

Chapter 1: Introduction

In this book, we present an explicit and uncompromising message: that children are intelligent beings, that they should be treated as such and that primary school teachers have a responsibility to develop children's intelligence through engaging them in meaningful and purposeful educative experiences. Throughout, we aim to explore how each subject in the curriculum can be engaged with to provide good opportunities for intelligent learning. Student teachers often begin their training with an unspoken model of the teacher as the dominant intellectual force within the classroom, the one with all the questions and all the right answers. The cohering theme that will come through every chapter of this book will be that teachers should aim not to dominate the intellectual activity within the classroom and should aim to offer children meaningful opportunities to raise questions, challenge ideas, create solutions, apply learning, articulate and justify ideas and give thoughtful answers to meaningful questions: in short, to develop a range of higher order intellectual skills.

In this chapter, we will explore the purpose of primary schools, how the curriculum impacts on what happens in schools and the significant role that teachers play in interpreting the curriculum to engage children in meaningful, valuable and valued learning experiences that demonstrate that children are respected as intelligent and active agents in their own education.

Primary education: what are we trying to achieve?

Most countries in the developed world spend billions of pounds, dollars, euros or other currencies, per year, on primary education and it is seen as an important part of a

government's policy agenda. What is it that they hope is being achieved as a result of this huge political and financial investment and, more importantly, what is actually being achieved and is it of long-term value?

In the United Kingdom, compulsory education for the masses is still a relatively new idea, invented by the Victorians, and the world has been changing at an incredible rate since those early days. Education that was supposed to be emancipatory and seen as an enormous privilege has, by its very nature, created the risk that, for many children and young people, it could be seen as an imposition on their personal liberty and they might feel restricted by the institutionalisation of schools. For many children, education is something that is 'done' to them: they are not invited to participate but forced to do so and this fundamentally changes the nature of the 'contract' made between schools and their main 'clients'.

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Critical task 1.1 The point of education

What do you see as the main purpose of education? To what extent was this achieved in your own experience in school? Reflect on these questions and make notes; you may wish to refer back to these notes when completing other critical tasks.

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Do children know what we are trying to achieve through their education? Do they see school as an exciting journey of self-realisation and personal development or, as

suggested by Holt (1982), as a series of tasks to be completed so that they are allowed to go out for lunch ...

For thousands of years, long before the notion of schools, 'learning' was absolutely central to our survival as humans. *What should I do if I find myself facing a lion? Which berries are good to eat and which are poisonous? How do I make my arrows as straight and sharp as possible? How much food will I need to survive the winter?* The passing on of 'survival expertise' was absolutely central to life and completely relevant: learning *about* the real world was undertaken *in* the real world.

In the 21st century, schools are so much a part of our shared cultural experience and have developed such an embedded role in our societies that we do not often stop to ask whether our current systems are 'fit for purpose'. Put simply, the current educational model is this: in order to prepare children for life in the real world, we put them in a box for twelve years. We call this box 'school'. In this box, we teach them about things that some nameless 'experts' think they should know.

The good news is that primary schools are vibrant, creative places and individual primary teachers have a good degree of professional autonomy about how they approach teaching and learning. As a result, teachers can make decisions about the kind of impact that they want to have on children's development. Children's time in primary school can have a life-enhancing effect if teachers hold a clear vision about the really important things that they want children to learn.

The curriculum

In the previous section, we considered the nature and purpose of education. In this section, we consider ‘the curriculum’ and how this guides our work as primary teachers.

In England, most primary schools are required to follow the National Curriculum (Department for Education (DfE), 2013), which sets out ‘subject content for those subjects that should be taught to all pupils’ (DfE, 2013: 5). It also states that schools must ‘teach religious education to pupils at every Key Stage’ and ‘must make provision for a daily act of collective worship ... [and] for personal, social, health and economic education’ (DfE, 2013: 5). The document states that the National Curriculum is part of the wider ‘school curriculum’, which comprises ‘all learning and other experiences each school plans for its pupils’ (DfE, 2013: 5). Free schools and academies have more flexibility and can adopt their own curriculum, but the reality is that many of these schools also follow the National Curriculum, perhaps because Ofsted (2018: 42) consider ‘the design, implementation and evaluation of the curriculum, ensuring breadth and balance and its impact on pupils’ outcomes and their personal, development, behaviour and welfare’ when making inspection judgements.

The Department for Education (DfE, 2013: 5) states that all state-funded schools must ‘offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly-based and which:

- promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and
- prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life’.

