guest paper for the Institute for Government.

This is a personal take from inside the policy process, augmented by policy analysis and consideration of domestic and international evidence. It is intended as a contribution to an understanding of the preparation and enactment of education policy from 2010 – and my account is just one piece of the complex jigsaw that was a turbulent period for education in England.

In the run-up to the 2010 general election Michael Gove spent three years as shadow secretary of state for children, schools and families. Following the formation of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government, he then spent four years as secretary of state for education. Gove left that role a decade ago, his departure marked by a curious mix of mounting friction with the teaching profession and recognition of his laser focus on issues essential to educational quality (Finn 2015).

Since 2014, ministerial turnover at the Department for Education (DfE) has been high, with no fewer than 10 education secretaries. But the legacy of his reforms continues to dominate education policy. Ahead of the general election, talk is of continuation, or not, of the 'Gove Revolution'. The direction of travel initiated in 2010 has persisted, not least because of Nick Gibb's almost unbroken tenure as a junior minister from 2010 to 2023. Despite the massive disruption of Covid from 2020 onwards, Gibb's focus on early reading, primary maths and qualifications policy represented deep continuity in enactment of policy formed in opposition.

I will argue that there are three key lessons for a future government seeking to enact reforms that, like those from 2010, can both be implemented at pace but go on to stand the test of time:

1. **Do the hard yards in opposition.** The Gove team entered DfE in 2010 with a detailed plan of action that had been carefully and intensively composed in opposition in the years preceding the election; the team hit the ground running.
2. **Build on what came before.** The term 'revolution' is convenient rhetoric, for all sides, but is misleading. There are important strands of continuity with New Labour policy of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Some of the most important discontinuities with the past were with key elements of preceding Conservative policy – particularly removal of the long-standing Conservative commitment to assisted places in independent schools and the creation of more grammar schools. These shifts had been carefully secured while in opposition.

3. **Learn from others.** Key aspects of policy in 2010 were grounded in international comparisons and strong evidence. There was significant appetite for research evidence even if it ran counter to some of the assumptions in policy – for example, the focus on oracy in all subjects, the removal of 'levels' as assessment and reporting of attainment.

Lesson one: Do the 'hard yards' in opposition

Understand the state of the inheritance

The policy drawn up in opposition was shaped as successive Labour governments held educational improvement as a flagship component of domestic policy. Education was central to Labour policy in the run-up to the 1997 election – "Education, education, education" (Muschamp et al 1999). Once in power, there was high commitment to policy measures with long-term, not short term, 'pay-off' – such as early years. This naturally had had an effect on the working, remit and size of the DfE, for instance:

- Policy units devoted to delivery on the ground focused on an increase in accountability and hard data from assessment.
- The size of the department grew significantly as it took more direct responsibility: the national strategies in literacy and numeracy, the City Challenges, and in the latter years, academisation. Familiar territory for educational policy – national curriculum, national assessment, qualifications, school funding, inspection – were joined by fundamental restructuring of bureaucracy, particularly the move to children's services as a means of enhancing local service delivery (Daniels and Edwards 2012).
- Reductions in class size were promised, in line with popular sentiment but despite evidence showing little relationship between marginal class size reduction and elevated attainment and equity (Hagemeister 2020).
- Education policy was combined with fiscal and wider social policy as part of an overarching mission for the Labour government to reduce child poverty. This policy was motivated by recognition of a continued link between educational attainment and social background (Joyce and Sibieta 2013).
- There was a deliberate strategy to increase post-16 participation rates and participation in higher education was accompanied by the introduction of fees to fund expansion.

As a result, the period saw a rise in teacher and support staff (an additional 48,000 FTE teachers and 230,000 support staff, mainly teaching assistants); a rise from 45% of young people gaining at least five A*–C GCSEs in 1997 to 76% in 2010; and under London Challenge funding (2003–2011), schools' results moved from some of the worst in the country to some of the best, accompanied by a significant rise in Ofsted school judgments of 'outstanding' (Blandon and others 2015).

But in opposition, Gove and his advisers had growing concerns about enduring problems; in particular, about grade inflation in tests and qualifications. Public spending had increased and examination scores had risen, but there was some evidence the latter was unreliable (Green undated), exaggerating the increase in underlying educational standards.

The shadow education team was also concerned about the total array of centrally directed programmes. Government initiatives in 1997–2010 led to an increase in the number of programmes being managed directly from the department, increasing the size of the departmental workforce: among them Every Child a Talker; the literacy and numeracy national strategies; National Challenges; Narrowing the Gap; Gifted and Talented; Building Schools for the Future; the academy programme. There were three main concerns about the scale and spread of central initiatives:

- **Cost.** There were issues regarding the size and cost of central bureaucracy and some of the programmes (particularly Building Schools for the Future), with concern about "the *size* of the state". The increase in the education budget (£35 billion in 1997/98 to £51 billion in 2004/05) was viewed with concern – that the significant and sustained increase in spending might not be resulting in a commensurate increase in equity and attainment.
- **Extension of state control.** Many programmes ran counter to Gove's views on school autonomy and the need for a "reduction in the *reach* of the state".
- **Approaches to learning.** There were concerns about schools' approaches to teaching and learning resulting from programmes directed at improvement, particularly in maths and literacy. The opposition team felt strongly that research pointed to far greater emphasis on, for example, phonics in early reading, and on fluency in basic operations in maths.

