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CHAPTER 7

Secondary Schools and Sixth Forms

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The emphasis in this chapter is on the development of the National Curriculum for secondary schools between 1988 and 2001 in three major versions. It considers the shifting approaches to vocational education, and the significant changes within technology.
- Discussion of assessment focuses on the more recent concerns over assessment in the secondary phase of education.
- The impact of inspection on secondary schools and the uses of inspection and assessment evidence are considered, as well as some of the key respects in which the system in England and Wales differs from those in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Introduction

An understanding of the current shape of the secondary curriculum requires an understanding of how it has come into being. Indeed, it is hard to recall just how controversial the introduction of the compulsory curriculum was and the impact that it has had on schools. The National Curriculum was introduced in the Education Reform Act 1988, but had its genesis at least 12 years earlier in the speech at Ruskin College Oxford by the then Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan. This speech initiated the so-called 'Great Debate' on the state of education in the UK. The concerns he raised were twofold. One can be characterised as entitlement: were our schools failing a majority of children in achieving the standards of which they were capable? Second, was the education system endangering the economy, by failing to produce a workforce with the skills and knowledge needed at the latter end of the twentieth century? These concerns were developed by successive Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997 into a systematic overhaul of all aspects of the education system. A significant turning point was the Education Reform Act 1988. This Act, introduced by Kenneth Baker as Secretary of State for Education, was arguably the most radical piece of education legislation since 1944. The National Curriculum was its centrepiece and was to deliver improved standards for all and to increase the ability of the nation to compete in the international economy.

The secondary curriculum

For the secondary phase the concerns around the curriculum derived from a number of sources. With the comprehensive school becoming the organisational unit for the majority of local authorities, the 1970s saw the merging of aspects of the grammar and secondary modern curriculum models. Following the introduction of the Certificate of Secondary Education in the late 1960s, and increasingly in the period following the raising of the school leaving age from 15 to 16 years in 1974, the secondary curriculum expanded to incorporate a broader range of subjects. These included some that were quite new to the compulsory school age curriculum, such as media studies, sociology, environmental studies, business education and computer studies. Alongside these changes, increasing amounts of curriculum time were given over to cross-curricular themes, including careers education and personal and health education. The outcome of these changes was that option choices became increasingly complex for students embarking on examination courses. This led to the perception, endorsed by Callaghan, that not all students were being given access to certain essential areas of learning and that the increase in programmes of vocational learning and work experience meant that large numbers of youngsters were failing to realise their full academic potential, through being channelled into non-academic or occupational options at an early stage.

The debate continued throughout the 1980s. The climate became increasingly hostile. Ranged on the government side was the evidence of a series of critical HMI reports, the publication of a series of 'Black Papers' by prominent right-wing educationalists and the beginnings of a radical review of the role of the local authorities and their control of schools and the curriculum. Set against them increasingly were the teacher unions, the subject associations and left wing commentators anxious to retain room for multicultural perspectives and personal and social development among the other claims on curriculum time. The confrontational mood of the time is reflected in the speech made by Angela Rumbold, then Minister of State for Education, at the conference of the School Curriculum Development Committee, the forerunner of the National Curriculum Council.

Why therefore can we not leave curriculum development in this country to be carried out through the varied and diverse LEAs within that framework of principles? Because the government has decided that the widely recognised need to raise standards, and the objective of cutting out clutter, are too important to leave to chance. Diversity can be a blessing and stimulation. But random divergence from what is expected of our schools is no longer acceptable. (O'Connor 1987)

The tone was prescriptive and dismissive of the concerns, expressed by teachers through subject associations and elsewhere, that important areas of learning and experience would be lost. The view of the government of the time was that this was a curriculum that would safeguard the essentials. Therefore, the National Curriculum that was introduced in secondary schools in 1991 established the now familiar pattern of core subjects – mathematics, science and English – and foundation subjects – technology, history, geography, modern languages, music, art and physical education. Religious

education remained a statutory subject, although not technically an element of the National Curriculum. This, then, was the 'broad balanced and relevant curriculum free from clutter', in the words of the minister. There were those who suggested that in safeguarding the essentials, the National Curriculum in the form in which it was launched for secondary schools in 1991 was not dissimilar from that laid out in the Board of Education regulations for secondary schools of 1906. The elements were substantially the same, apart from the innovation of technology. On the other hand, it was argued that although the curriculum was prescribed and traditional, there still remained scope for teachers to devise their own schemes of work and to interpret the requirements in ways that would match the interests and aspirations of individual students.

