

Subject departments and the 'implementation' of National Curriculum policy: an overview of the issues

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Introduction

The 1988 Education Reform Act introduces to English and Welsh schools a statutory national curriculum. The curriculum is split into subject areas with mathematics, science and English forming the Core and technology, history, geography, a modern foreign language, art, music and physical education the Foundation subjects. Each subject is being 'defined' by Working Parties, appointed by and responsible to the Secretary of State, in the form of 'Programmes of Study' (knowledge, skills and understanding) and 'Attainment Targets' (the levels students are expected to attain at four 'key stages' of their education, ages 5-16). In addition there are a number of cross-curricular themes, 'Economic and Industrial Awareness', 'Careers Education', 'Health Education', 'Education for Citizenship' and 'Environmental Education', that the new Government-nominated National Curriculum Council (NCC) deems to be 'essential parts' of the whole curriculum (NCC 1990: 4). At the end of each key stage students will undertake 'Standard Attainment Tasks' (SATs) to ascertain the level of attainment they have reached; these assessments will be set alongside those of the teachers, although it is clear the former will have the greater import.

Sociological discussion about the National Curriculum has been somewhat dominated by the tendency to see it, fairly straightforwardly, as yet another example of the increasing state control of education. The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) and the establishment of Educational Support Grants (ESGs) on a 'bid and deliver' basis, have also been seen as evidence of this tendency, a view that has been further encouraged by the government's deliberate exclusion of the 'implementors' (teachers, Local Education Authorities [LEAs] and the 'educational lobby' in general) from the process of formulating the 1988 Educational Reform Act and developing the

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National Curriculum. This perspective would suggest a somewhat unproblematic 'implementation' of the National Curriculum in schools, a view the government is keen to encourage. (See, for example, Department of Education and Science [DES] 1989, especially section 9.) Implicit is the idea that the National Curriculum policy reflects an unequivocal government position that will filter down through the quasi-state bodies (the NCC and the subject working parties) and into the schools. (The LEAs remaining in a marginal position but essentially seen to be supporting schools in their endeavours, helping schools to get change right.)

However, we shall argue that the policy process is a good deal more complex than this and that there is a *dialectical process* in which the 'moments' of legislation (the Act), documentation (from the NCC, the DES etc.), and 'implementation' (the work of the teachers) may be more or less loosely coupled. Policy texts are not closed, their meanings are neither fixed nor clear, and the carry over of meanings from one policy arena and one educational site to another is subject to interpretational slippage and contestation. These texts are part of a *policy cycle* consisting of significantly different arenas and sites within which a variety of interests are at stake. While it is the case that the Act as a whole aims to intervene in the workings of these arenas and sites in order to create a qualitatively different cycle with new conditions 'empowering' some at the expense of others, the different parts of the Act may well be taken up differently by particular LEAs, schools and departments within schools, thus producing very different outcomes that may actually work against a *National Curriculum*.

In short, existing diversity in the educational system may well be exacerbated by the provisions of the Act. In effect, the capacity of the state to 'implement' successfully a National Curriculum may in fact be limited and circumscribed by other aspects of the Act. While this may well appeal to those neo-liberals in the Tory party who have expressed concern about the whole principle of a National Curriculum, our research suggests that the present developments are not resulting in a curricular provision that is driven by 'the market', but a provision that is driven by serendipity, *ad hocery*, chaos and the minimum planning that such circumstances allow. The cost of all this within schools is measured by teachers' stress, resentment, illness, absenteeism and the number of those leaving the profession.

Characterizing the policy process

We want to begin by indicating how we might move away *analytically* from a state control model, whilst still recognizing that the state, LEAs and schools are differentially empowered, over time, within the policy process. If we consider this process as a policy cycle then we can see a *text* (the Act) which has become a *working document* for the interpretations of politicians, teachers, the unions and the bodies charged with responsibility for further translating that legislation into *everyday practices*. Furthermore, those involved in the continued 'clarification' and generation of policy and those required to implement policy are not two totally remote and disconnected sets of persons. They are connected in a direct sense by their varying

capacities to affect the work of each other. We have, for example, been struck by the extent to which people in schools and LEAs discuss the alternative *readings* of the broader political picture and the pronouncements of key politicians (the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education) and policy-implementing bodies such as the NCC and Secondary Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC). These discussions provide varying interpretations of what 'they' (the legislators and the 'implementing bodies') want and varying views of what possibilities or limits these create for the LEAs or the schools.

In addition we can see a growing awareness amongst senior Tory politicians and the NCC of the potential power of the various parts of the 'educational lobby' within the policy cycle. For example in Kenneth Baker's (the then Minister of Education) attempt to 'talk up' the excellent work of the teaching profession in the inaugural *IBMI* Education Lecture at the Royal Society (TES 1989), he stressed teachers' 'professionalism, dedication and imagination' and pointed to their successful introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) as a reason to believe the National Curriculum too 'will be a job well done'. Indeed Mrs Thatcher, in a widely reported interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* in 1990, talked of 'teachers who are teaching extremely well' and the need for 'scope for each teacher to use her own methods, her own experience'. A report of this, headlined in the following week's *Times Educational Supplement* (TES 1990), 'Mrs Thatcher signals "U-turn" on curriculum', suggested the Prime Minister was concerned about the National Curriculum becoming too prescriptive, 'because otherwise you are going to lose the enthusiasm and the devotion and all of the extras that a really good teacher can give out of her own experience'.