Advisers to the opposition team were also concerned that the civil service would be resistant to change, a concern based on academic research and assumption of inertia among civil servants serving a long succession of governments of the same party (Frug 1976; Dowding 1995; Foster 2005). In particular, they were anxious that a department heavily populated with officials tied to specific executive programmes would be reluctant to change direction or close those programmes, and a long and developed working relation with ministers in the previous three-term party would create ideological resistance to an incoming government's agenda.

Establish a clear direction and set of priorities

The incoming team wanted to move fast, had a clear set of objectives, and was concerned about the possibility of high levels of departmental inertia. In the days immediately following the change of government, DfE programmes were rapidly closed down by ministers, and civil service independence was openly questioned by political advisers. Methods at the heart of flagship policies such as the literacy and numeracy strategies were heavily scrutinised and challenged. This scrutiny was intense and

detailed; the pre-election work guided advisers and ministers on "where to look and what to unpick". Whether the concerns were valid or not in each case, an atmosphere of scrutiny and change prevailed, with a looming sense of programmes being curtailed and teams retasked or wound down.

While longer term reviews were put in place (the review of the national curriculum, the Bew review of assessment and the Tickell review of early years), extensive executive action nonetheless proceeded at pace. And this programme broke with many preconceptions and prior positions in previous Conservative manifestos. Preceding manifestos over the past three decades engaged with a wide range of issues of school governance, accountability, the curriculum, the purpose of schooling and 'issues of the moment'. But they repeatedly had four things at their heart:

- **Behaviour** – policies focused on ensuring school attendance, and diffuse ideas of 'improved discipline'. This included commentary on 'progressive' schooling
- **Academic selection** – and the potential creation of more grammar schools
- **Provision for gifted and talented pupils** – and specifically, the assisted places policy
- **Control of schools** – including issues around governance, national curriculum, national testing and school inspection.

Gove's work in opposition broke with these long-standing preoccupations and laid the groundwork for a markedly different Conservative position on all of these central themes, informed by domestic and international research:

- **On behaviour, Gove sought to reassert 'knowledge' in the curriculum.** Rather than focusing on 'class discipline', the concern about the 'state of the classroom' was reframed as a curriculum issue. The driving idea was a view that knowledge had been downgraded in the curriculum and its role needed to be given much more prominence. While much of the top-line discourse of this 'readjustment' focused on national identity and 'established canon', there was a strong commitment to ensuring that all pupils acquired solid and extensive subject discipline knowledge. Contrasting this with a 'skills-based approach', a strong subject-based curriculum was seen as a means of improving social equity and enhancing life chances of all children. This commitment was viewed as a means of strategic reduction of poverty and inequality of outcomes.
- **On academic selection, the aim to create more grammar schools was swapped with provision of high-quality schools everywhere.** Gove moved the party discourse away from creation of opportunity through the formation of more grammar schools to a clear statement that all schools should offer high-quality provision.
- Similarly, **provision for gifted and talented pupils was sought in every school**, with a commitment not to allow a limited number of children privileged access to high-performing schools but to make all schools high performing, and supporting more equitable progression to higher education.

- **Control of schools was to be passed to academies and free schools**, in response to OECD evidence linking autonomy of schools and higher performance. This was also used to justify reducing forms of restriction on schools, for taking an increased number of schools out of local authority control, and for the creation of new categories of community-created schools.

There are three important features of this set of commitments. First, it represented a radical break with some of the key themes of successive preceding Conservative manifestos. Out went grammar schools and assisted places, and in came radical school improvement across the whole of the system. Out went support to selected groups of high-performing children and in came support for all to achieve and attain. Out went ideas of fallibility of young people – segregating those prepared to work hard from those who are not – and in came ideas that all schools should be able to support all children and maximise attainment.

Second, there was a strong commitment to using international evidence. Gove referred repeatedly to Andreas Schleicher of the OECD being "the most important man in English education" by virtue of his access to the data and insights from OECD's regular PISA survey of different nations' educational performance. And Gove also tacked close to the message regarding the link between high-performing systems and school autonomy – the 'autonomy argument' was then dominant in OECD messaging and in the flow of discourse between nations' policy makers. Critique of the position was only in its infancy, and later focused on whether OCED data was being interpreted correctly (Benton T 2014), and whether autonomy was the cause of high performance or could arise in systems as a result of them attaining high performance (Gomedio 2023). While many of the coalition policy positions were grounded in secure evidence and maintain high coherence, I will argue that the 'autonomy argument' became one of the unreconciled and fractious elements of the post-2010 education reforms.

The programme of reforms brought in after 2010 began quickly and delivered significant changes over the parliament. That was only possible because of the work done in opposition. The new political team that entered DfE in 2010 had a strong sense not just of their individual priorities, but the outcomes and objectives they were seeking to achieve. The breaks with successive Conservative positions were done in opposition. The manifesto signalled what a new education ministry would stand for and aim for. It was clear that there was much work to do to make them a reality and many questions that were not and could not be answered in opposition, but unquestionably there was a clear sense of direction and priority.