The Dearing review

These hopes were modified in practice, so that by 1993 the government had commissioned Sir Ron Dearing with a full-scale review of the National Curriculum, long before a single cohort had passed through the secondary phase of education having experienced it throughout. It quickly became clear that the new curriculum, free of 'clutter', left time for precious little else. It was not only the new subject areas whose academic credibility had been challenged that were squeezed out by the demands of the new curriculum orders. English literature as a separate subject could no longer be accommodated, nor could two foreign languages at GCSE level, and many schools found that the timetable would not permit the teaching of three science disciplines. Ironically, the curriculum which had set out to ensure entitlement for all was beginning to be seen as a curriculum which for too many constrained choices, sometimes for the more able and academic students. On the other hand, there was increasing evidence of growing disaffection among large numbers of young people. The traditional content of the curriculum and the heavy burden of assessment had little to offer a significant minority of students, and there was little curriculum time left for vocational education, which had provided a significant motivation for some of these students. Despite the fact that students were permitted to drop art and music at the end of Key Stage 3, at the age of 14, and that short courses were available in history and geography, the volume of material to be covered remained immense. Each subject area occupied its own A4 sized folder. The requirements for assessment remained formidable. This was the context for the full-scale review of the National Curriculum carried out under the chairmanship of Ron Dearing in 1993.

The review was guided by the need to:

- reduce the volume of material required by law to be taught;
- simplify and clarify the programmes of study;
- reduce prescription so as to give more scope for professional judgement;
- ensure that the orders are written in a way which offers maximum support to the classroom teacher (Dearing 1994).

A significant strand of the framework for the review was the recognition of the clear concerns of the teaching profession that their ability to construct a curriculum

appropriate to the needs of their students had been curtailed. Additionally, there was considerable concern that teachers had been undermined as a result of the demands of the curriculum and its assessment arrangements. Indeed, the review itself was initiated in part by the refusal of secondary English teachers to participate in the assessment arrangements for Key Stage 3, which led to a wider boycott and made the need for a reappraisal more urgent.

The revised version of the National Curriculum for England and Wales was implemented progressively from 1995. The review was generally welcomed for the reduction in content. Once each of the subject advisory groups had completed its work the new curriculum could be contained in one A4 volume, rather than the ten of its predecessor. A distinction was made between statutory and non-statutory elements of the curriculum. However, there was residual concern that some important areas of content had been lost at Key Stages 3 and 4. Above all there was little account of the principles underlying the new version of the curriculum. The revision was at best a pragmatic approach to a series of practical problems and it met with criticism from both advocates of traditional and more liberal approaches to the curriculum.

At Key Stage 3 the suggestion was that the prescribed content should occupy no more than 80 per cent of the available time. A shift in emphasis in the technology order gave information technology greater prominence, although it remained open to schools to deliver it across the curriculum. At Key Stage 4 greater flexibility was offered through the recommendation that the curriculum be slimmed by introducing short courses in modern foreign languages, this to be a minimum requirement in view of the fact that 'Britain's economic prosperity will depend increasingly on our relationships with our trading partners in both Europe and the wider world' (Dearing 1994). Technology too was distinguished as a strand of the nation's economic competitiveness: 'We have suffered from an inability to translate scientific discovery into wealth-generating industrial and commercial products.' For this reason technology remained a compulsory short course for all students, despite resistance from some quarters. This emphasis on international competitiveness was to become a recurrent theme of debates surrounding the evolution of education policy for the secondary phase throughout the 1990s. Allied to this was perhaps the most significant element of the Dearing review. He suggested that, unlike curricula in many other European countries, the curriculum for England and Wales had no vocational element and a strong recommendation of the report was that such a pathway be developed, in order to provide a progressive route to post-16 education and training. The final promise, widely welcomed, was a period of stability, with the firm proposal that the new curriculum would remain in place for a full five years. For a teaching profession that had had to adapt to a series of radical innovations with little time to prepare, this was a welcome commitment.