The point is, of course, that the state must rely on teachers to 'deliver' the curriculum. Consequently, to sustain a singular, national curriculum requires either teacher acceptance and understanding, 'lock, stock and barrel', of the National Curriculum or a system for effectively policing teachers into acceptance. A question of either 'winning the hearts and minds' of the educational lobby ('the commitment of individual teachers will be crucial in "making it happen"', [DES 1989 Secn. 9.14.]), or creating the means whereby the state has the capacity to control and discipline the educational lobby's membership. Neither of these possibilities will be easy to achieve if the experiences of researchers and teachers involved in the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative are anything to go by.

TVEI was a well-financed initiative, requiring schools and LEAs to submit projects for scrutiny prior to funds being made available. Many commentators have pointed out that the Manpower Services Commission's (MISC) need to secure the co-operation of the 'educational lobby' actually produced curriculum development in schools that was far closer to the educationalist (mostly school-based) than the occupationalist (mostly MISC-based) model of the curriculum (Dale 1990). The implication from this is that even a quasi-state body, obliging schools and LEAs to sign contracts to get their money, was actually limited in its capacity to reach into the schools. All this suggests that the question of whether the National Curriculum will equal state control over school knowledge must remain an empirical one and research in schools may or may not indicate more powerful texts and weaker contexts. Our

suggestion at this stage is that, even with a highly detailed piece of legislation on the statute books, educational policy will still be generated and implemented both within and around the educational system in ways that have intended and unintended consequences for both education and its surrounding social milieu. As a result the Act, and its attendant texts, are in one respect an expression of sets of political intentions and a political resource for continuing national debates, and in another a micro-political resource for teachers, LEAs and parents to interpret, re-interpret and apply to their particular social contexts.

Policy arenas and the context of schooling

Introducing the notion of a continuous policy cycle draws our attention towards the work of policy recontextualization that goes on in the schools. However, researching the school setting actually requires us to consider not only the National Curriculum but also how the various elements that make up the Act, Local Management of Schools (LMS), Open Enrolment, etc., empower different bodies, groups and individuals in different ways. Investigating the context thus means the plotting of clashes and mismatches between contending discourses at work in these settings, e.g. professionalism vs. conformity, autonomy vs. constraint, specification vs. latitude, the political vs. the educational. It also requires an investigation of the impact of matters of contingency—staff absence or shortage, individual personalities or capacities, the geographical location and the catchment area, etc. For these reasons the analysis of policy requires a clear distinction between:

Intended policy: the variety of 'official', competing ideologies that seek to affect policy. 'Official' registers the fact we are speaking not only of the intentions of the government and its advisers, the DES and the quasi-state bodies that have been appointed to 'implement' policy, but also schools, LEAs and other policy arenas where 'official' policy lines emerge. Competing ideologies signal the complexity of 'official' pronouncements and the continual struggle for power they reflect and contain.

Actual policy: draws our attention to the wording of legislation, circulars and policy documents—the policy texts—that set out to lay down the ground rules for policy-in-use. 'These provide one form of intended policy. However, with all their 'spaces', 'silences' and contradictions, they remain a resource for practitioners to develop policy-in-use.

Policy-in-use: the institutional practices and discourses that emerge out of the responses of practitioners to both the intended and actual policies of their arena, the peculiarities and particularities of their context and the perceptions of the intended and actual policies of other arenas.

These differing facets of policy may provide 'space' for manoeuvre throughout the policy cycle and research needs to identify the nature and extent of resistance, accommodation, subterfuge and conformity within schools and between departments. Furthermore, departmental work will be nested

within the LEA and school environments, albeit changing environments, that reflect the ways in which schools and authorities are adjusting to the new ERA *in toto*. These overlapping environments provide a context in which the teaching resources, the policies and the ethos of the schools, the views of teachers, the levels of parental accountability and inspectorial checks, and responses to market forces may well fracture and diversify the implementation process rather than encourage similarity and unity between schools. We are therefore suggesting that the complexity and interrelated nature of the various aspects of change may well confound a model of change that assumes a processual simplicity and a certain discreteness between the various elements of change.

We will present a sample of data from the four case-study schools in our ERAP study.¹ Flighthpath School is an 11–18, purpose-built, comprehensive community school of around 1200, mostly white, working-class students. Parkside School is also an 11–18 comprehensive in the same Labour-controlled authority. It takes in around 1100 students and has a wide ethnic mix of students with a preponderance of Asians. Overbury has around 900 students in the 11–16 age range and Pankhurst, an all-girls school, a similar number. The catchment area of Overbury and Pankhurst is dominantly middle class. The LEA, which is Liberal Democrat-controlled, provides a tertiary college for the 16–18 year olds. Most of these data are drawn from repeat interviews with Heads of Department, although others are quoted and some observation data are also included. The subjects referred to here are science, maths and English. The conclusions from the data are often quoted in general terms and all indications are that the sorts of issues raised here are to be found within virtually all schools involved in National Curriculum changes. Basically we want to convey something of the complexity of these changes.

We begin with the issue of interpretation, the reading of policy texts, and go on to point out that such interpretations are not unconstrained, they do not develop in a vacuum, and a variety of exigencies impinge on the processes of interpretation. Thus we have two, interrelated, central concerns. One to explore the actual engagement of departments with the policy texts and the other to explore the engagement with and responses to the constraints and possibilities arising within the changing contexts within which the departments operate. It is our contention that it is in the micro-political processes of the schools that we begin to see not only the limitations and possibilities state policy places on schools but equally, the limits and possibilities practitioners place on the capacity of the state to reach into the daily lives of the schools.

Interpreting the texts

Departments and the whole curriculum?