Lesson 2: Build on what came before

One of the key elements of continuity with the Labour administration was retention and expansion of the academy programme, originally formulated under Labour by Andrew Adonis to effect rapid transformation of poor-performing state schools – crucially taking those schools out of local authority control, running them through direct contract. In this sense the 'Gove revolution' was a mix of four policy stances: a low-profile wind-down of Labour flagship programmes (such as Sure Start); a high-profile shut-down of others (such as Building Schools for the Future); these combined with the apparent closure but re-specification of programmes (the literacy and numeracy strategies); and the high-profile gearing up of other Labour initiatives – such as the academy programme.

Past reforms laid the foundation for a so-called 'revolution'

It is a borderline judgment as to whether the academy programme was simply expanded, or appropriated and fundamentally changed. Under Labour it had focused on the most low-performing schools and so appeared as a limited and constrained initiative; it remains ambiguous as to whether such a large expansion was already latent in the original model (Adonis 2012; *Evening Standard* 2012; *Independent* 2016).

Interestingly, while the expansion of the academy programme can be seen as a continuation of Labour policy it also had deep continuity with much earlier 'unfinished business' associated with Conservative thinking prior to and around the very first national curriculum in 1988, particularly the propositions of Stuart Sexton on marketisation of schools (Sexton 1994). A national curriculum represented a fundamental shift of control to the centre, away from local authority control of the curriculum – increasing parental choice, reducing the impact of catchment area policy. Further to this, Gove added more contemporary international evidence aligned to increased parental choice, in this case Sweden's controversial creation of free schools (Oates and others 2021). But herein lay contradictions in policy. The coalition's highly leveraged expansion of both the academy programme and creation of free schools undermined the power of the national curriculum as a universal policy instrument, since these categories of schools were legally free of the obligation to follow its specific requirements.

At the same time, the national curriculum was being adapted to support the models and rationale driving development in primary maths and primary literacy – again with a keen eye on coherence of approach. But while the national curriculum review was working hard to deliver "fewer things in greater depth", content sequencing which aligned with evidence from international comparisons, and a focus on "concepts, principles, fundamental operations and core knowledge" (Oates 2011), one key adviser argued forcefully for all schools to be free of legal requirement to deliver it. The view was that schools should be "... free to choose the best from the materials and curriculum content now coming out from MIT, from Harvard". This position was justified as cohering with liberal- and market-based approaches in free schools strategy, increased parental choice through the academy programme and changes to the distribution model for school funding.

This seemed, however, to render the review of the national curriculum irrelevant. With no legal force it could be used simply as a 'signalling' document, or "window dressing to policy". The analysis that laid down the principles for the review had focused on the problems created by ambiguity in the legal status of curriculum instruments. In the late 90s, schools had displayed uncertainty about what guidance and documents were actually a formal legal requirement and which were not. This extended to quite detailed aspects of practice on assessment, on timetabling and so on. While exploiting the ambiguous status of instruments such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's 'schemes of work' can be seen as politically astute steering of education, it was also leading to confusion, overload, and a breakdown of trust between schools and state (Oates 2010). This threatens careful demarcations of school autonomy and necessary state restriction, and renders schools unclear about what choices they can and should make. There are risks in encouraging a system in which misunderstanding about the legal status of measures is exploited to manage key elements of policy – with non-binding measures treated by some or all as legally binding (Simons and others 2017).

In office Gove clearly was committed to revision of the national curriculum – and through the review of the curriculum scrutinised the detail of proposed content, its sequencing and its role in human development and national identity. This was not a cursory interest. Indeed, there were concerns expressed inside and outside the department regarding his keen involvement in the specification of content in history and literature, a level of involvement about which officials – and some members of the expert panel – grew increasingly nervous. As the months progressed, they ramped up pressure for involvement of teacher and subject specialist groups in the final phase of the review, to mitigate increasing calls of 'personal capture'. Legally, the national curriculum *is* owned by the secretary of state – with that power mitigated by the legal requirement to consult (HMSO 1996). Of course, the political reality is culturally and historically bounded – it is possible to push that sense of individual ownership too far to maintain consent, an issue that arose in curriculum reform in Norway (Broadhead 2002). But the key thing to note is the high level of engagement from a busy secretary of state pushing reform across a wide range of policy fronts (he was accused of "trying to do too much, too fast" by a select committee chair (Guardian 2013)).

Busy also with a host of transformative, confrontational and risk-laden projects, Gove indeed was a secretary of state in a hurry – with power to act depending on a heady mix of a potentially short-lived and fragile coalition government, a well-prepared and wide-ranging set of policy shifts, and an evidence-driven sense of the need for 'coherence' between all aspects of policy action. With such a wide and challenging portfolio and a desire to retain coherence, it would be rational to neglect an instrument you felt was essentially irrelevant. But this he did not do with the national curriculum. For him the curriculum was not irrelevant, but an instrument that should tightly cohere will all other elements of educational policy. This idea of 'coherence' was pulled in from discussions of high-performing systems (Oates 2011) and surfaced repeatedly in the policy models of not only DfE but Ofqual, Ofsted and other key agencies.

But in some areas new ministers wanted a 'clean break'

While the national curriculum review geared up, the closure of key Labour programmes continued apace. The rapid termination of the Building Schools for the Future programme was driven by concerns about competence – centring on delays and lack of clarity regarding value for money (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee 2009; NAO 2009), but two more subtle discontinuities with New Labour policy were a de-prioritisation of the Sure Start programme and a move from 'personalisation' of learning.