'Education, education, education'

The third version of the National Curriculum was published in draft form in 1999 under the aegis of 'New Labour', following the election of 1997. It set out initially to give an explicit account of the purposes of education:

Education must enable all students to respond positively to the opportunities and challenges of the rapidly changing world in which we live and work. In particular, they need to be prepared to respond as individuals, parents, workers and citizens to the rapid expansion of communication technologies, changing modes of employment, and new work and leisure patterns resulting from economic migration and the continued globalisation of the economy and society. (QCA 1999)

This is the underlying principle behind the commitment to 'education, education, education', which was the theme of the new administration. It also sets out clearly the purposes and concerns of that education, if only by omission. There is limited reference to the aesthetic, spiritual, moral, cultural and affective dimensions of education. The individual is of significance principally in relation to the economy and insofar as he or she may be economically active. Four key functions of the curriculum were articulated:

- 1 Establishing an entitlement.
- 2 Establishing standards.
- 3 Promoting continuity and cohesion.
- 4 Promoting public understanding.

To this extent, then, the new curriculum was underpinned by the guiding principles of the earlier versions. There were, however, some shifts in emphasis. The importance of technology, which has been a feature of all of the versions of the curriculum, is now focused formally on information and communications technology (ICT). This was in line with other ICT initiatives, including the National Grid for Learning, which set out to link all schools to the 'information highway', and a considerable investment in training practising teachers in the use of ICT through the New Opportunities Fund. If this was a new emphasis, a quite fresh element of the revised National Curriculum was the introduction of citizenship as a subject in its own right, and a statutory element of the secondary curriculum as from September 2002. The values underpinning the new school curriculum were articulated in this way:

Foremost is a belief in education as a route to: the well being and development of the individual; equality of opportunity for all; a healthy democracy; a productive economy; and a sustainable environment. Education should reflect the enduring values that contribute to these ends. These include valuing ourselves, our families, our relationships and the wider groups to which we belong, together with virtues such as justice, truthfulness and a sense of duty. (QCA 1999)

These sentiments could be interpreted as containing a new direction for the National Curriculum. They sit alongside a statement in each of the subject orders, which requires a more inclusive approach to the curriculum, one that would be less prescriptive and more flexible. However, other policy initiatives were introduced at around the same time that might compromise these aspirations.

Beyond curriculum policy there have been parallel developments in the structure and organisation of secondary schools. The City Technology Colleges (CTCs) were

established in the early 1990s. Supported to some extent by private finance (although to nothing like the extent that had been planned by central government), these schools were intended to lead the way in curriculum development and in the use of technology as a basis for teaching across the curriculum. If there were only a handful of CTCs many more schools opted to become grant-maintained (GM). This was a route to diversity as it freed schools from local control; local authority schools were permitted to specialise in a particular curriculum area. Under New Labour these changes were consolidated, and the predicted abolition of GM status did not take place, although GM schools were in most cases redesignated as foundation schools. Curriculum specialism was encouraged through additional central funding for specialist colleges, with strengths in such areas as languages, performing arts, science and sport. All of these developments were part of the policy agenda, which set out to encourage diversity and parental choice.

'Education with character'

The Green Paper *Building on Success* (DfEE 2001) is a strong predictor of further change. It sets out 'to build on achievements to date to secure a step-change in secondary education'. The implication is clear, if regarded askance by those who feel that secondary education has changed considerably in the past decade. The new emphasis is on replicating the improvement in standards that has been achieved at Key Stage 2 through a fresh emphasis on Key Stage 3. There will be targets set for end of Key Stage outcomes and a focus on narrowing achievement gaps between schools in different circumstances. Above all, the aim is to achieve 'education with character', heralded more controversially at the launch of the paper as 'the end of the bog-standard comprehensive'. The vision is of 'every school having a distinctive mission and ethos and contributing to the community or wider education system'. The 'bog-standard comprehensive' has demonstrated itself in the majority of cases to be responsive, adaptable and capable of meeting the needs of a wide range of students. In the near future it may have to reinvent itself.