Although the Government has laid out an overall structure for the National Curriculum, the setting down of the content and the skills to be taught in the individual subject areas and the cross-curricular themes and dimensions are actually being undertaken and introduced into schools in a piecemeal

fashion. In our research schools the relationship between subject departments and the full curriculum of the school has varied, although all the schools have had a strong subject-based departmental bias. Up to now such a basis for organizing the curriculum has only gradually been eroded by fairly limited cross-curricular concerns, for example Personal and Social Education or topic-based work. The impetus for departments to look outwards and develop cross-curricular links has tended to come from senior teachers, curriculum deputy heads and the like. However, the new legislation and its process of introduction has interrupted this steady, if small-scale shift.

To begin with, the senior managers have been getting conflicting 'messages' from the DES (DES 1989 Sec. 4.3.) and the NCC (NCC 1990: 1) respectively. The NCC argues that:

The use of subjects to define the National Curriculum does not mean that teaching has to be organized and delivered within prescribed subject boundaries. Subject descriptions reflect the way in which the school curriculum is now most often planned and, in secondary schools, also organized. This reflects the advantages of such descriptions for clarity of presentation to those within and outside the education service, and as a means of ensuring that essential areas of the curriculum are properly covered.

In due course, it is likely that schools will 'throw all the attainment targets in a heap on the floor and reassemble them in a way which provides for them the very basis of a whole curriculum'.

Where the DES appears reluctant to see subjects disappear the NCC positively promotes the idea. The extent to which teachers feel licensed to promote cross-curricular links depends to some extent on which 'official' text they read, and how they 'read' it. While some senior teachers have encouraged teachers to believe that cross-curricular initiatives were going to provide new opportunities, *in practice*, the process whereby the National Curriculum is being introduced, 'a drip feed of Statutory Orders', each tightly timetabled for introduction immediately after its issue, has actually made it difficult for schools to break out of the old, subject-based curriculum organization. The Head of Maths at Flightpath typically talked about the lack of 'time or space to get together and look at the matches between them [the subjects]'.

We are all aware that we do need to link up. But again it's down to the pressures which are exerted on us. It's the time factor. (Head of Science.)

The result seems to be that cross-curricular matters remain the responsibility of senior management for whom, our data suggest, LMS has become the major concern. Where there is an interest in the 'dimensions', 'skills' and 'themes' that make up the cross-curricular elements of the National Curriculum (NCC 1990) the former two are 'delivered' by departments and it seems likely the themes may well be 'bolted on' as a carousel of non-subject-specific offerings. In effect the 'implementation' process has interrupted those moves that were in hand towards whole-curriculum perspectives in schools.

All of this suggests that the substance of existing curriculum structures and the current institutional practices *may well not only remain in place but be reinforced by the way in which the National Curriculum is being introduced*. Thus in terms of the whole curriculum there seems little indication of any need for radical change, and it is difficult to support any argument that this is

merely a period of transition. After all, departmental structure and subject-based curricular have a long and powerful history that seems far more likely to feed off the National Curriculum structure rather than be weakened by it in any move into a Whole Curriculum.

Departments and their subject areas

The new process of curriculum development emerging out of the National Curriculum involves the replacement of local decisions based on direct experience with general structures based on assumptions about 'normal' pacing and 'levels' of difficulty. This stimulates a complex and sophisticated process of accommodation between the National Curriculum texts and existing assumptions and practices. The learning and changing that teachers and departments do in relation to the National Curriculum, like the learning that pupils do, involves making sense of the new in terms of past experiences and understandings. The ways in which the National Curriculum is construed are, in part, dependent on existing subject paradigms and subject subcultures. The National Curriculum articulates with established theories-in-practice.

Furthermore the process of construction and interpretation is a social process, it is done with or in relation to colleagues. As a result the leadership of Heads of Department (HOD) is important here. The skills and expertise of HODs, their capacity to make sense of change for or with colleagues, are crucial resources, and a significant point of variation in the engagement of a department with National Curriculum texts. HODs may well find themselves caught between the National Curriculum and their colleagues, standing in part 'for' the National Curriculum. But of course this puts pressure on them to be an adequate interpreter of key texts for others and be both *in* authority and *an* authority. Not all HODs are equally well equipped to carry this off and like other innovators the National Curriculum can disrupt existing hierarchies, advantage some and disadvantage others. Information and understanding, 'authoritative readings', are at a premium in the process of accommodation. HODs perform differently in discussions with their departments over the National Curriculum. For example, the Head of Science at Parkside, running an in-service training day for his department, took a strong interpretative approach, laying out his own general view of progression through the levels of the National Curriculum and then trying to accommodate the new levels into the existing conceptions of science in the department and the existing science syllabus. Interestingly, this followed a session, organized by the LEA science advisor in which notions of progression were examined very closely, and strategies to help HODs introduce the National Curriculum to their colleagues were also explored. But the HODs attempt to pre-structure and assist the process of curriculum development had also to be set against other concerns and interests within the department. In one instance the academic/cognitive aspects of the National Curriculum were questioned through the social/equal opportunities concerns of the members of the department. Such mismatches of purpose are likely to give rise to a

strategy of *containment*. In this case the basic conception and structure of the department syllabus remained the organizing principle to which the National Curriculum was 'added'.

... we're going to look at our approach and see where the national curriculum and the profile components fit in to our activities and ... rather to concentrate on developing a good lower-school curriculum, and so that's what we've decided to do. We've decided to formulate schemes of work in which ... we have the sort of scheme of work in the centre ... then radiating out from it, with arrows, the areas of the national curriculum that will be covered. (Head of English, Pankhurst, interview, 28 November 1989.)