Sure Start

Alongside the review of the national curriculum but reporting in 2011, in advance of the 2013 schedule for the national curriculum, the Tickell review of the early years and foundation stage (EYFS) reinforced the importance of early years support but recommended considerable streamlining of processes, particularly observation of progress and reporting. On the radar of advisers was research and scrutiny of Sure Start, which outlined the strains that expansion of the scheme had created and highlighted a discreet shift of focus of the programme:

> **"... One of Sure Start's original developers in the Treasury, Norman Glass, argued that the expansion to 3,500 centres left local Sure Start programmes stretched thinly, and this led to its 'capture by the employability agenda'. He felt that the resulting focus on provision of childcare moved Sure Start away from its original child development agenda. In becoming a place for parents to leave children while they went to work, he argued the changes were creating 'a sort of New Deal for Toddlers ...'" (Bate and Foster 2017, p. 12)**

While evidence of benefit and beneficial impact on social inequality was accumulating, other aspects of Sure Start ran counter to the overall direction of policy, particularly the increase in local authority oversight within the programme. There was no single declaration of reduced commitment to Sure Start but nonetheless the move represented a significant shift away from a flagship Labour programme, with more than one in three Sure Start centres closing by 2020 (Wise 2021).

Effecting a major change in 'curriculum thinking'

By contrast with 'hidden policy' on Sure Start, there was a high-profile declaration of a move away from 'skills-based curriculum' and 'personalised learning' to a focus on educational standards, curriculum content and didactics. During the preceding Labour governments, 'personalisation of learning' had been linked by some to 'student voice' and other initiatives designed for inclusion. But it emanated from a much more generalised broader strategic move by the Labour government across all public services (Leadbeater 2004). While being a very broad commitment across health, education, transport, and associated with negotiating a different relationship between individuals and the state, in education it was swiftly aligned with 'child-centred education' – interestingly, an association that the Labour government sought to reject (Hartley 2009).

But in 2010 the drive to personalisation was dropped instantly as "overly child-centred" (Gibb 2017). Teacher-led, knowledge-rich, subject-discipline-focused didactics and pedagogy were seen as a better-evidenced approach to securing high attainment and high equity. To further the idea of "a high quality curriculum for all", the elaboration of performance measures to include 'Progress 8' were an explicit response to the known problems of previous measures, such as the 'five GCSE grades A*–C', which so dominated schools during the late 90s – which led to a neglect of both the highest attaining and the lowest attaining pupils, encouraged undue focus on borderline C/D pupils, and narrow, shallow learning to pitch pupils over the grade threshold (Acquah 2013). Despite the known problems, the measure had been retained for over a decade.

The revised measures were designed to avoid these serious failings and induce greater curriculum coherence – an alignment of curriculum aims, pedagogy, assessment and accountability. An explicit commitment to coherence could also be seen in the development of the teacher standards – designed to support the move to a more knowledge-rich curriculum and the principles and content of the maths and literacy initiatives. Likewise the new approval processes for phonics materials; the link between pedagogic model, content progressions, learning materials, and staff development for didactics and pedagogy matched exactly Schmidt's model of 'curriculum coherence', which is displayed by high-performing systems around the world (Schmidt 2006).

Multiplication and phonics checks

The political will to implement unpopular measures such as the multiplication check and phonics check again showed a commitment to curriculum coherence and international evidence. Memorisation of times tables was seen as a clear feature of the primary curriculum in Singapore, Shanghai, Estonia and Hong Kong – an important prerequisite to progression in maths and to more complex problem-solving (Petch 2016). However, the introduction of additional testing into primary was likely to face a wall of opposition, and this proved to be the case (Independent 2018). Although the multiplication check was intended to be exactly that – with the onus on its being a helpful 'check' to support learning – it was perceived by unions and many teachers as an extension of national testing and an addition to high stakes accountability.

The educational press did little to correct misconceptions (BBC 2018). The political high stakes accompanying the introduction of a test that was not extremely high stakes for schools might have discouraged ministers from persisting with the policy, but the importance of introducing measures that would drive up equity and attainment was seen as a key imperative. So too the phonics check. With a strong and explicit push to drive up facility in reading and reducing the numbers arriving at secondary school with low attainment in reading, the phonics check was designed to help schools identify those most in need of support. Again, 'curriculum coherence' suggested that formal assessment would support curriculum aims, progression and teaching methods – an assessment focused on de-coding in reading cohered with the increased emphasis on phonics in policy, and which had been emerging prior to 2010, including in the 2005 Rose review (DfES 2006).

Nonetheless, maintaining coherence across all dimensions of policy and a system is a demanding public policy enterprise. From 2010, small fractures were inherently present in a key area: school autonomy. And over a very short time these grew into significant fissures.

I have outlined above the immediate origins of the 'autonomy argument' and the reasons why it resonated with previous Conservative Party thinking. But it is important to note that increased autonomy of schools can be where the left overlaps with the right; where the right sees reduction of state control, in the same thing the left sees "the importance of personalised learning" and "curriculum-making in schools". But the years following 2010 showed instability and tension in the way in which the 'autonomy argument' played out. On the one hand, there was a political impetus to shrink the state and increase autonomy of schools; on the other, a desire to see highly specific, evidence-driven practice. This is a fraught tension and, as of 2024, it remains entirely unreconciled.