Vocational education

Approaches to vocational education through most of the 1980s were driven by the need to address the problem of mass youth unemployment. The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) was introduced in 1982 and followed in 1984 by the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE). These initiatives were designed to meet the needs of the 40 per cent of students who had no realistic prospect of success either in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) or in the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) – it was not until 1986 that they were merged in the General Certificate of Secondary Education. School-based vocational qualifications were designed to develop the technical and key skills that would be necessary for the workplace. However, it was precisely such qualifications as these that contributed to the confusion surrounding the secondary curriculum and led to the introduction of the National Curriculum. A multitude of awards and awarding bodies led to confusion for

parents, employers and the wider public. It was also the case that they contributed to a two-tier system in the age 14–16 stage, which was replicated and reinforced in the age 16–19 phase. Once a student had opted for either the academic or vocational track it was difficult, even impossible, to switch. In his review of the curriculum Dearing referred to this problem and set out to address it. He did not advocate a fully vocational course, although General National Vocational Qualifications were introduced in Key Stage 4, via the piloting of a new foundation stage.

Specifically, the need was to 'broaden our concept of achievement' (Dearing 1994), a statement that contained tacit acceptance that the secondary curriculum pattern, based on ten traditional subjects, was failing to motivate a significant group within Key Stage 4 or respond to their particular talents and aspirations. However, the review did not advocate a full vocational course. It would be important to avoid a student

making a premature commitment to one pathway thereby cutting out important options for the future . . . we need to consider nevertheless whether a vocational and/or occupational element in a more broadly based education post-14 is an option which will serve better to develop some young people into capable and sensible men and women than an education that does not offer that possibility. (Dearing 1994)

This approach went some way towards meeting concerns about a curriculum that was perceived by many teachers to be failing to meet the needs of the less academic students and failing to engage those who were disaffected. Recognition of this has come relatively late in the evolution of the curriculum, but it is currently being addressed. Under the most recent statutory orders secondary schools are permitted to disapply aspects of Key Stage 4 for identified pupils. Such pupils may spend part of the week, for instance, at a local further education college pursuing subjects such as vehicle maintenance and training in the building trades, or on other forms of work experience. But the review did not recommend a full occupational route in Key Stage 4 for a number of reasons.

First, and in addition to the concerns expressed about narrowing the range of options for some students, some aspects of the context had now changed. Technology as a subject had reinvented itself, it 'leavened a subject-orientated curriculum' (Graham 1993). The initial impetus was 'to remove the grip of woodwork and metalwork for boys and needlework and domestic science for girls' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, this new subject would be taken by all, whereas in the past able students had not chosen the craft subjects. Newly defined, technology required that students would: 'identify a problem or a need, design a solution, make whatever was required, and then evaluate the outcome in aesthetic, commercial and environmental terms' (Graham 1993). The process of redefining technology as a subject area was immensely controversial, as it cut across the work of teachers who had previously identified themselves as working in discrete subject areas of home economics, woodwork, metalwork and technical drawing. In its new formulation it drew on the skills of all these areas of the curriculum, but craft and production were no longer at the heart of the subject.

Technology no longer set out to prepare students for specific occupations, not least

because of the changing nature of employment, from manufacturing to the service economy, and the demise of traditional craft apprenticeships. The 1980s saw very high levels of youth unemployment. Schemes such as the Youth Opportunities Scheme and Youth Training Scheme were designed to meet the needs of school leavers. In addition to the formal elements of the curriculum, work experience became a staple of Key Stage 4 for all students, who were expected to begin to develop the skills needed in the workplace. Ultimately, however, the recognition that contemporary circumstances demanded higher skill levels and a better qualified workforce led to the expectation of much higher participation in post-16 education and training than had been the case. Inevitably this led to a redefining of the 16–19 curriculum.

The 16–19 curriculum

Prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum, 16–19 education was defined in terms of advanced level GCE. The model was one that successively filtered out the less academic. Until the mid to late 1970s only 20 per cent of any given cohort would take ordinary level GCE, 15 per cent would progress into the sixth form to take A level and 10 per cent would go on to university. Following his work on the 5–16 curriculum Dearing was asked to follow up with a review of 16–19 provision. His report (1996) was not a curriculum review but a review of the qualifications framework for 16- to 19-year-olds. The difference is significant. It reflects the concern over the proliferation of hundreds of awards. There is no such thing as a ‘curriculum’ for the post-compulsory age range. Provision is dictated to an extent by individual choice and defined by sets of subject frameworks, a statutory ‘core’ for A level and sets of specifications for a wide range of vocational and occupational awards. The Dearing review was the forerunner of Curriculum 2000, and attempted a more systematic account of the provision post-16.