But the process of interpretation and planning becomes all the more difficult when several different agendas are at work. At an in-service day in the Mathematics Department at Parkside there were examples of the logics of progression in the National Curriculum being contrasted both with the departmental logic and the constructivist logic of the students and occasionally a stubborn defence of the 'logic of enjoyment'. In this respect the National Curriculum provides an irritant for review and must take its place within the bricolage of motives and theory that make up the pedagogic discourse within any department. In the case of some mathematics departments this 'history of motives' may include a commitment to a particular, published scheme of work, for example SMP 11-16 (School Mathematics Project). Here the approach to implementing the National Curriculum may be to retain existing courses and 'fill in the holes', which has in fact been common to three of the mathematics departments we have looked at and anecdotal evidence suggests it is widespread where science and mathematics departments were already using widely available courses.

... we're committed to SMP 11-16 scheme, O.K., the National Curriculum's come along but we're going to see where it's covered, we're going to use SMP. We're not going to, because I know some schools have re-ordered it and put it into module blocks to fit with the National Curriculum, but we've decided that time's been spent developing that scheme, the order of it is there for a reason. We're not going to mess up the scheme to make it fit into boxes in the National Curriculum. (Head of Mathematics, Flighthipath, interview, 3 November 1989.)

In these instances views about appropriate progression and cross-curricular concerns actually cut across the National Curriculum document and raise difficulties for any form of straightforward 'implementation'. SMP has a long and relatively successful history and has won the 'hearts and minds' of a significant number of mathematics teachers across the country. There is an unwillingness to take on the National Curriculum at those points where commitment to the scheme's view of progression remains high. A history of innovation and curriculum development in any school normally produces a set of professional 'side bets'; these are not easily dislodged or surrendered in the face of changes generated externally - however forceful they may appear.

Departments have also approached the National Curriculum in ways that reflect the particularities of the subject area, its politics and its history. For example, the debate about integrated vs. separate subjects still remains pertinent, despite the existence of integrated science as a single subject in the

National Curriculum; and the disposition of staff remains important. At Flighthipath, for example, the science department has split 'Key Stage 3' into topics that tend to reflect the traditional three science subject boundaries and, although the aim is to integrate the science elements, teachers' backgrounds are seen to make that difficult. The histories and cultures of particular subjects may actually lead to different interpretations of possibility and constraint. At Parkside, for example, the science department view of progression was not shared by the mathematics department and they differed over when students were seen to be 'ready' for certain concepts and ideas. (Similar disjunctions are present in the Statutory Orders for the two subjects!)

There is often a process of developing a collective reading of the Programmes of Study and the Attainment Targets; making sense by making meaning. In the process of pick and mix, gaps in the text were identified, and the National Curriculum choices of what was crucial material were set against the collective wisdom and history of the department. What department members saw as 'basic' was retained, anything seen as 'redundant' removed. In some instances teachers' priorities, experience and professional expertise were set over and against the structure, content and progression of subject knowledge presented in the National Curriculum documents. The result was a lot of accommodation and minimal change. This may be what Duncan Graham, Chair of the NCC, means by teachers 'making the National Curriculum their own'. But the interesting, difficult and, for some teachers, frustrating thing, is to know where the limits of this process of accommodation will be set.

It seems from data so far collected that the question of progression produces the most obvious writerly² responses from mathematics and science teachers. There is certainly no passive acceptance of, or mere adaptation to, the progression identified in the National Curriculum texts. It is common to find that collective interpretations and strategies emerge in the 'spaces' left by these texts, and these may be developed through social and professional networks in LEAs, subject associations, etc. Thus in some departments incoherence in the text may become latitude and latitude becomes incorporation and eventually accommodation. Some teachers may be oppressed by the National Curriculum text but we find considerable evidence of creative responses.

Departments in context

Staffing the National Curriculum

One of the many problems involved in relating exhortations of change to the world of schooling is the tendency for policy texts to be written in terms of an assumption that ideal conditions for change apply across the schooling system. Texts fail to account for the fact that in most schools change will take place against a backdrop of unforeseen, unforeseeable and unavoidable difficulties. Schools are very diverse. The question of staffing is just one of

The long, dark shadow of assessment

The question of reporting pupil achievement and the linked and equally uncertain question of what form assessment will take, tends to make them the jokers in the pack. Although many of the teachers we interviewed spoke relatively positively about the concept of a National Curriculum and sometimes welcomed their own subject's statutory orders, the response to the prospects of national testing was unanimously negative. Fear, loathing and dread were the normal reactions. The fear of the unknown fed by the 'horror story' press coverage about the piloting of the SATs made planning and change all the more difficult.

... as regards testing, I think it's going to have absolutely devastating effects on schools... for precisely the reasons that we were talking about. (Head of English, Parkhurst, interview, 28 November 1989.)

At the moment I'm almost ignoring the national testing, because we know so little about it. You can't work towards something you don't know anything about. (Head of Science, Flightpath, interview, 3 November 1989.)

How far teaching to the test can be avoided will depend a great deal on the outcome of the work being done on assessment by the various SAT development groups. Many teachers have expressed considerable concern about any system of assessment that leans strongly towards the testing rather than assessment paradigm (Troman 1989). Within teaching in the UK over the past 20 years, there has been a steady move away from a testing paradigm with new forms of assessment, including formative and diagnostic, gaining wide acceptance (Bowe and Whitty 1989). Not surprisingly then, at this stage, many teachers are choosing to ignore the possibility that the testing paradigm will be preferred and they are developing approaches to the curriculum that would make implementation of such a system very difficult. None the less, the idea that teachers can make the curriculum their own has to take adequate account of the constraints that may arise from a national testing regime and there is evidence that anticipated changes are already influencing classroom teaching, which the government may well intend it to do.

