

It's the curriculum, stupid!

Roy Blatchford

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Bill Clinton's successful 1992 presidential campaign slogan memorably read 'It's the economy, stupid'. His lead strategist James Carville hung a sign with these words in the Little Rock campaign headquarters: what was intended for an internal audience rapidly became the election signature tune.

In the contemporary schools landscape, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector has hung up the sign: 'It's the curriculum, stupid'.

Over the years the inspectorate has waxed and waned in its enthusiasm for the curriculum. For teachers at the sharp end of leading curriculum development in schools, Ofsted was in my view at its descriptive, enabling best in the **2009** framework, defining an outstanding curriculum as follows:

The school's curriculum provides memorable experiences and rich opportunities for high-quality learning and wider personal development and well-being. The school may be at the forefront of successful, innovative curriculum design in some areas. A curriculum with overall breadth and balance provides pupils with their full entitlement and is customised to meet the changing needs of individuals and groups. There are highly tailored programmes for a wide range of pupils with different needs.

This narrative happily reminds us at that a school's curriculum is the sum of many parts, including the national curriculum.

In the **2012** inspection framework, there was little prescription; rather a focus on educational outcomes, however schools chose to achieve them. Inspectors worked with a relatively loose yet comprehensive description:

A broad and balanced curriculum which meets the needs of all pupils, enables all pupils to achieve their full educational potential and make progress in their learning, and promotes their good behaviour and safety and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

In the **2018** framework, the word 'curriculum' does not appear as a key word in any of the section or chapter headings. Rather it features as one modestly, yet trenchantly worded aspect among many to be inspected under leadership and management:

The broad and balanced curriculum inspires pupils to learn. The range of subjects and courses helps pupils acquire knowledge, understanding and skills in all aspects of their education, including the humanities and linguistic, mathematical, scientific, technical, social, physical and artistic learning. (Outstanding)

What does the 2019 Ofsted inspection framework say about the curriculum?

It says a great deal. And signals a number of inspectorate priorities which will inevitably lead to intended and unintended consequences in schools. Just watch the growth in 'cultural capital' resources.

The 2019 framework places curriculum *intent, implementation* and *impact* centre stage in its assessment of the quality of education a school provides. The extensive text dedicated to the curriculum certainly marks a departure from previous Ofsted frameworks, and will doubtless generate much fruitful debate in staff rooms about *what* is taught and *why*.

And the inspection framework is quite possibly the first of any globally not to have 'teaching & learning' as a key heading – a significant departure.

HMCI Amanda Spielman clearly wishes the curriculum to be her legacy. Unambiguously, she has commented:

Schools need to have a strong relationship with knowledge, particularly around what they want their pupils to know and know how to do. However, school leaders should recognise and understand that this does not mean that the curriculum should be formed from isolated chunks of knowledge, identified as necessary for passing a test. A rich web of knowledge is what provides the capacity for pupils to learn even more and develop their understanding.

All schools will feel confident that they can embed a rich web of knowledge at the heart of innovative, engaging and powerful curriculum models. In reading in the 2019 framework that 'schools taking radically different approaches to the curriculum will be judged fairly', it is to be hoped that leaders will not be afraid to structure and deliver content that best suits their individual school contexts.

The ambitions of leaders to 'do differently' - for example, in relation to government EBacc targets or the teaching of reading - will need to be matched by intelligent inspection that recognises school autonomy and those individual contexts.

The times are propitious for an energising and intellectually stimulating debate on what lies at the learning heart of every primary and secondary classroom.

This is an extract from Roy Blatchford's introduction to two newly published titles:

The Primary Curriculum Leader's Handbook

<http://www.johncattbookshop.com/the-primary-curriculum-leader-s-handbook>

The Secondary Curriculum Leader's Handbook

<http://www.johncattbookshop.com/the-secondary-curriculum-leader-s-handbook>