The review was significant in that it applied not just to schools but to all the institutions that young people move on to after compulsory school age, including further education and sixth form colleges and government sponsored training. It applied to those in employment and those not in any form of education or training. The Labour government adopted the principles of the review. It defined three broad pathways for the 16–19 phase. They were the traditional academic route leading to A and AS levels, a vocational route and an occupational route. These routes were to be integrated into a scheme of National Awards at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels. The aim was to achieve greater transparency and wider understanding of the range of awards and to introduce greater flexibility for students. In what is a radical move, Curriculum 2000 incorporates key skills, these skills to be certificated separately from subject qualifications.

In summary, Curriculum 2000 consists of:

- New A level syllabuses, structured into six units. They may be taken in ‘linear mode’ or in modular form according to whether the assessment is at the end or staged across the course.

- A new AS (advanced subsidiary) qualification. This consists of the first half of the content of a full A level or three units. The aim is twofold, to make a smoother transition from GCSE to A level and to discourage early specialisation. Students will be encouraged to take four AS levels in the first year of a two year course.
- New extension papers aimed at the most able of the cohort but designed to be accessible to more students than the former S level papers.
- A revised GNVQ to be available at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels. The new GNVQ advanced level will consist of six units.
- Key skills qualifications in communication, application of number and the use of information technology.

The aim of these changes is to break down the divide between the academic and vocational pathways. The new six-unit GNVQ permits students to pursue a mixed programme of A level and GNVQ courses, which has been constrained before by the fact that GNVQ has occupied a full 12 units or two A level slots on the timetable.

Early indications are that these approaches have created fresh problems. Teachers working in the 16–19 phase had very little time to prepare for the new AS levels, as the syllabuses for some subjects were published only weeks before the first students began their programme in September 2000. There are concerns that the new broader curriculum contains too much content and that time for individual study and for the extra-curricular activities that have enhanced the learning experience of sixth form study has been lost. There is little evidence to date that large numbers of students have taken advantage of the option of following a mixed programme of academic and vocational courses. Above all, the load of assessment with the modular schemes being introduced wholesale, alongside the new AS courses, has given rise to the criticism that students spend disproportionate amounts of time being tested, at the expense of being taught.

Further curriculum change is heralded the consultation document '14–19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards' (DfES 2002) which proposes significant change to the secondary curriculum. The rationale for the proposals is the need to give belated recognition to vocational qualifications. The argument is supported by international comparisons which show lower levels of participation in the UK in education and training than in France and Germany. Key features of the consultation are the introduction of a Matriculation Diploma to be achieved by the age of 19, and individual learning plans as a means of monitoring progress. Possibly the most significant proposal is that GCSE should become a 'progress check' rather than an end in itself. In order to achieve significant progress a coherent approach involving schools and colleges will be needed throughout the 14–19 phase.

Assessment

A major underpinning argument for the very existence of a National Curriculum was the need to raise standards. Many claims have been made subsequently about the improvement in standards at each of the Key Stages. However, it is hard to discern what the nature of that improvement might be without better comparative data. The amend-

ments and reviews of the curriculum that have taken place over the decade of its implementation in secondary schools mean that there is little reliable evidence as to just how things have improved. Certainly the numbers of passes at A to C at GCSE have risen year on year. However, there remains considerable discussion about comparability of standards over time. What is unquestionably the case is that more is being measured. Indeed, one of the prime criticisms of the curriculum and its assessment has been that it is reductive, limiting learning to areas of knowledge that can be readily assessed.

The Task Group on Assessment and Testing (DES 1988) carried out the initial work on assessment within the National Curriculum. This document (the TGAT Report) placed considerable emphasis on a variety of assessment methods and the importance of formative teacher assessment. However, this emphasis was to shift in the implementation and as National Curriculum assessment began to be used to compare school performance as much as to inform learning. The framework is relatively simple. Compulsory secondary schooling falls into Key Stage 3 (age 11–14 years) and Key Stage 4 (age 14–16 years). This was established during the consultation phase and has not been controversial, since it matched the common pattern of primary/secondary transfer in most (although not all) authorities, as well as the pattern of GCSE courses.