I mean we'll know what's being required in the tests and obviously that is going to affect to some extent the teaching, but I don't see the tests as the be all and end all of the National Curriculum. I mean you're educating people, not just teaching them to pass tests. (Head of Science, Parkside, interview, 3 November 1989.)

Our more recent interviews indicate that the particular situation of departments in two of the schools at the time of the issuing of the Statutory Orders can affect their response to the National Curriculum. Thus the science departments at Flightpath and Parkside took the opportunity to rework their first two years' curriculum. In both cases they combined aspects of their existing courses with the National Curriculum to produce new, unit-based courses. However, at Parkside the course created has retained its integrity while at Flightpath the National Curriculum is beginning to make inroads into the original intentions. Both departments have suffered from considerable pressure on staff throughout the year but Parkside was able to develop a clear, independent logic to its course and drew in the third year to their planning. This has given them the confidence and foundation to continue to write units

several vicissitudes that are routinely ignored. In these texts the implicit model of the department-in-change is that of a group of experienced, full-time, stable specialists. For schools in London and other large cities, and especially for departments of science and mathematics, such an assumption is often untenable. The presence of non-specialist teachers, the use of supply teachers or part-timers, high rates of staff turnover, illness and absence, all affect the capacity of a department to respond and to plan for the National Curriculum and will influence the form and nature of the response and the degree of planning. For example, the presence of a number of non-specialists in the science and mathematics departments we studied meant that one had felt it necessary to produce fairly closed, pre-prepared curriculum materials. There is clearly a delicate and indeterminate balance that is sought between communality and individuality, prescription and autonomy in the production of units of work.

Indeed the Education Reform Act, has actually increased the pressure that teachers feel under as a result of staff shortages. Concern over external checks, whether via inspections, SATs or parental and governing board scrutiny has changed the way in which schools have tried to cope with and disguise teacher shortages, lack of good supply teachers and so on. Now departments are accountable for appropriate delivery of the National Curriculum they must take responsibility for contingent problems not of their making and often not within their control. Thus, as one senior teacher pointed out to us, disguising staff shortages by reallocation of staff to examination classes and the first and second years is no longer possible because all years of the school must receive their 'curriculum entitlement' and he can be held accountable if they do not.

Problems of continuity and expertise in subject areas are compounded in many departments by the fact that many teachers, especially senior staff, have multiple involvements in aspects of the implementation of the ERA. Many teachers find the National Curriculum an additional burden in their already stressful working lives. In all the case-study schools the implementation of the National Curriculum took its toll in terms of morale, commitment and energy. Furthermore, the particular constitution and characteristics of a staff is an important factor in coping with change. Different schools are more or less well provided with an infrastructure of both experience and commitment. This applies equally to the teaching and the ancillary staff.

It would probably be a generous overstatement to say that the introduction of the National Curriculum is informed by a theory of innovation; clearly it is not. In fact our research indicates that it is governed as much by serendipity, *ad hocery* and chaos as by planning. But if a theory were to be attributed to the perception of change presented by teachers it would come closest to a power-coercive strategy. Perhaps more accurately it is change by a process of attrition. Teachers feel under pressure and are experiencing considerable overload and stress. Senior staff are weighed down by multiple roles and the impact of multiple and diverse innovations. Even so, subject pedagogical allegiances, and what might be called 'professional responsibility' strongly mediate the policy text of the National Curriculum (see below).

that retain their own original aspirations for science in the school. In contrast Flightpath has been keen to ensure a tight system of assessment, for the most part using the *Graded Assessment in Science Project*. This has resulted in the putting together of regular tests that draw people back to the levels of attainment as a 'source book'. Their concentration on assessment has had the unintended consequence of making them more dependent on the National Curriculum text than they set out to be.

Being a 'professional'

The subject-specific and assessment concerns which were articulated by the teachers in the case-study schools tended to be reinforced by more general and deeper-seated worries about the long-term erosion of teachers' professionalism. While some may, resignedly, accept that their position has been publicly undermined, attempts by Government and DES to invade all areas of the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy may well produce far less of a feeling of resignation. At the moment there is evidence within our case-study schools that the question of 'doing a professional job' can be set over and against the lack of teaching experience among the Government's curriculum planners. The whole notion of teacher professionalism therefore remains to provide a powerful critical vocabulary of aspects of the National Curriculum.

One manifestation of this is a degree of scepticism which seems to be common among the teachers in the case-study schools who are 'receiving the National Curriculum, especially in the light of the delays in disseminating materials. This has created extra space for the media to interfere with the message. But there is a good deal more to this than delays and the interference of the media. There is the continuing feeling that the National Curriculum and its 'implementation' process constitutes an attack on their professionalism. The translation of the legislation into the language of education is being conducted on one level by the NCC and on another through the Subject Working Parties. Teachers varyingly aim their scepticism at these two bodies, whilst retaining a deep sense of both scepticism and resentment of the government's role. To some extent this has meant teachers have allowed 'them' a licensed autonomy, to stand Dale's notion (Dale 1989) on its head, to operate in the educational world. This has been dependent on 'them' showing a degree of credibility in the teachers' eyes. Scepticism in this instance privileges the text and allows teachers to express a certain degree of tolerance, to view it as being capable of a benevolent interpretation. However, such tolerance can prove to be fragile, especially where the legislation and/or the 'translation' in NCC or DES documents fails to show an appreciation of the school setting. Maintaining 'street credibility' with the teaching profession is unlikely to be an easy path. There are strong residues of collective resentment that require very little to trigger off small pockets of resistance. The mismatches between the National Curriculum structure and school resources (time, teachers, materials, space) is a particular source of worry and antipathy. On the one hand many teachers feel that the National Curriculum is asking them to do many things that they are already doing, while assuming that they were not. On the other they consider it is asking

them to do things that simply cannot be done within the constraints within which they must operate. In both these respects they feel affronted. For some teachers the requirements of the National Curriculum, taken as a whole, seem irreconcilable and unachievable. The Deputy Head of Pankhurst expressed some of these feelings

