DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 179 SP 035 619

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TITLE Changing the Classroom Curriculum: The Acid Test of Policy Intervention.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *British National Curriculum; Classroom Research; *Curriculum; Educational Change; Educational Policy; Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; Foreign Countries; *Intellectual Disciplines; Legislation; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Methods; *Time Factors (Learning)
IDENTIFIERS *England

ABSTRACT

Data from a larger study reveals how policy-directed change is perceived and experienced by teachers and pupils in early years of primary school in England between 1990 and 1993. Data from PACE: Primary Assessment, Curriculum and Experience, a study of educational change under reform of the National Curriculum, included interviews with 94 teachers and studies of 9 classrooms. The studies included field notes, systematic observation, and interviews with the teacher and 6 target pupils from each class who were tracked, longitudinally, across the 3 years. Evidence suggests that teachers feel more constrained and perceived considerable changes in the curriculum in the early years of primary school, though observations suggest that practices remain much the same and that any change is an increase in teaching single subjects and a move away from teaching thematically. Interviews with children showed that they preferred physical education, painting, and play to the National Curriculum core subjects. They also indicated very little evidence that the National Curriculum made any substantial difference to the curriculum as the students experience it. The overall effect has been of considerable perceived change for teachers but relatively little measurable change in the time spent on different subjects. Consequently there has been an element of continuity in terms of pupil experience and perception. Schooling is still schooling for English pupils, whether its form and content is decided at a classroom level or is directed by national policy. Contains 18 references. (JB)

PRIMARY ASSESSMENT, CURRICULUM AND EXPERIENCE

A study of educational change under the National Curriculum

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CHANGING THE CLASSROOM CURRICULUM: THE ACID TEST OF POLICY INTERVENTION

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Paper presented as part of the Symposium:

Finding the Keys to Educational Reform: Insights from the Implementation of a National Curriculum and Assessment Programme

The American Educational Research Association Conference

New Orleans, April 1994

CHANGING THE CLASSROOM CURRICULUM: THE ACID TEST OF POLICY INTERVENTION

Andrew Pollard with Dorothy Abbott, Patricia Broadfoot, Paul Croll and Marilyn Osborn.

INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns curriculum change as perceived and experienced by teachers and pupils in the early years of primary school in England in the early 1990s. It is part of an AERA symposium to which an introduction to recent changes in education policy in England will be presented together with information about the project on Primary Assessment, Curriculum and Experience (PACE), from which this paper is derived.

The paper is based on data gathered in 1990/1, 1991/2 and, for some, 1992/3. For each year, it draws on interviews with 94 classroom teachers and on a 'classroom study' in each of nine classrooms. The latter included field notes, systematic observation and interviews with the teacher and six target pupils from each class who were tracked, longitudinally, across the three years. The annual pupil sample is thus 54, but, drawing on interviews at the ages of 6 and 7, the paper is based on 108 pupil interviews.

PART 1 TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

1.1 What changes in curriculum content did teachers perceive?

One of the first questions addressed by the PACE project was how far teachers shared fears, expressed when the National Curriculum was being initiated (Haviland 1988), that the balance of the infant school curriculum was likely to shift towards the `core' subjects laid down by the Act and away from some of the potentially expressive and creative areas like art and music.

Dramatic indications of changes perceived by teachers was revealed by questions which we put to our sample of 94 classroom teachers. In both 1990/1, 1991/2 and 1992/3 they were asked whether each subject was being taught `more', `the same' or `less'.

The continuation of previous priorities regarding `the basics' was clear for English and mathematics, with very little perceived change from 1990 to 1992. In contrast, perceived increases were particularly notable for science which 84% of teachers felt was taking more time in 1990, with only a slight falling off in 1992. Technology, history and geography were also all seen as having increased a good deal in 1990, but they were felt to have increased still more in 1992. In fact, many teachers explained that these areas had always been covered in thematic or 'topic' work without being *called* technology, history and geography. A more conscious labelling of the subject areas of topic work may thus have been taking place, rather than there having been a real increase. Indeed, as we shall see, these perceptions of the extent of history, geography and technology work are hardly borne out by findings from PACE systematic observation during which they were recorded relatively rarely.