Each subject of the National Curriculum is divided into Attainment Targets (ATs). Each AT was arranged hierarchically on ten levels. In the early version of the National Curriculum each level had its statement of attainment, broken down into sub-statements. To progress from one level to the next required that all elements contained within the statement had to be met. This proved in practice to be cumbersome and bureaucratic. The refusal of secondary English teachers to carry out the statutory assessment at Key Stage 3 was one factor that led to the Dearing review. In the revised version, level descriptors were introduced with the concept of a 'best fit', whereby a student could be assigned to a level. After 1995 the problems of reconciling GCSE performance with Levels 9 and 10 of the new curriculum were recognised and the scale became an eight-point one, with GCSE accounting for performance in Key Stage 4. These moves were welcomed, but concerns remained.

Some of these are general and apply to both primary and secondary schools. For teachers they have to do with the broad issues of what it is that is being tested and the uses to which assessment outcomes are put, in the form of league tables and other measures of quality. For pupils there are issues of motivation, especially for pupils with specific learning difficulties who may only progress one or two levels during their secondary career. However, there are some factors of particular significance to the secondary stage. At the lower end, there is increasing pressure from central government to review progress in Key Stage 3. There is a perception that the improvement in standards achieved in Key Stage 2 is being lost in secondary schools. One approach to this is to introduce further tests, at the end of Year 7, to assess the extent to which progress is being maintained in the secondary phase. This suggestion has been met with caution by teachers in view of the increasing burden of assessment on the system, particularly in the secondary years of schooling. At the upper end of the range the concerns are even stronger. Most students are now being tested formally in every school year from age 14 to 18. This is having a considerable impact on curriculum time and the ethos of secondary schools through loss

of teaching time and teaching space, as gyms and assembly halls are taken out of use for examination purposes. Although the National Curriculum for secondary schools is an established fact, its assessment continues to be controversial.

Inspection

Inspection and assessment have been closely linked as controversial elements of the changes in the secondary system since the Education Reform Act of 1988. One of the most disputed uses to which assessment outcomes have been put is the ranking of schools' performance in league tables according to pupils' performance at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4. This, in combination with the publication of Ofsted reports, has been a central feature of successive governments' attempts to raise standards and to ensure that all schools reach the standards of the best.

Prior to 1992, school inspection was carried out by local authority inspectors, and by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). However, as the complement of HMI at the time was 480, a secondary school might expect to be inspected only once every ten years at the most. This situation changed with the creation of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 1992, which was charged with the duty of a regular inspection programme for all maintained schools. The relevant section of the Education (Schools) Act 1992, which established Ofsted, requires inspectors to report on:

- the quality of the education provided by the school;
- the educational standards achieved in the school;
- whether the financial resources made available to the school are managed efficiently;
- the spiritual, moral and cultural development of pupils in the school (Ofsted 1995).

Inspections follow a standard framework and are supported by analysis of quantitative data, using a standard set of criteria. Subsequently a full report is produced, which must be circulated in summary form to all parents of pupils in the school and which:

- evaluates the school according to the framework;
- identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the school;
- gives the appropriate authority for the school a clear agenda for the action needed to improve it.

The new requirements led to a major recruitment drive to train inspection teams to carry out the massively expanded workload. In practice, the work was carried out extensively by former HMI and local authority inspectors, who, once trained, tendered for individual inspection contracts. The initial inspection cycle was for each secondary school to be inspected once every four years, with schools being given five terms' notice of an impending inspection. Each inspection team is led by a registered inspector, and each member is responsible for the inspection of different aspects of the curriculum and other areas, such as special educational needs provision.

In themselves the aims of Ofsted inspections appear sound. They were, however,

contentious from the start. This was partly due to concern in the teaching profession about the nature of inspection teams. The inclusion of lay inspectors was an innovation that many teachers felt was intended to denigrate their professionalism. Anxieties were also heightened due to the shift in the focus of the inspection model. Whereas LEA inspections had tended to combine an advisory role with that of inspection, Ofsted inspectors were specifically precluded from offering advice. Professional dialogue was replaced by what many perceived to be externally imposed and punitive inspection. Individual teachers felt threatened and there was substantial evidence of high levels of stress in schools in the lengthy preparatory stages and during the week of the inspection itself. Because the framework was centrally decided and administered objectively, a further concern was that it failed to take into account local conditions, such as those in areas of high social deprivation. Finally, the personality of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead, was a significant factor. His public pronouncements on the inadequacies of the profession contributed to a public perception that education was indeed failing, and undermined the morale of teachers.