Reform of qualifications – aligning elements of the education system, or 'which levers to pull?'

National qualifications dominate curriculum thinking in the secondary phase in all types of schools. The approach to reform of qualifications by the coalition government was a break from decades of preceding policy under governments of different hues. Unusually in a country with a trend towards assessment-led reform and the introduction of new classes of qualifications (NVQs, GVNQs, AVCs, diplomas, EPQs) and assessment reform (modularisation, coursework) the post-2010 reform of qualifications focused on standards and quality of educational experience. Work by Cambridge Assessment had highlighted some increase in underlying educational attainment during the preceding decade but accompanied by grade inflation in both GCSE and A level, and in national assessments (Cambridge Assessment 2010).

Commitment to "high standards for all pupils" was expressed in policy not by introducing new qualifications or innovation in assessment, but by implementing a qualifications review – and in A level, ensuring content linked more closely to the demands of undergraduate provision – a linkage realised more keenly some two decades previously when more exam boards were owned by universities. The issue of "high standards for all pupils" also drove the 2011 Wolf review of vocational qualifications – with an intense focus on return to qualifications and on progression. The low or negative return on some qualifications was considered unacceptable – and instead of a focus on 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational qualifications (VQs), which had so dominated prior policy (Oates 2010), the Wolf recommendations focused on reducing the use of qualifications of little apparent value – ultimately recommending that a focus on GCSE at 16 was critical for equity and attainment.

The discussions included scrutiny of research and inspection findings that had identified 'performativity' behaviour of some institutions – using high-tariff vocational qualifications to boost performance table position. I had warned exam boards in

the early 2000s that although very high-tariff VQs were few in number (most were equivalent to one or two GCSEs but a handful were equated with up to six GCSEs), the fact that they conspicuously were being used for performativity purposes in some instances would make all VQs vulnerable to adverse reputation in political circles. This advice was not heeded by board staff.

Post-2010 qualifications strategy thus was entirely consistent with commitment to high equity and attainment, and displayed further commitment to 'curriculum coherence' – alignment with the principles of the review of the national curriculum and other policy strands – particularly the focus on 'knowledge-rich learning'. This focus on knowledge was viewed by many commentators as regressive and traditional, but my own transnational analysis of national education systems and the problems of the 2008 national curriculum for England (Oates 2011) endorsed this 'rehabilitative' emphasis on the importance of knowledge in establishing a high-equity, high-attainment system. Independently, Michael Young's emerging work on 'powerful knowledge' was increasing its prominence domestically and internationally (Young and Muller 2013). Its growth in impact has continued, and with my own work has stimulated OECD's increased emphasis on the place of knowledge and a recognition that problems of knowledge have adversely affected a number of education systems including Portugal, Poland and Sweden.

The reform of qualifications was seen in structural terms – not only something that needed attention in its own right, but recognising that qualifications were vital to targets and accountability measures. Reforming both in tandem was seen as essential to ensuring that drivers and incentives were aligned with overall educational aims of policy.

The use of strong evidence

Outrage at Michael Gove's direct intervention in the writing of elements of the national curriculum overshadowed the extent to which there was strong commitment during opposition and during office to using international and domestic evidence in policy formation. The simplest approach to exploring the high respect that was attached to this is through specific instances of the use of evidence. I will refer to these evidence bases, since there seldom was reduction to 'single points' of research evidence. In this, there are no naive assumptions about 'data speaking for itself', the value-neutrality of research and evidence, nor about misunderstandings, misappropriation and bias (Lier and Parkhurst 2016). But, simply, there was huge appetite for research evidence in the 2010 coalition government even when it challenged established positions and contradicted long-held assumptions.

Evidence base 1: International comparisons

From the outset of the review, there was a commitment to using evidence from international comparisons to inform decisions about specific content of the curriculum, and to determine its shape – for example, the respective loading of primary versus secondary, the sequencing of content, the models for content in each subject. My own transnational analysis well prior to the review was central to the principles

driving it (Oates 2011), high-performing jurisdictions were carefully chosen for a set of detailed content comparisons, and a large team assembled to complete those comparisons (DfE 2012).

The reports created by the civil service team remained a touchstone throughout the review and were central to discussions. The choice of countries was systematic; only countries which were high performing, had secured a period of substantial improvement, and about which we had evidence of policy and impact from that period of improvement were included. This ruled out nations that were engaged in radical reform about which there was no secure information on improvement and success. This disqualified Australia and Scotland in particular. While this was criticised at the time, the subsequent problems in these jurisdictions endorsed our approach. Analysis was completed on Singapore, Finland, Alberta, Massachusetts, Hong Kong (China), with the addition of ED Hirch's Core Knowledge sequence. Japan and South Korea would have featured in the comparison work but sound translation of the relevant curriculum materials could not be obtained within the timeframe of the review. General research on these nations was, however, included. The comparisons yielded important principles regarding avoidance of curriculum overload, 'fewer things in greater depth', particularly in the primary phase, and the statement of concepts, principles, fundamental operations and core knowledge.

