



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

The big picture of the curriculum

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One of the challenges for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is to develop a modern and world-class curriculum to inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future. Many of our schools are already providing an inspiring and challenging curriculum that would stand comparison with any in the world, where they have added their own unique elements and emphases. They have also, in most cases, adapted the national curriculum's programmes of study to suit their pupils and their local needs.

These schools look not only at the subject requirements and targets, but also at the development of underlying skills, qualities and competencies: the skills that contribute to lifelong learning.

Above all, these schools engage their pupils in an open-ended investigative approach to learning where interest is engaged, where there is a sense of purpose and relevance, where pupils are active participants and where learning is enjoyable.

Other schools feel that they are unable to work in this way because they are confined by the national curriculum, by the national curriculum tests and by Ofsted¹ inspections. However, all our evidence shows that schools need not have these concerns. Ofsted inspections consistently praise innovation and approaches that engage the pupils' interest through enjoyable activities. Schools pursuing these approaches tend to see a rise in their scores in national curriculum tests. And schools have much more freedom to innovate within the national curriculum than most of them think. Indeed, QCA is encouraging them to do so.

We do not see the key to developing the modern and world-class curriculum as producing more documents and sending them out to schools, nor issuing yet more guidance and programmes. The key is to unleash the positive energy of the teaching profession and allow it to focus on children's learning.

QCA is working with schools to promote a sense of professional enthusiasm for innovation around a 'big picture' of the curriculum. A big picture that takes account of the fact that pupils learn not just in lessons, but also through the routines of the school, the events it organises and the increasing amount of out-of-hours learning opportunities that schools are providing. A big picture that takes account of the overall aims of education, the five outcomes within

¹ Ofsted is the official body for inspecting schools in England.

Every Child Matters², the underlying skills that underpin all learning, and the skills, competencies and qualities that we are trying to develop in our pupils. A big picture that recognises that there is a lot more to learning than the national curriculum, and that although there needs to be a common national core within the curriculum, there also needs to be a regional or local dimension and an element unique to each school.

In the big picture, we ask three basic questions: ‘What are we trying to achieve?’, ‘How shall we organise learning?’ and ‘How well are we achieving our aims?’ The answer to the first question links five aspects:

- the overall aims of the curriculum (that pupils should become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens)
- the five outcomes of Every Child Matters
- the underlying skills of learning (competencies, thinking skills etc)
- key knowledge and understanding (big ideas that shape the world and our culture)
- personal development (attitudes, qualities and dispositions).

The way we organise learning takes account of:

- lessons, routines, events, extended hours and out-of-school activities
- learning approaches (enquiry-based, investigative, active, practical, constructive, etc)
- areas of learning (ethical, international, physical, spiritual, environmental, etc)
- the national curriculum subjects.

To determine how well we are achieving our aims, we clearly need a wide range of methods of capturing success so we can measure:

- achievement and standards
- personal development
- behaviour and attendance
- civic participation
- healthy lifestyle choices
- increased participation in education, employment and training.

² Government programme for a national framework to support the ‘joining up’ of children’s services – education, culture, health, social care, and justice. The five outcomes are every child having the support they need to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being.

Looking at the curriculum in this way impacts on the organisation of pupils' learning. Firstly, it takes account of the fact that pupils do not just learn within lessons, but through activities outside the normal school day. In the big picture of the curriculum, the national curriculum subjects are a part – albeit an important part – of a greater whole. In many schools, planning for lessons is detailed, but planning for (and sometimes even recognition of) the impact of the other areas is often left to chance.

Secondly, it takes account of overall aims of education. These might be seen as the outcomes that should lead everything else. Whenever we ask groups of people (parents, business and employers, governors, pupils) what the curriculum is for, or what they think young people should have learned by the age of 16, they always answer with overall goals such as being good team workers, adaptable learners, capable of showing initiative, creative thinkers and good communicators. These are broad aims rather than specific outcomes, but if we are serious about them they should shape the direction of education. Yet the curriculum is often planned primarily in order to cover the programmes of study rather than to promote the overall goals. When schools finish their curriculum plans they tend to ask themselves, 'Have we covered everything?' rather than, 'Will this set of learning experiences enable learners to meet the goals we set?'

Thirdly, it takes account of the underlying skills or competencies that underpin learning, such as problem solving, working with others, communication and the application of number.

In continuing the development of the curriculum, QCA is working with schools. So how are we doing this? And what is the point of working in this way? We believe that the capacity to develop a modern and world-class curriculum lies within the schools themselves. We believe that it is the energy and creativity of schools working together that will enable this curriculum to be developed. To this end, we have set up a network of co-development groups across the country. In these groups, schools work together on aspects of curriculum development. The co-development groups are sharing innovative approaches to learning and developing ways of capturing the impact of these innovations beyond those aspects of attainment measured by national tests.

The co-development groups are working on a wide range of approaches (learning through drama, the local dimension, learning through role-play, fieldwork, vocational education).

These approaches share the common principle that the curriculum needs to recognise that education is more than specified content knowledge.

But how can schools fit all these aspects together into one curriculum? If we think of the curriculum as a tree, we can see how many of these ideas fit together.

The roots of this organism are the key underlying skills that underpin all learning and enable the plant to stay firmly anchored and to continue to grow. Above ground are the branches of learning: science, the humanities, physical development and so on. At the end of these branches are the leaves – the courses, the individual bits of learning. The things schools plan for in our short- and medium-term plans. The Victorians within history or the electricity within science.

Providing the essential link between these is the trunk of the pupils' learning experiences. It is the quality of these learning experiences that is crucial to the health of the plant, as it is these that will link the subjects to the underlying skills. Of course, without good roots drawing moisture from the soil, the leaves could not grow. Conversely, there have to be leaves to provide the sustenance for the roots to grow. Lessons need to bring growth to the process of learning. The underlying skills are essential, but pupils cannot develop these in a vacuum – they have to learn something.

Interestingly, the individual leaves may not be that important in themselves. A healthy tree could lose many of its leaves and still prosper. If the roots are sound, new leaves can be grown. This renewal process can lead to lifelong learning. But a plant with a poor and underdeveloped root system may be able to produce a good show of leaves in the short term, but will not sustain it, and will seldom blossom.

The final strand of the development of the curriculum is a review of the existing programmes of study. We have started with the secondary curriculum (for 11- to 16-year-olds) and have not only reduced its content significantly but have also defined more clearly key concepts and processes. This has given schools more scope to develop their own approaches. There is already considerable scope for schools, as there is in the primary curriculum, but this will make the situation even clearer. My second paper gives details of this work.

These are some of the ways in which QCA is working. We are encouraging schools to take a fresh look at the curriculum and, in particular, at how all the elements of the big picture fit together. Encouraging schools to go back to the key principles in their planning and ask rigorous questions about the present content: if it is not supporting the overall aims, why is it there? Encouraging schools to work together to ensure the curriculum engages all pupils and that learning is relevant, meaningful and fun. By working with schools in this way, we can create a curriculum that is irresistible, a curriculum that truly challenges and inspires all learners and prepares them for the future.