The two main subjects on which teachers felt less time was being spent were music and art, as early critics of the Education Reform Act had suspected might happen. Initially they were thought to be suffering in the move to embrace science but the continued squeeze on these subjects suggests that by 1992 they were also losing out to the growth of technology, history and geography.

Our interviews revealed the feelings of many teachers that there were other more subtle ways in which the `creative' side of the curriculum was affected. For instance, although the time spent on English had not changed, for most teachers the type of activity upon which children were engaged as part of English work *had* altered. Many teachers repeated that they were doing far less creative writing with their children. Similarly, art may well have been eroded even more than is apparent from the dramatic 1992 response when 54% of teachers said they were doing less. A large number of teachers said that they were doing less `art for art's sake' with their children. Many said that writing and painting and drawing were now related to subject and topic areas which formed part of their National Curriculum work rather than being open to children's free choice, inspiration or imagination. As one teacher put it -

> `It's less fun now. Everything has to be specifically related to the topic.'

Overall, it seems that the perceptions of Key Stage 1 teachers regarding changes in curriculum content showed clear signs of content overload. This may partially account for the overall cooling in teacher support for the National Curriculum which we recorded in 1992.

By 1992, teacher opinion of the relevance of the National Curriculum to the needs of their pupils had fallen significantly. The percentage of teachers thinking of the curriculum as `very well' or `well' matched to pupil needs had dropped from the 1990 figure of 55% to just 24%. The percentage thinking it `not well matched' had risen from 14% to 29%. 3% continued to think it `irrelevant' whilst those believing the National Curriculum to be of `mixed relevance' had risen from 29% to 41%.

As the curriculum requirements for history, geography and other subjects outside the `core' were published during 1991 and 1992, the issues of curriculum overload, over-prescription and inflexibility began to surface as important concerns. The scale, complexity and apparent impracticality of the National Curriculum were debated, marking increasing awareness of the changes as `public issues' rather than as `private troubles' for which individual teachers should accept responsibility (Mills 1959). As challenges to the structure and content of the National Curriculum were made and were debated in public (eg: Campbell et al 1991, Campbell and Neill 1992), teachers were no longer willing to simply regard themselves as being personally deficient in, for instance, subject expertise.

Such concerns were reflected by the 51% of teachers who, in 1992, felt that the National Curriculum restricted their capacity to adapt their teaching to the children's needs. Only 17% had felt this in 1990. Many more teachers also began to feel that their own roles were more constrained: a rise from 24% to 66% between 1990 and 1992.

One teacher recounted her frustration at being forced, as she felt it, to `cover too much content'. She said:

> `I find I have to stick to my timetable much more rigidly than I ever did in the past; it's the only way I can fit everything in.
>
> *Are you changing activities more often, then?*
>
> Very much so, and I don't think it's good for the children. There are often times when an activity is going really well and I know they're enjoying it and I'd like to go on and develop it, but I have to urge them to finish off because there's something else I need them to start. I feel they're getting lots of short bites and that isn't the way I normally like to teach.
>
> *You sound as though you're worried about achieving breadth at the expense of depth?*
>
> Yes, I am. I feel we're being asked to pack so much into each week that I do think we're in danger of being shallow.'

Other teachers made similar statements:

> `I feel far more constrained. We must follow the syllabus and the artistic, creative side is being squeezed out. It's less experimental and creative than it

was once.'

> `The curriculum is so full. Having to teach the whole curriculum I feel there is no choice of topic - we must just fit in with the whole school scheme. I had to teach the Stuart period and we had no resources available, so many schools were teaching the same topic. I find this sort of history very difficult, so abstract. Science is easier because we can create our own resources.'

Considerable doubts and concerns thus remained amongst teachers in the later stages of the implementation of the National Curriculum. Of course, by 1993 both the National Curriculum Council (1993) and national body for school inspection, OFSTED (1993), had recognised similar points and were articulating a fear that curriculum coverage may be compromising the quality of children's learning. Most of the teachers from whom we gathered data knew this much earlier and were sad and frustrated that their professional judgements had been ignored for so long.