Evidence base 2: 'Curriculum coherence'

The evidence, underpinned by the work of Bill Schmidt, showed that high-performing education systems had one key thing in common: they were coherent. This is not just about coherence between things like the content of the curriculum, how assessment works and how teaching and teaching materials are used. But it's also about coherence in the sequencing in what is taught at different levels of education, the focus of the inspection regime and the accountability system. High-performing systems around the world might look, at initial glance, to be very different: variation in the size, structure and type of schools; different balances of private and state provision, some selective and others not; and the ages at which children move between different stages of education are not the same. Those were all less important than the level of coherence in the system. Those systems that were incoherent – for example, an approach to assessment that was much narrower than the curriculum – had sub-optimal performance. Through work directly with Schmidt, the concept and evidence of coherence had been developed extensively prior to the curriculum review In the very first discussions in the review, the secretary of state and ministers engaged intensively in the evidence in favour of curriculum coherence.

Indeed, the commitment to coherence was explicitly demonstrated through the immediate convening, under direct instruction of the secretary of state, of a series of meetings of civil service directors and team leaders across the department, in order to ensure linkages between all policy areas and lines of work. The term 'curriculum coherence' – the alignment of assessment, content, inspection etc – clearly established itself deep in the policy discourse across DfE, Ofqual and Ofsted, repeatedly emerging

in policy meetings from 2010, and is still evident in discussions over a decade later. Discussions in both the department and other agencies (Ofsted, Ofqual) from 2010 to 2023 frequently referred to the importance of ensuring the explicit alignment of accountability, assessment, teacher standards, teacher training, etc, and under the term 'curriculum coherence'.

Evidence base 3: Oracy

Throughout the review research reports were both sought and independently submitted. This included a key report on the importance of oracy across all subjects. This was submitted by the director of the Cambridge Primary Review, Robin Alexander, and although wider in scope the evidence it cited cohered with that used by key phonics programmes on the importance of oral exposure to words in the acquisition of reading. There was considerable concern expressed by the secretary of state regarding the manner in which 'speaking and listening' had been included in English orders and form of its assessment. Civil servants were extremely surprised when the secretary of state moved from outright resistance to high support for the inclusion of oracy in all subjects: it was presentation of the research evidence which effected the radical change in position Oracy was emphasised in all subjects, using the subject aims statements as the vehicle for guidance.

Evidence base 4: Levels

Since the early 1990s, the Task Group on Assessment and Testing's recommendations to use 'levels' to assess pupils was a fundamental part of school management of learning, feedback to parents, and accountability measures. Yet my research prior to the review showed substantial problems had accumulated in the use of levels: particularly poor granularity in reviewing each child's learning (missing key elements of subject discipline knowledge); low reliability (consistency); labelling and self-labelling by children driving low expectations and depressing both attainment and equity.

Checking contemporary findings from schools with Paul Black, chair of the 1987 task group, he agreed that the systemic nature of the problems justified consideration of alternative approaches. Again, prompt presentation of the detail of the evidence and the advantages of alternative forms of reporting attainment led to the secretary of state ordering the removal of levels from the system, and introducing scale scores into national tests, and focusing ongoing assessment on the specific content of the curriculum. Civil servants keenly pointed out the extent to which accountability arrangements and national reporting of attainment relied on levels. However, the secretary of state felt that the weight of evidence that pupils' attainment was being inhibited by the use of levels and the advantages of focusing on attainment of specific discipline content in ongoing assessment trumped the rationale for retention.

For this aspect of policy it is worth tracing the subsequent enactment of this policy reform. It proved a highly controversial decision, since so much practice in schools was centred around, and relied on, the assigning of levels and sub-levels to pupils. In implementing the change, the school autonomy commitment heavily moderated

implementation strategy: national action would be taken to revise reporting from national tests (using a fine-grained score), GCSE grades would be the reference point for lower secondary assessment, there would be no provision of national staff development on alternative approaches at school level – schools would develop their own assessment approaches, in line with 'greater school autonomy'. With schools expressing both concern and uncertainty, I undertook a large number of regional presentations ('Life without Levels') to outline the rationale for the removal of levels and the forms of assessment that could be used for replacement approaches. YouTube videos accompanied this effort to work directly with schools. A commission on 'Assessment without levels' was put in place in 2015, but detailed guidance did not percolate to school level (Schools Week 2016). Inevitably, due to the absence of high-density, co-ordinated national staff development, considerable variation in approach arose, from schools retaining levels or re-inventing them to well-underpinned granular approaches supporting learning and reporting to parents.

Evidence base 5 : National curriculum and school curriculum – ambiguities at the heart of 'school autonomy'

Schools minister Gibb had, in opposition in the years leading up to 2010, heavily criticised models of maths and literacy embedded in the national curriculum and the literacy and numeracy strategies – undertaking wide discussions with researchers and educationalists as well as extensive school visits. Immediately on gaining office, plans were enacted to withdraw the strategies – in line with the 'school autonomy' argument – but with highly prescriptive and detailed alternatives replacing them.