Here, the DfE is referring to the wider ‘school curriculum’, of which the National Curriculum is one part. The aspects of the wider school curriculum that sit alongside the National Curriculum are sometimes referred to as ‘the hidden curriculum’ or the ‘co-curriculum’. While the National Curriculum tends to dominate the focus of many schools, some might suggest that the hidden curriculum is even more important, in terms of equipping pupils with ‘life skills’ and preparing them for employment. James (2018) suggests that there is ‘a growing awareness of the importance of social and emotional skills’, claiming that not only are these important in their own right as skills for life, but that they can also support children in becoming more effective learners within education. For example, children who have developed the skill of resilience in other situations will be able to apply their resilience to their learning, willing to take risks and to persevere when they find something challenging. Analysing the results of the Global University Employability Survey, Baker (2017) identifies that employers list communication as the most important quality they are looking for in new employees, closely followed by problem-solving/critical thinking, adaptability, initiative, collaboration and creativity. Resilience and social awareness also feature in the top ten. Knowing the properties of a cylinder or the ability to distinguish between a simile and a metaphor did not feature on the list at all... In this book, we explore ways in which the National Curriculum can be taught to develop these desirable qualities.

In recent years, significant debate has taken place in relation to whether a knowledge-based curriculum is more effective than a skills-based curriculum. In a speech in 2017, Nick Gibb (School Standards Minister) suggested opponents to a knowledge-based approach propose that it can lead to ‘entrenching [of] social divisions’, whereas

supporters propose that a knowledge-rich curriculum can help to close the gap for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (Gibb, 2017). The reality is that, while the current National Curriculum is undoubtedly more knowledge-based than its predecessor, it is intended to ‘promote the development of pupils’ knowledge, understanding and skills’ (DfE, 2013: 6). Our own view is that any curriculum should always include a balance of knowledge, understanding and skills: what value is knowledge without any skills with which to make use of the knowledge? How can pupils develop skills in a meaningful way, if not drawing upon knowledge? It is the development of these alongside each other that can truly promote and develop children’s own intelligence.

The content of the National Curriculum, in previous versions, the current version and subsequent versions (because curricula will come and go, to be replaced with versions that are deemed by policy makers to be ‘better’ than the previous), is also worthy of consideration. The vast majority of primary aged pupils in England will be following a curriculum that has been designed by a relatively small group of adults, drawn from a narrow range of fields, focusing on content that they consider to be most important for primary aged pupils to learn. Postman and Weingartner (1969: 34) suggest that any statutory curriculum is inherently focused upon children learning ‘somebody else’s answers to somebody else’s question’. So whose curriculum is it? Who is it for? The important thing to remember is that the National Curriculum is just a document. During your teaching career, it will undoubtedly be reviewed and adapted and you will have little control over that, beyond engaging with consultation opportunities during periods of review. What you can control is the way in which you interpret and transact the

curriculum; that is in your hands and we will now go on to consider the role of the teacher.

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Critical task 1.2 Memorable moments: the role of emotion in learning

Think back on your time in primary school and make a note of your most vivid memories. Try to unpick why these memories have stayed with you for so long when so many have been forgotten.

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How to be a really effective primary school teacher

To be a really effective primary school teacher, you need to be clear about what you are trying to achieve. Are you trying to develop children to be polite and compliant or respectful and intellectually challenging? Are you trying to teach children stuff or inspire them to learn stuff? Are you trying to help them remember some facts from the curriculum or lead them on a journey of discovery that is relevant to their lives?

Being clear about the ‘higher goals’ of teaching is important and something to hold onto in the day-to-day business of the job. It is also important to reflect, regularly, on how your work as a teacher is going and whether there is a good match between your goals and your actual impact. Here are some general principles that great primary school teachers draw on in reflecting on and developing their practice:

Empathy: First and foremost, it is important to put yourself ‘in the shoes’ of the children: try to imagine what the ‘lived experience’ is like for the learners in your

classroom. Remember that children are real live human beings, with all the emotional responses that we experience in our lives: boredom, frustration, joy, inspiration, anger, anxiety, glee, calmness, confidence, irritation, disengagement, excitement ... the list goes on. When planning any learning opportunity, ask yourself how it will feel for the learners.

Partnership: Aim to see the children as co-owners of the curriculum, the learning environment, the learning process and the intellectual activity engaged with in your classroom. Of course, by the end of the school day, you may feel mentally exhausted, as a result of all the thinking that you have done to support the children's learning but you should also aim to send the children home with their brains fizzing nicely from the intellectual stimulation during the day.