There were many other issues about which Key Stage One teachers were concerned in 1992, but which we cannot describe in this paper. Was the primary school curriculum becoming more subject centred? Would the topic-centred approach survive? Were more didactic teaching methods being introduced as result of time pressure? Would the perceived warmth and closeness of teacher-pupil relationships, on which primary school teachers prided themselves, survive the changes?

Evidence on such questions is offered in the full report of the project (Pollard et al 1994). However, we move now to review some major results of our observations of classroom curriculum practice.

1.2 What was the observed content of the classroom curriculum?

This part of the paper draws on findings on curriculum based systematic classroom observation, rather than teacher interview. In one sense, this is likely to be a more objective source of data in that it is based on systematically observed classroom practice. On the other hand it is dependent on the strengths and weaknesses of our observational methods and we are certainly aware of the weaknesses of systematic observation, as well as its strengths (Croll 1986). In fact, there were very few significant discrepancies between teacher perspectives and classroom observations, though we will highlight those that did occur. Overall, we feel that the data sources complement each other in providing a description of curriculum practice.

There are considerable problems in classifying school knowledge and activity so that the balance of the curriculum can be described and we faced this issue very directly in collecting data on the curriculum content of teaching/learning activities. In our observations we used the subject classifications of the National Curriculum to code each six minute period of pupil and teacher observation by `curriculum context'. We could show when single or several subjects were being drawn on by coding `main' or `part' contexts for the activities which had been observed. However, this was by no means easy and researcher judgement was involved. Where there was uncertainty, the classroom teachers were consulted prior to confirming

coding.

The content of the curriculum is a crucially important question, given the explicit aim of the Education Reform Act 1988 that a broad and balanced curriculum should be provided for all pupils. This created a tension for teachers between meeting the requirement to extend the range of subjects offered to all pupils and the perceived need to give a high priority to basic subjects of English and mathematics. Whilst teachers supported the principle of a broad balance curriculum, they felt that the ways in which they were being required to implement it were, in practice, leading to an over-specified and inflexible curriculum.

Table 1 shows the results of our 1990/1, 1991/2 and 1992/3 observations in the 27 classrooms which were observed over the period.

Table 1: **Curriculum subject content**
(Percentage of observed time for main and part curriculum subjects: column percentages)

Source	PACE Systematic observation data					
Sample	9 Y1 classrooms nationally		9 Y2 classrooms nationally		9 Y3 classrooms nationally	
Date	Autumn 1990/1		Autumn 1991/2		Summer 1992/3	
	Main curric	Part curric	Main curric	Part curric	Main curric	Part curric
English	38.3	20.0	34.2	14.1	27.4	28.3
Maths	14.1	10.0	15.9	7.4	19.8	4.0
Science	8.1	9.0	9.3	6.5	9.6	2.3
History	2.8	3.0	0.6	3.1	6.4	8.7
Geog'phy	0.5	1.4	0.4	2.5	1.5	0.2
Tech'ogy	4.6	10.0	5.1	3.9	1.2	2.1
Art	6.2	17.2	2.7	8.8	6.7	3.3
Music	2.8	1.8	3.2	4.7	0.8	0.8
PE	3.0	0.0	3.0	0.6	2.3	0.8
RE	1.8	1.6	4.4	5.3	1.5	1.9
PSE	0.9	8.0	1.5	1.2	0.8	1.7
Non curric	5.3	5.0	6.3	6.0	2.1	2.3
No main curric	11.6	n/a	13.4	n/a	19.9	n/a

Note: Part curriculum observations do not equal 100% as it was possible for several part curriculum contexts to be coded at the same time.

The most noticeable findings here are the dominance of work in English and the preponderance of work in the core National Curriculum subjects and, in particular, English and mathematics. It is noticeable that the proportion of time spent on English as a main curriulum context decreased by a full 10% over the period, which, of course, may also reflect the growing age of the target pupils and their movement from Year 1 work to Year 3 study. The time spent on mathematics has slowly increased over the same period whilst time on science also increased slightly. In both cases, there were signs that these subjects were being taught increasingly as single subjects.