These were not arbitrary schemes. The emphasis on phonics drew from evidence also prioritised under Labour and the policy enacted through approved reading schemes – detailed materials for schools accompanied in most instances by highly prescriptive professional development. In maths, the NCETM (National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics), set up under Labour in 2006, was commissioned with an ambitious programme of development of 'mastery' maths education. This was based on practice and models in Singapore and Shanghai. An extensive exchange programme with Shanghai was set up (DfE 2016), 40 'hub' schools supported staff development in more than 10,000 schools, and approved textbooks aligned with mastery were made available with dedicated funding for schools using the hubs. Running on a parallel timeframe to the national curriculum review, there was constant exchange with both literacy scheme providers and the NCETM to ensure absolute alignment with the content and models of the national curriculum. This level of tight control of curriculum content, curriculum materials, professional development and didactic practices aligns with notions of 'curriculum coherence' but misaligns strongly with the overt commitments to high school autonomy – an important contrast between belief in high autonomy but an operational commitment to highly prescriptive action.

Reviewing PISA data in 2018, England's enhanced performance in maths and literacy coincides with these detailed and carefully managed interventions. Although the national curriculum included radically revised, knowledge-rich content in maths,

English, science (and other foundation subjects), performance in science remains static. With no detailed intervention in science that resembles those in reading and maths, the PISA data appears to support the impact of the maths and reading interventions, and suggest a weak influence of the national curriculum.

Evidence base 6: Year-by-year specification of the primary curriculum

The national curriculum, from its inception, has been arranged into four main 'key stages' from age five to 16. Primary legislation outlines pupil outcomes that should be achieved by the end of each key stage. With a fragile coalition government and ministers in a hurry to effect improvement, the review was tasked with reform inside the framework of existing primary legislation, and instructed not to engage with reform that would require passing of revised primary legislation.

Immediately, the international comparisons showed that key high-performing systems set their curriculum year-by-year or had state-approved textbooks, which provide de facto year-by-year sequencing of content of the curriculum. While the autonomy argument drove towards retaining the larger content blocks of the key stages covering two to three years of learning, evidence pointed towards the greater clarity and support to schools of year-by-year specification, particularly in primary.

Two members of the expert panel began to object to any move to state content year-by-year, citing the commitments to 'fewer things in greater depth' and the distinction between a parsimonious national curriculum issued by the state and the detailed school curriculum determined at school level. They also grew increasingly concerned about the detailed work being commissioned on maths and reading, and the close involvement of the secretary of state in certain subjects. They were unconvinced by the international evidence on year-by-year statement of content, not reassured by clear civil service guidance, and other panel members' views that this would not be a legal requirement, but advisory and supportive.

They also were not reassured by the fact that the national curriculum might increase the number of words and pages describing key concepts and core knowledge but still realise 'fewer things in greater depth'. That is, more words to describe fewer things, but with precision – necessary in a system in which there would not be approved textbooks, in contrast to Singapore, Hong Kong etc. This led to a fractious period where two members of the panel threatened to resign, a difficult time for all those overseeing and delivering the review (TES 2012). In the event, the storm was weathered, and the review maintained its established course. Only at a later stage was the principle of 'fewer things in greater depth' compromised; this came with the final push regarding subject community involvement.

In late 2012 and early 2013, with the expert panel no longer in place, and the public consultation on the review long completed, there grew nervousness in the civil service team supporting the review regarding subject community consent. While ministers remained extremely concerned about subject community capture, they assented to closing rounds of review by subject groups. In most subjects, tight adherence to the

avoidance of curriculum overload and the principle of 'fewer things in greater depth' and 'concepts, principles, fundamental operations and core knowledge', English specialists began to expand significantly the content annexes to the primary curriculum – content on vocabulary, grammar and 'language about language'. This later developed into a serious problem in the first round of national tests based on the (non-statutory) annex content. 'Fronted adverbials' became a national news story and a totemic feature of the annexes (Guardian 2017; Schools Week 2016) – which were non-statutory and a very late addition to the national curriculum, driven by literacy specialists coming very late to the development process (More Than a Score 2021).

The careful grip on the founding principles of the review – which held back on over-specification – looks to have been lost in the final phase, leading to serious problems in learning. Meanwhile, the highly prescriptive iron grip on content and process in the reading and number initiatives seems – in the light of PISA data – to have created success in learning. These developments leave the autonomy argument in a fractured state. Revision of the annexes in English remains 'unfinished business'.

Evidence base 7: GCSEs as the structuring instrument for KS3 and KS4

Interviews with schools during the early weeks of the review showed clearly that GCSE specifications and endorsed textbooks absolutely dominated curriculum thinking in lower secondary, with few teachers referring to the national curriculum as a reference point. The link between GCSE and the national curriculum had been highly problematic in the years following 1998, with the first Dearing review being tasked with effecting a satisfactory reconciliation of the two. Since that time, GCSE had come to dominate curriculum thinking. With KS3 still regarded as underdeveloped (Ofsted 2015) discussions were held on whether the national curriculum should be reinstated as the primary instrument for curriculum thinking and curriculum development 11–16. With the review taking place at pace – again with a consciousness that the political term might be truncated – this seemed like a large hill to climb, with a huge implementation and information effort required to dislodge 'GCSE thinking'.

Perhaps, the discussions entertained, keeping the national curriculum as 'light touch' (covering key content but with parsimony) and encouraging greater continuity between KS3 and KS4 would be a more prudent and effective strategy. Encouraging 'seamless learning progression 11–16' would not only go with the grain of current behaviour but since all schools including independent schools use GCSEs – in contrast to the partial nature of the national curriculum as a requirement on some schools only – greater coherence across the system would be attained. This was the adopted position. It required strategy on encouraging schools to establish greater continuity of learning sequences 11–16, without curriculum narrowing. This strategy subsequently was not drawn up in detail, and with the arrival of Covid-19, this element of reform also remains 'unfinished business'.