Well again, I resent the fact that the public image is that we weren't doing most of these things anyway, because in this school we'd always made everybody do, I mean it seems so obvious, everybody did English and maths. But the media image is that they didn't. Virtually all the girls had always done modern language, they'd all had to do a science, we'd already moved to the integrated science course, because we wanted to counteract the fact that we thought there were still too many of them doing biology. We'd already introduced technology, and we were trying very very hard to positively discriminate so that girls would go into it, we were already doing all these things. So I mean I don't necessarily resent the National Curriculum, I just am cross that people think we weren't doing a lot of it in the first place.

Well I mean as the working parties come out, I mean, right, science. They expect every girl to do double science eventually, so it's 20% they reckon. Even if they only do single - the exceptions might be allowed to only do single - they want 12% English want to hang on to the amount they have, which is over actually the amount that perhaps the national curriculum would have suggested. History and geography have come out, haven't they, demanding more timetable time than they traditionally get in the lower school. Now if you start adding all these things up it's not manageable, if you're still teaching them all these discrete subjects... (Deputy Head, Pankhurst, interview, 15 June 1990.)

But the pressures on doing a good, professional job also arise from the change process itself. The pace of change required by the government timetable clearly fails to recognize the complexity of the teachers' task or the demands involved in making a thorough and coherent response to the National Curriculum. Teachers feel a whole variety of responsibilities to their students. The National Curriculum may actually cut across some of these. The teacher's sense of professional responsibility does not begin and end with the National Curriculum, or with teaching and learning. The role of the teacher is broad and diffuse and often ambiguous. The National Curriculum is in some circumstances a diversion from other things of more immediate importance. Furthermore, there are other innovations to be coped with and groups of children to be taught *here and now*. What may seem slowness to react or failure to plan is often the result of carefully thought out professional decisions to do other things. The National Curriculum change process can actually be seen to 'get in the way' on occasions, with whole-school in-service days disjuncting the 'natural momentum' teachers build up with their teaching groups.

It takes so much effort to build up the momentum of the kids handing things in and work coming back, and you just get everything rolling, actually sort of producing things, a few detentions and they realize you're serious and, okay, you can keep it going, once you start it but if you break for three weeks... (Head of Science, Parkside, interview, 18 October 1989.)

Professional judgements over the required pace of change, its complexity and strong feelings of responsibility to students are seen to be placed in conflict by the various demands that have been imposed from outside.

... we are slow, and I could have predicted at the beginning of the year that we would have been slow because of what we're trying to do, but we're slower than that even. And

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then we have the problem what do we do for year 8? Presumably we carry on with the first year course, into year 8, and by the time they get into year 9, we're perhaps going to be half a term adrift, or even longer, even further adrift, and then we've got the SATS which will occupy who knows four, six weeks of lessons, in the spring term or something, or the summer, early summer term. How on earth do we deliver this programme that we've got outlined which doesn't allow for any slowness on our part? (Head of Science, Flightpath, interview, 8 June 1990.)

Thus several of our respondents expressed very strongly their sense of professional doubt, their lack of belief and trust in the change process set by the government for the National Curriculum. Many people interviewed suggested that the government were actually asking them to do a less than professional job with the National Curriculum. This rapid pace of change, the lack of support and facilities, inadequate staffing, the experience of innovation overload (Apple 1983) and contradictions between innovations of different kinds means people feel that in order to get by they have to botch and make do, skimp and compromise. For many this meant they felt students were getting a raw deal. The National Curriculum was getting in the way, diverting attention, time and energy from the task at hand—teaching—or simply making impossible demands.

Managing the National Curriculum

In the heat and dust of technical talk about change in schools it is usual to find talk about curriculum matters conducted separately from talk about other changes, like LMS. There are different arenas of debate and increasingly sharp divisions of labour and expertise in schools. But, although the priorities created by LMS are significantly different from those invested in the National Curriculum innovation, LMS may well affect what is possible in terms of the curriculum and pedagogy. For example, there was discussion at Flightpath about the extent to which a lack of resources might mean a change in teaching methods.

I mean chalk and talk is cheaper than a sort of individualized carousel and we'll just have to make those choices. (Curriculum Council meeting, Flightpath School, Observation notes, 5 March 1990.)

But, 'chalk and talk' may orient learning far more towards the content of the curriculum and away from the development of skills and critical capacities in students and key in this respect is the size of teaching groups.

The question of group size is being forced upon us by formula funding. There's a sort of remorseless logic about this. (Senior Deputy, Flightpath School, Curriculum Council meeting, Observation notes, 5 March 1990.)

In times of financial austerity, when school budgets often contain little room for flexibility, difficult choices are having to be made. The HODs at Flightpath were soon to be confronted with the implications of this 'remorseless logic' when the needs of the general curriculum meant some HODs had to accept an increase in group size.

