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Nick Gibb, MP  
Sanctuary Buildings  
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Dear Minister

**NC Review: some things you should know about where I stand (at present)**

I am very open to persuasion on the basis of new evidence and good argument, but it might be helpful for you to know 'where I am coming from' at the present time. Over forty years experience as a schoolteacher, educational researcher and academic inclines me to the following views about the conduct and direction of the NC review that you are proposing:

1. A chief task of the review should be to achieve a better and clearer balance of responsibilities between central government and schools for the school curriculum.
2. The review should not assume a blank slate on which to write. After more than two decades of NC development, and constant change, it must reflect on what has been learned and therefore what ought to be retained, what ought to go, and what might be changed. Account must be taken of the stress of constant change. Yet more change of the kind that teachers have experienced in recent years is highly likely to be resisted. They will only be receptive if they feel that complexity and prescription is reduced, that their professionalism is acknowledged, there is scope for flexibility in interpretation according to context, and, most importantly, that their efforts to be innovative will not be punished by an oppressive accountability system.
3. Time and effort has been invested in various recent reviews pertaining to the curriculum – some better founded on research and evidence than others. Their lessons should be considered. I have in mind those associated with the previous Government and the Conservatives when in Opposition (e.g. QCA review of KS3; the Rose Review; the Select Committee Review of the NC; the Conservative's Report from the Public Services Improvement Policy Group) and reviews from university researchers and Foundations (Cambridge Primary Review; Nuffield Review of 14-19; Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning; ESRC

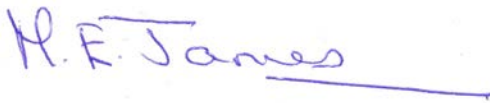
Teaching and Learning Research Programme; Mental Capital and Well Being Report; National Child Development Study). The insights from the latter group of reviews are currently being synthesised by researchers in a 'Review of Reviews'.

4. All reviews agree that a framework for a National Curriculum is required. There is also some agreement that this should be framed in terms of subjects or domains, and what these domains should be, although the labels may differ according to phase or sector. The prime task of the Review should be to advise on such a framework.
5. There is, I believe, a social consensus that the NC framework should identify essential content within domains in terms of the big ideas (concepts and essential knowledge), key processes (developed skills and competences, methods of enquiry and validation), modes of discourse (language and literacies) and, possibly, the narratives of subjects (stories about key events and people that comprise the social history of subjects).
6. These topics should form a Programme of Study in each domain. However, there should be no attempt to recreate the detailed attainment targets and statements of attainment that were intended as assessment criteria but have come to define the curriculum itself. The high stakes attached to test outcomes have led many teachers to teach to the assessment criteria rather than the substance of the programmes of study, thus sacrificing deep learning and understanding of content and skill. There are good ways of ensuring valid assessment, within schools and by awarding bodies, which do not depend on the mechanistic tick box approach that atomistic criteria encourage.
7. How pupils are expected to progress through programmes of study should be considered in relation to what is known about cognitive development, physical maturation and social and emotional development, as well as the structure of subjects. However, if a mastery view of learning is applied then too strict age-related ladders of progression may be inappropriate. Hierarchical subjects like science and mathematics may lend themselves to this approach more readily than fields of study such as the humanities and the arts where a more useful way of thinking about progression is as a 'zone of development'. More research has been done in the 'core' subjects but this should not automatically be generalised to others. Subject associations should be consulted on the best way to structure progression in their fields. Progression must be tailored to the particular subject. Comparability between subjects in terms of cognitive demand etc. can be achieved in ways other than imposing a common structure for all. Moreover allowance needs to be made for different patterns and trajectories of development by different learners.
8. The attempts to construct curricula along these lines in other countries should be investigated but applications in the English context should be treated with due caution.
9. Beyond subjects, there should be an expectation that schools provide for citizenship education, personal, social and health education etc but these should not be part of a mandatory framework. They should properly be seen as a focus for local decision-making and accountability.

10. The NC framework should not prescribe how the content is taught, either in terms of curriculum organisation e.g. separate subject lessons, or integrated courses, or in terms of pedagogic approaches. These decisions should be based on the professional judgement of teachers, schools and governors, taking account of their particular contexts and informed by good evidence.
11. However, evidence of effective practices, informed by sound research, needs to be available and accessible to schools and teachers in order to make such choices and to encourage innovation. An evidence information service needs to be created although this should be the responsibility of the profession, probably in partnership with universities and funders, but independent of Government. Suggestions for such an information service are emerging from the Strategic Forum for Research in Education and the Coalition for Evidence Based Education. Such evidence should be accumulated, but it also needs to be supplemented by regular focused reviews in particular fields or sub-fields, and by evidence from practitioners of attempts to develop and apply innovations in diverse contexts. How such a resource is funded will need to ensure continuity beyond political cycles.
12. All of these suggestions have implications for (1) assessment, testing and qualifications, (2) teacher education and continuing professional development, (3) school leadership, local governance and accountability, (4) the role and incentivisation of educational research. However, the first thing is to get the National Curriculum right. Too often in the past two decades various tails have wagged the curriculum dog.

Given the likely brevity of our conversation on 20<sup>th</sup> September, I hope these ideas will help our discussion of whether we are likely to be able to travel together in a broadly similar direction.

Very best wishes,



Mary James