If teachers hoped that the incoming Labour government would replace him in 1997 they were disappointed. However, there were developments in inspection and review of school performance. It was suggested that fairness of inspection might be enhanced by taking into account 'value-added' measures to assess the extent to which a school is enhancing the outcome for its pupils, no matter their ability. Such moves have met with a degree of approval, although they are problematic in themselves. They raise issues about the validity of the baseline assessments on which they are based. They can also be invalid for schools that have transient populations, which is the case in many inner-city areas. Conversely, some schools that have demonstrated high achievement at the end of Key Stage 3 have found it hard to add significant additional value in Key Stage 4. After two initial rounds of inspection, after 1999 there has been a move towards longer periods between inspections, a shorter period of notice (now two terms) and a focus on progression against the action plan developed after the previous inspection.

Models of inspection have shifted in line with overall policy. Schools that have 'failed' the inspection are put on special measures and given specific targets for improvement to be achieved within strict time limits. The local education authority (LEA) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) will review the action plans, and if no progress is made then the school can be subject to 'Fresh Start' procedures that include the appointment of a new headteacher, governors and staff. These measures come under the remit of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit of the DfES. The unit is charged not only with improvement of failing schools but with a range of measures designed to secure school improvement. They include standards at Key Stage 3, Beacon Schools, Specialist Schools, the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy. The resignation of Chris Woodhead in 2000 saw the beginning of an improvement in relations between teachers and the inspectorate. In addition, it is recognised that Ofsted has generated useful data on a range of topics, including attainment by girls and boys in the secondary phase and language across the curriculum, that have informed planning and policy development. After nearly a decade of confrontation and mutual recrimination it is possible that a new phase is beginning, when schools

might begin to be able to use their external reports alongside the range of other data and material available to them to foster a culture of self-evaluation.

Regional variations

Secondary schools in England and Wales are covered by almost the same version of the National Curriculum, which is managed by the QCA in England and by ACCAC in Wales.

In Northern Ireland the Department of Education has a policy of encouraging integrated education. The system is broadly selective, with a system of grammar and high schools. Grant-maintained schools receive grant aid and must demonstrate that they set out to achieve a balance of students from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. The secondary curriculum includes English, maths, science, technology, the environment and society, creative and expressive studies, religious education and language studies. There are also cross-curricular themes, which reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. They are 'education for mutual understanding', cultural heritage, information technology, health education, economic awareness and careers education.

The Scottish system differs most markedly from that for England and Wales. Transition from the primary to the secondary stage is at 12. Most schools are comprehensive, although there is an independent sector, as elsewhere in the UK. In the Standard Grades S3 and S4, which cover the 14–16 age range, the curriculum is organised not by subjects but through eight 'modes': language and communication studies; mathematical studies and applications; scientific studies and applications; social and environmental awareness; technological activities and applications; creative and aesthetic activities; physical education; religious and moral education.

The tone of the curriculum documents for Northern Ireland and for Scotland differs markedly from that for England and Wales. While sharing the concerns for breadth, balance and progression that underpin the curriculum for England and Wales, the Scottish curriculum, for example, makes explicit reference to the importance of partnerships and successful good practice within individual schools and across local authorities. The tone is collaborative rather than prescriptive.

Welsh schools are inspected on a five-yearly cycle by ESTDIs (previously OHMCI). In Northern Ireland schools are inspected every seven years by the Education and Training Inspectorate, which advises the Department of Education for Northern Ireland on each school's quality. In Scotland inspections are managed by HMI on behalf of the Scottish Executive Education Department. The outcomes or 'evaluations' are published and are supported by material for schools, parents and governors, titled 'How Good Is Our School?'. The emphasis is on self-evaluation.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 What are the essential components of a National Curriculum for secondary age students at the start of the twenty-first century?
- 2 How might vocational education be incorporated progressively into statutory education between the ages of 11 and 18?

- 3 One of the proposals to decrease the burden of assessment in the secondary phase has been to do away with GCSEs. What is your view of this proposal? What alternative suggestions do you have as to how assessment might be rationalised?
- 4 Would it be desirable for some elements of the curriculum models for Northern Ireland and for Scotland to be adopted in England and Wales?

INTERNET SITES

Department for Education and Skills (DfES): www.dfes.gov.uk
 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority: www.qca.org.uk
 Ofsted: www.ofsted.gov.uk
 Department of Education for Northern Ireland: www.deni.gov.uk
 Learning and Teaching Scotland: www.LTScotland.com
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