Consequently, decisions about the best and most appropriate form of delivery for the National Curriculum were subordinated to budget setting and vocabularies of institutional survival. Again there are diverse and

contradictory responsibilities interwoven here. Budgetary responsibilities are set over and against educational ones. And 'the immediate', doing the best for students in classrooms *now*, is set over and against longer term questions of survival. For the subject teacher and HOD timescales are typically short and hectic; it is often a case of preparing for the immediate task in hand rather than spending the time reflecting on the options and coming to terms with the National Curriculum. Although the financial planners in the senior management team may be in a position to take a longer view, their implied critique of staff 'short-termism' may well breed further resentment and place curriculum concerns directly in conflict with budgetary concerns.

Part of the new logic, set-up by LMS, brings a growing recognition that staffing and curriculum planning are themselves market-related: in particular, financial planning is now beginning to reflect the exigencies of the teacher labour market. We have already talked about some of the problems created for National Curriculum implementation by the constraints arising from staffing, but shortages of specialist staff also means that money has to be spent to attract applicants for 'problem' vacancies. These expenditures have to be met from the schools' devolved budgets and, of course, reduce the funds available for other purposes. In science in particular teacher shortages mean having to meet the market price. But this picture is also extending to other subject areas and schools are faced with the dilemma of deciding which replacements are the most important. It may therefore be that the labour market for teachers, in conjunction with the National Curriculum, produces an even more rigid subject hierarchy. Core first, then Foundation, and lastly...? This is exacerbated in our case-study schools by the 'London factor'. The use of incentive payments to attract new staff has a knock-on effect on the morale and commitment of existing staff.

...if you're someone who's been slogging your guts out for 10 years and you're on an A and you see someone pulled in who's no better than you, simply because the school can't get anybody, you feel a sense of grievance maybe. Its market forces at their most brutal. (Head of Science, Parkside, interview, 6 June 1990.)

While the rhetoric of LMS celebrates the autonomy and control that is given to schools by the devolution of budgets, this rhetoric often serves to obscure the overall financial limits that are imposed on school funding. The National Curriculum is being implemented in a period when spending on schools, in real terms, is declining and LEAs do not have a free hand in the setting of their education budgets. There is no obvious direct relationship between levels of funding and changes that schools are required to make. Indeed for schools losing numbers in the competitive education market-place the National Curriculum may be a luxury that they can ill afford. Financial management is often a euphemism for cuts and savings and one outcome of trying to make savings in staff expenditure may be a steady skewing of budgets in favour of the Core and Foundation subjects, with the added complication of what is being 'tested' by the SATS helping to decide the final budget structure. In all of this student needs, the commitment to a Whole Curriculum and responding to the consumers would have to take a back seat. The National Curriculum would be working in direct contradiction to other aspects of the Education Reform Act. The choices for schools are thus set in such a way that 'rational decision making' must operate in an irrational world.

Conclusion

In this paper we have stressed and highlighted some commonly expressed problems of and responses to the National Curriculum. In doing so we have also tried to show that the pattern of problems and response vary between schools and departments. On the one hand such variation reflects a shifting political debate within the bodies of the state (the DES, the NCC, the ministers of education and even the Prime Minister) about prescriptiveness, the subject-based curriculum, national testing and the extent of the educational market. On the other hand, in the context of the schools, it reflects the different *capacities, contingencies, commitments and histories* of these institutions. In concluding we want to consider the developing histories of the national and the institutional settings and their relationship and discuss briefly the analytical validity of the four concepts for understanding the processes of change.

The concept of *capacity* refers to both the experience and the skills of the members of the department in responding to change. Thus capacity sensitizes us to the institutional competence of the members, the skills, knowledge, contacts and experience they can draw on. Such competence might seek to support and sustain interpretations of the intended and actual facets of policy or be critical and oppositional. The leadership styles (Knip and Van der Vegt 1991) of the senior teachers and HODs are also significant here. *Contingency* draws our attention to the factors which may advance or inhibit the possibilities of change—staffing (recruitment, experience, specialization), student recruitment, inherited plant and facilities, etc. Clearly these two concepts overlap and remain crucially affected by other aspects of policy. However, we would suggest they help us to recognize powerful contextual factors in schools' and departments' responses to change. In a similar sense *commitment and history* are often closely connected. The former refers to the existence of firmly held and well-entrenched subject or pedagogical paradigms within a department (or school). The latter refers to what Knip and Van der Vegt (1991) call the *innovation histories* of schools or departments. That is the existence (or not) of a history of curriculum development and change. A history of curriculum change can reduce the threat involved in the possibility of further change but it is also typically associated with high levels of commitment.

We do have evidence that low capacity, low commitment and no history of innovation results in a high degree of reliance on policy texts, external direction and advice, which in some circumstances verges on panic or leads to high uncertainty and confusion and a sense of threat. Equally we have evidence that high capacity, high commitment and a history of innovation may provide a basis for a greater sense of autonomy and *writerliness* with regard to policy texts, and a greater willingness to *interpret* texts in the light of previous practice, and a greater likelihood therefore of 'reconciliation' and 'mutation' (Corwin 1983).

This leads us to suggest that the differential impacts of contingencies, institutional structures, cultures, histories and environments may produce very different kinds of possibilities of response. For teachers these features make up part of the operational terrain within which policies are implement-

ted. But, as we have noted, in the National Curriculum policy the assumption is made that schools operate and will respond in terms of *ideal* conditions for change. Hence there is the assumption of commonality, even sameness, among schools, that all are equally able to respond, equally prepared, equally resourced. That is clearly wrong! Furthermore, the basis of differences between schools is not just a matter of resources or of the skills and experience of key participants, no matter how important those things are. It is also a matter of differences in the interpretations of key texts: Knip and Van der Vegt (1991) call this 'translation'. To put it another way, the authors of the National Curriculum are limited in their capacity to control the meanings embedded in the texts. As a result such texts are read and appreciated differently in different settings.