Problem-solving: It is often said that teachers have to be creative and able to find solutions to problems. We believe this to be true but, drawing on the previous point, we propose that children should be given a role in the problem-solving process. Do not come up with ten brilliant ideas to support the children's learning: come up with one idea that will allow the children to come up with ten brilliant ideas to progress their own learning.

Humility: As a reflective teacher, you will recognise that you will not get everything right and be willing to admit when things have not worked out as you had hoped. Be willing to apologise to parents, to your colleagues and, most importantly, to the children. Just as you will be empathetic and aware of children's emotional responses, you should aim to share your 'humanness' with them, including your flaws and your determination to learn from your mistakes as you strive to be an effective teacher.

Determination: Teaching is an incredibly busy job, with multiple and competing demands made on your time and attention. Once you have decided what kind of teacher you want to be, you need to hold onto this very tenaciously and then stay focused on the children's development as intellectual beings. Reflect on your practice, learn from the children, and stay determined to provide rich, positive and child-centred learning opportunities.

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Critical task 1.3 How do you see yourself teaching?

When you imagine yourself 'teaching', what do you imagine the children doing? Are they hanging on your every word or identifying their own topics for discussion?

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Critical task 1.4 New school: blank slate

If you had the opportunity to open a brand new school, and design your own curriculum from scratch, how would you approach this? Which subjects would you have in your curriculum? Would you have a curriculum? How would you organise the timetable? What role would the children have in negotiating the approach to learning?

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How to read this book

This book has been written by subject experts and has a very clear focus on effective primary practice. Each of the following chapters (with the exception of the final chapter) focuses on a different subject of the National Curriculum, exploring the distinctive elements of the subject and effective pedagogical approaches appropriate to it.

Each chapter also explores a key pedagogical issue, applicable across the curriculum, which is discussed in relation to the chapter's subject drawn from the National Curriculum. At the end of each chapter, the applicability of the pedagogical issue to other curriculum areas is considered.

Throughout the book, there will be the opportunity to reflect on some case studies and critical tasks, often based on real examples of student teachers grappling with the development of new and challenging aspects of their own professional practice.

In the final chapter, we will review some of the key issues identified throughout the book and look ahead to the development of education in the twenty first century.

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Response to critical task 1.1 The point of education

In this task, we invited you to reflect on what you see as the main purpose of primary education. We asked some PGCE student teachers this question at the beginning of their course. Here are some of their responses:

The main purpose of primary education is:

- to explore ideas and make sense of the unknown
- to open as many doors as possible to children
- to teach pupils how to learn and how thinking is important in all aspects of life
- to inspire a love of learning and a passion for finding out new information
- to learn to embrace and celebrate difference, culture and success
- to ensure that the future of humanity is properly equipped to open doors to all possibilities ...

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Response to critical task 1.2 Memorable moments: the role of emotion in learning

We asked you to explore why it is that some memories of our time in primary school are so vivid, when there must be thousands of hours of experience that we cannot recall specifically. We suggest that experiences that provoke a heightened emotional response are more likely to stay with us when other memories fade. So, we predict that most of your long term memories are from times when you were anxious, excited, sad, scared, happy, humiliated, inspired, intrigued ... the list goes on.

This is not just a trivial oddity. This is a really important point to remember if you aspire to be a great teacher. Always remember that the children in your class are small human beings, with all of the emotional responses that we experience as adults. If you ignore children's emotions in your teaching, you are missing out on a really powerful aspect of their learning. To be clear, we are not arguing, here, that you should aim to make your

teaching ‘interesting’: that should be a minimum requirement. We are arguing that your teaching should engage children as social and emotional beings.

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Summary for this chapter

In this chapter, we have considered how our current education system has evolved and some of the purposes of education. We have reflected on the nature of the curriculum and the role of the teacher in interpreting and translating it into meaningful and significant learning opportunities that put children at the centre of the process. We have considered some of the attributes of great teachers and outlined ways in which this book may support your development towards becoming an outstanding teacher.

Further reading

Forster, C. and Eperjesi, R. (2017) *Action research for new teachers: evidence-based evaluation of practice*. London: SAGE Publications.

This book provides a clear guide to action research, a methodology that supports teachers in evaluating and improving key aspects of their own practice.

The Children’s Society: Good Childhood Report. Available at:

<https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-publications> (Accessed: 23 April 2019).

This annual report sheds light on what life is like for children and young people in UK. It often makes for uncomfortable reading and is an important indicator of trends over time.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

This book explores a theory that emphasises the social nature of learning in professional contexts. It is a valuable tool for new teachers, to support them in reflecting on who influences them and whether this influence is always a good thing.

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