Extracting lessons

Fourteen years have passed since the coalition was formed and Michael Gove was appointed as the first Conservative secretary of state for education in over a decade. Whoever wins the next general election will likely build on many of the policies he introduced, while attaching new labels and 'policy wrapping'. What is genuinely new and what is continuation policy remains an important issue.

Doing the 'hard yards' in opposition

With opposition parties having only a fraction of the executive support available to incumbent governments, and with key details of finances and system performance not immediately available to them, it is extremely demanding to formulate robust and precise policy that allows immediate and concerted action on taking office. While the 2010 election gave the nation a possibly fragile coalition government, the hard policy graft done by Michael Gove and Nick Gibb prior to 2010 – years of slog monitoring research, scrutinising researchers and commentators, visiting schools – allowed them to formulate robust elaborated policy and to start immediately on a concerted programme of coherent, specific work – a programme that broke considerably from previous Conservative policy. That work included internal party lobbying, arguing for shifts away from previous pre-occupations on behaviour, selection and limited assistance to disadvantaged but high-attaining pupils.

Coherence

The alignment of policy measures already was a deliberate focus of incoming ministers' and advisers, and continuity across all areas of policy of measures and driving principles agreed in oppositions were an explicit part of almost all discussions. The injection of Bill Schmidt's work and my own work on 'curriculum coherence' added evidence heft to the commitment to coherence.

Political agnosticism and using domestic and international evidence

The extent of policy continuity with Labour, and discontinuities with preceding Conservative manifesto commitments, are striking and often ignored. There existed both in the pre-2010 formation phase and the post-2010 development and enactment phases a strong commitment to driving policy through evidence. Policies were constructed not on the basis of whether they were consistent with previous party orthodoxy or political alignments, but whether they would contribute to higher standards, better welfare and an improved education system. The non-aligned and eclectic use of evidence was remarkable, but avoided any decay into disjoint, through use of principles of 'curriculum coherence'. And – unlike in many key nations – standards were rising prior to Covid (Oates 2018) and England's PISA scores were the most resilient of the four administrations of the UK in the wake of the pandemic.

Tensions

Despite the commitment to coherence, a central concept in the strategy – the autonomy argument – displayed persistent contradictions of thought and action. The successful interventions on maths and literacy were both driven by evidence and highly directive, while the rhetoric of autonomy suggested far less central direction of school practices. At the same time, the autonomy argument was the cause of breakdowns in policy construction and weakness in policy enactment – academies were free of the need to follow the national curriculum just as the national curriculum was used as a major vehicle of curriculum reform. The 'autonomy argument' was fraught with contradictions. A problem with an idea became a material rift in policy and process.

Unfinished business

And along came Covid. And pay disputes in the wake of Covid. And RAAC. Counterfactual history is seldom worth playing with outside fiction. What would have happened to attainment and equity had the Covid-19 pandemic not happened? But the response to the pandemic, the ensuing 2020 exams crisis required round-the-clock attention. The unfinished business in KS3, in the English annexes and elsewhere remains... unfinished.

Gove left DfE in 2014. Yet the direction of policy remained solidly in place, not least due to Nick Gibb's long tenure as 'heavy lifting' schools minister. While the policies on maths and reading aligned England more closely with high-performing systems' approaches, countries that moved towards 'competence-based' curricula are in 2024 re-examining the role of knowledge in the curriculum and looking with interest at the Gove reforms – Scotland has just convened a group to review this, New Zealand is doing the same, Sweden is joining them in this endeavour and Estonia has never foregone its commitment to acquisition of discipline knowledge. In terms of curriculum approaches, early reading policy, primary maths and qualifications standards, we remain better aligned with high-performing systems than in the period pre-2010. With many systems we share problems of chronic teacher shortages, confusion about marketisation of education, calls on a pressed public purse, changes in young peoples' engagement with education, and fallout from the global pandemic.

Some elements of Gove's 'revolution' were not-so-hidden continuations of Labour policy (Exley and Ball 2011). But some things genuinely were innovative aspects of public policy management. Alongside genuine commitment to evidence from carefully framed international comparisons, Schmidt's 'coherence' argument was pursued with vigour in the first months of the coalition government. A group was convened comprising all major team leaders, to examine the means of securing coherence across all arms of policy. This was not crystallised in formal governance, but as schools minister in an almost unbroken run from 2010 to 2023, Gibb constantly and consciously drove for coherent impact across accountability measures, teacher training standards, curriculum initiatives, funding and qualifications policy.

By 2021, slowly and quietly, the 'managed decline' of Sure Start began to be reversed, as early years began to be a new focus of DfE policy. By 2023, the enervating impact of

managing Covid, crises in inspection, teacher strikes and the RAAC crisis all began to dominate educational discourse. The search for innovative policy led to announcements on maths to 18, an unforeseen proposal for the Advanced British Standard, and virtual silence around the key policies laid down in 2010.

Whoever wins the next election will want to take forward reforms of their own. This paper, I hope, sets out some of the lessons learnt through the coalition government about the challenges and opportunities they will face.

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