The four schools in this study have markedly different catchment areas and student populations. The mix of major institutional concerns, although basically similar overall, were balanced differently in each case. In part, this balance was also reflected in the institutional histories and the work cultures of their staffs (gender was a factor in this). The substance and conceptualization of institutional leadership was different in each case and the attendant micropolitical tussles were inflected differently. Some of the schools had a history of innovation which meant that they were better placed to engage with further innovation but also vary about not losing the benefits of previous developments, to which they were committed. All of these factors affect and constitute particular readings of the policy texts and provide what Knip and Van der Vegt (1991) call 'scenarios for change'. A scenario reflects the response of the social system to the policy intervention and as such indicates the degree to which the school actually allows the central policy to enter its system.

Further, according to Knip and Van der Vegt (1991) the scenario for change in a particular institution can be thought of '... as an outcome of a process of *self-reflection* in the school provoked by the policy intervention. Attention then shifts from the organization as an adapting system to the organization as a *self-producing system*'.

Thus, we are arguing that change in the school is best understood in terms of a complex interplay between the history, culture and context of the school and the intentions and requirements of the producers of policy texts. This interplay cannot be reduced to adaptation or 'successive approximation' (Eveland *et al.* 1977), rather it is a process of 'mutation' (Corwin 1983). Similar variations to those in the schools can be identified between different subject departments. In terms of rough generalization it is even possible to talk about different interpretational stances in different departments. In some cases, the interpretation of texts is proactive, critical and self-assured, what Barthes (see Hawkes 1977) might call 'writerly'.² We might also want to call this a 'professional' response in the sense that it preserves a strong role for the teachers. In others, the interpretations have been more reactive, passive and unquestioning, what Barthes might call 'readerly'. We might want to call this a 'technician' response, in that the National Curriculum texts are read like technical, how-to-do-it manuals rather than as professional documents. Our concluding point, then, is that as policy the National Curriculum remains both the object and subject of struggles over meaning. It is not so

much being 'implemented' in schools as being 'recreated', not so much 'reproduced' as 'produced'. While schools are changing as a result, so too is the National Curriculum. This leaves us with a strong feeling that the state-control model is analytically very limited. Our empirical data does not suggest that the state is *without* power. But, equally it indicates such power is strongly circumscribed by the contextual features of institutions, over which the state may find that control is both problematic and contradictory in terms of other political projects.

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Notes

1. The ERAP (Education Reform Act project) study is based at the Centre for Educational Studies, King's College, London. It is concerned with the impact and effects of the Act in schools (specifically the National Curriculum and LMS). The research concentrates on case studies of four schools and two LEAs.
2. Roland Barthes in Hawkes 1977: 113-114) has argued that:

literature may be divided into that which gives the reader a role, a function, a contribution to make, and that which renders the reader idle or redundant, 'left with no more than the poor freedom to accept or reject the text' (S/Z: 4) and which thereby reduces him to that apt-but-impotent symbol of the bourgeois world, an inert consumer to the author's role as producer.

In 'readerly' texts the signifier/signified relationship is clear and inescapable. There is the minimum of opportunity for creative interpretation by the reader. An initial reading of National Curriculum texts and their technical languages of levels, attainment targets, standardized attainment testing and programmes of study, might suggest just such a readerliness. However, the NCC has also published secondary texts, the *Non-Statutory Guidelines*, which suggest the National Curriculum texts are to be interpreted more like Barthes' alternative 'writerly' texts, which self-consciously invite the reader to 'join in', to co-operate and co-author. In the language of TVET to feel a sense of 'ownership'. We would suggest that this free play is a matter of degree in the interpretation and reading of these texts rather than any kind of open freedom of action.

Barthes (see Hawkes 1977: 114) has also argued that, 'writerly texts require us to look at the nature of language itself, not through it at a preordained "real world" ...'

We have been very aware that the very invention of a new proposed 'reality' for schooling in terms of attainment targets, etc., draws attention to the language itself, and to its adequacy as a way of thinking about organizing the way pupils learn. 'Making sense' of new texts leads people into a process of trying to 'translate' and make familiar the language and the embedded logics. In this process they place what they know against the new. Readerly texts, however, presuppose and depend on presumptions of innocence, on the belief that the reader will have little to offer by way of an alternative. Teachers may feel battered and coerced, they may have been softened up for change, but they are also suspicious and cynical and professionally committed in ways that hardly form the basis for 'innocence'.

Finally, Barthes suggests that the reading of writerly texts involves two kinds of 'pleasure' (Barthes 1976), the straightforward pleasure of reading and the *jouissance*, the ecstasy or bliss which arises from the sense of breakdown or interruption. The latter comes from the critical and creative response to the text, the seeing through to something beyond.

the erotic possibilities of an illicit glimpse 'when the garment gaps'. The blissful, and with it a sense for some of discomfort and loss, comes perhaps in relation to those 'gaps' and 'moments' of progressive and radical insertion, from the breakdown of transmission teaching and subject boundaries and formal examining and their replacement with cross-curricular work, with investigations, with group and process assessments.

However, these readerly and writerly texts are the products of a policy process, a process that interacts with a variety of interrelated contexts, over time. Consequently we have to recognize that texts have a clear relationship with the contexts in which they are used. This applies to national debates, exchanges in schools between teachers, the individual approaches developed by teachers to meet the requirements of the National Curriculum as well as to the way in which these intertwine.

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