It should be noted too that these aggregated figures conceal considerable variations between the classrooms studied in different schools during each period of data-gathering. For instance, in 1990/1 maths as a main curriculum context occupied just 9% of the observation periods in one school but over 20% in another. English occupied a range between 23% to almost 66%.

In the 1990/1 interviews, many teachers had said that they were teaching more science. However, in each of the three years for which data are available science was observed as the main curriculum content for less than 10% of the time. This figure for science has been relatively stable. Historical and geographical content was rarely visible until the 1992/3 figures for History which, following the publication of National Curriculum orders, suggest that the subject was not only being taught for 6% of the time itself, but was also being used for significant amounts of cross-subject work.

How justified were apprehensions that the National Curriculum would threaten children's experience of art and music? In 1990/1, art and music formed the main curriculum content for 6% and 3% of the time respectively, certainly not large proportions, though art was very often combined with other subject work. Our 1991/2 data showed a halving of art, both as a main curriculum context and as a part curriculum context. This perhaps reflects a particular vulnerability of this subject within a curriculum which was becoming progressively more packed with the subject-content requirements of more highly prioritised subjects. However, by 1992/3 National Curriculum orders for art had been published and more art was again observed. However, the use of art across subjects had continued to decline. Art was recorded as part curriculum in only 3.3% of observations, compared with over 17% in 1990/1. Music seems to have vulnerable throughout, though it still remains, perhaps through the protection afforded it by timetabled hall and resource allocations.

The very small proportion of time spent in religious education is deceptive, since observations were not recorded during school assemblies. Those assemblies which were attended by members of the research team were often used as opportunities for general reflections on behaviour, kindness and cooperation, for promoting social values and for emphasising the academic standards of the school community. The `good work' of pupils was often highlighted. Sometimes there was more explicit religious education. Most assemblies were regularly complemented by singing of appropriate hymns and songs and with prayers. This was so in mono-cultural schools, as well as in those with mixed ethnic populations. The exceptions, not unexpectedly, were the two Roman Catholic Aided schools in our sample. In

these schools religious instruction was very explicit and provided the focus of curriculum work for significant proportions of time. In 1991/2 the recorded time spent on religious education doubled, but fell back again in 1992/3. The rise could reflect statements made by a Government minister just prior to data collection.

The variations between subjects which were found were probably only to be expected at a time of progressive implementation of a new national curriculum structure and it would be unwise to make too much of them without further evidence. However, they do illustrate the compromises which have been made to `fit in' the National Curriculum.

In particular, they document the very small proportions of curriculum time which teachers felt able to allocate to some subjects. Indeed, curricular breadth and balance were hard to provide given the extent of specification of subject content. Having said that though, we should note that there is nothing unusual in such patterns. Indeed, a recent international comparison of primary curricula in 70 countries (Meyer, Kamens and Benavot 1992) shows that the officially planned distribution of time in many countries is similar to these observed findings for infant schools in England, perhaps, if anything, with a little more physical education and aesthetic education (art and music) and a little less language work.

The PACE results show considerable continuities with previous research and HMI findings in the UK. A recent review of such work by Campbell and Emery (1994) provides the following summary table, Table 2, in which 'basics' refers to the combination of English and mathematics.

Table 2 **Proportions of time spent on 'basic' subjects and other subjects in a range of research studies** (extended from Campbell and Emery, 1994)

Percentage of curriculum time spent on:

	Basic subjects	Other Subjects
Bassey 1977 Junior	54	46
Bennett et al 1980 Infant	53	25
Bennett et al 1980 Junior	48	39
Galton et al 1980 Junior	49*	51
DES Primary Staffing Survey 1987 Junior	49	51
Tizard et al 1988 Infant	52*	40
Alexander 1992 Primary	52	48
Campbell and Neill 1992 Infant	51	39
Campbell and Neill 1994) Junior	49	45
Meyer et al 1992 Primary/Elementary	50	50
PACE 1990/1, Year 1, Infant	52	48
PACE 1991/2, Year 2, Infant	50	50
PACE 1992/3, Year 3, Junior	47	53

* Recalculated by Campbell and Emery from original sources.

Research findings are thus very consistent about the proportions of curriculum subject coverage in England. Taken overall, there is certainly no evidence that basic subjects were being neglected in the sample schools. The so called 'three R's' of reading, writing and arithmetic were dominant. Perhaps it should also be explicitly stated that this empirical research, provides no justification for the view that children in English infant schools spend large proportions of their time in unfocused, undirected play.

1.3 Summary

Overall then, our evidence suggests that teachers perceived considerable changes in the curriculum in the early years of primary school, though in terms of observed proportions of time, our data suggest considerable continuities with previous practices. Teachers certainly felt more constrained. In terms of the mode of curriculum delivery, data on which are presented in the book (Pollard et al 1994), our two major data sources are very consistent. They document an increase in the teaching of single subjects and a move away from teaching thematically, by subject combination.

Following a sustained period of criticism from teachers and many other pressure groups, in 1993 the Government conceded that the National Curriculum was indeed overloaded. The Government appointed Sir Ron Dearing to conduct a review and to recommend cuts in content and simplifications in the structures and forms of assessment. It is interesting to consider how our empirical findings relate to the proposed changes.

The Dearing Report (Dearing 1993) recommended that English and maths should take up 45.2% of the curriculum at Key Stage 1, rather than the higher figure of just over 50% which has been found by previous research, including our own. However, there is to be 20% of 'discretionary' time which, though unallocated to particular subjects, is expected to provide opportunities for the development of 'basic skills'. Concentration on these is not only likely because of old established traditions of curriculum which were established in the last century, but also because the assessment procedures for English and maths will remain relatively tight. The review of the National Curriculum could, in other words, help to reproduce the old curriculum and it remains to be seen whether teachers can really provide the 'broad and balanced' provision which was promised by the Education Reform Act of 1988.

In terms of the title of this paper, which sees change in the classroom curriculum as the 'acid test' of policy intervention, we have to remain doubtful about the results of the legislation. Teachers certainly perceive large changes in the form, delivery and specific content of the curriculum, but the obervational research evidence suggests that it has not changed a great deal in terms of balance and breadth.

What though, of the pupils? Would they care? There are signs that they might.

PART 2 PUPILS AND CURRICULUM

2.1 What were pupil preferences for curriculum activities?

In both the 1990/1 Year 1 interviews and the 1991/2 Year 2 interviews the children in our longitudinal sample were asked to identify curriculum activities which they `liked best' and then which they `liked least'. In both 1990/1 and 1991/2 they were asked to make selections from the set of twelve activities which we had presented to them. Since those activities were not fully comprehensive regarding all infant school activities we cannot treat the data which we had collected as being totally representative. Nevertheless, it does provide powerful indications of children's preferences for different sorts of curricular activities.

For the purposes of this analysis we coded the activity which was named by each child as `most liked' or `least liked'. Table 3 below, provides data on the curricular activities which were most favoured by the pupils.

Table 3 Curricular activities `liked best' by children in Year 1 and Year 2 (percentages)

Source	PACE 1 Child interviews				
Sample	54 Y1 and 54 Y2 children				
Date	Autumn 1990 and Autumn 1991				
	Y1	Y2	Girls	Boys	Overall
Stories	7	4	7	4	6
Reading alone	4	7	9	2	6
Reading lessons	0	0	0	0	0
Writing	6	2	2	6	4
Maths	2	17	9	9	9
Science	0	4	0	4	2
Construction	6	6	0	11	6
Sand	13	0	2	11	6
`Home corner' play	17	6	13	9	11
Painting	20	7	19	9	14
Singing	4	13	9	7	8
PE	22	33	26	30	28
Nothing liked	0	0	0	0	0
Missing	0	2	0	2	1

The most consistently favoured activity was Physical Education. This was liked by boys and girls in both Year 1 and Year 2 and was a first choice for no less than 28% of children. Also clearly favoured were painting and `home corner' play, though, as for sand, their favoured status was strongest when the children were younger. As the children moved from Year 1 to Year 2 the appreciation of maths and singing developed significantly. Girls tended to favour reading, `home corner' play and painting whilst boys prioritised construction activities and sand. Analysis of preferences by pupil attainment showed few differences, `though there was a slight preference for lower achieving pupils to like `home corner' play.

Data on the curriculum activities `least liked' is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 **Curricular activities `liked least' by children in Year 1 and Year 2** (percentages)

Source	PACE 1 Child interviews				
Sample	54 Y1 and 54 Y2 children				
Date	Autumn 1990 and Autumn 1991				
	Y1	Y2	Girls	Boys	Overall
Stories	4	17	15	6	10
Reading alone	9	7	2	15	8
Reading lessons	7	2	6	4	5
Writing	15	15	6	24	15
Maths	15	7	9	13	11
Science	7	15	17	6	11
Construction	11	7	17	2	9
Sand	2	2	4	0	2
`Home corner' play	6	2	0	7	4
Painting	4	6	6	4	5
Singing	6	9	7	7	7
PE	0	2	2	0	1
Nothing liked	13	7	6	15	10
Missing	2	2	2	2	2

Overall the least liked curricular activity was writing, first named by 15% of pupils, followed by maths, science and listening to stories - a finding which made the PACE team immediately wonder about stress on the core subjects of the National Curriculum. The dislike of hearing stories was almost exclusively mentioned by the children when they were in Year 2 and does not undermine the generally positive views of the children when younger. However, there were strong patterns by gender amongst the activities disliked. Girls disliked construction, science and stories much more than boys, whilst boys found writing, reading, maths and `home corner' play more distasteful than girls. Again analysis of pupil attainment revealed no significant differences.

In keeping with the spirit of the early 1990s, we have produced a `league table' of Year 1 and Year 2 pupil preferences. This is based on a rank order of the net score when the percentage `best liked' is set against the percentage `least liked' for each subject in each year. Table 5 sets out the result of this analysis.

Table 5 `League table' of pupils' favoured curricular activities

Source	PACE 1 child interviews	
Sample	54 Y1 and 54 Y2 children	
Date	Autumn 1990 and Autumn 1991	
Rank	Year 1 net rank	Year 2 net rank
1	Physical Education	Physical Education
2	Painting	Maths
3	`Home corner' play	`Home corner' play
4	Sand	Painting
5	Stories	Singing
6	Singing	Reading alone
7	Construction	Construction
8	Reading alone	Reading lesson
9	Reading lesson	Sand
10	Science	Science
11	Writing	Stories
12	Maths	Writing

There are many interesting features of these league tables of pupil preferences. Firstly, we should note that Physical Education occupies the top of both tables whilst writing and science are at the bottom of each. Other curriculum activities which record change of only two places or less are painting, `home corner' play and singing in the upper half, and reading alone, construction and reading lessons in the lower half. The big `success story' was mathematics which rose from twelfth position when the children were in Year 1 to second at Year 2. Conversely, sand and stories fell down the list of pupil preferences as the children aged a year.

It is, perhaps, just as well that recent government policy has not seen pupils themselves as the prime educational consumers in the new market-based model of education which the Education Acts of 1988 and 1993 have introduced. Had this been the case it is apparent that the National Curriculum core subjects would have been significantly skewed off balance at Key Stage One, with the possible exception of maths. Children, on this evidence, would have done a lot of physical education, painting and playing.

However, this is too simple, for we have already seen that over 50% of the observed classroom curriculum was in fact devoted to the basic subjects in both years and there was in fact, *very* little time spent on physical education, painting or play. The children, in other words, seemed to dislike things which they were required to do regularly but would have liked to do more of the occasional activities which, in their experience provided respite from the more normal routines and curriculum diet of classroom life. More detailed reasons for children's perspectives are explored below.

2.2 Why did pupils prefer particular curricular activities?

Two sources of interview data were collected by the PACE team regarding this issue. First, following the identification of `most liked' and `least liked' curricular activities, children were asked `why do you like (the most liked) better than (the least liked)?'. This sought pupil reasoning concerning activities chosen freely but relatively abstractly. A more contextually embedded approach was also used at the start of the pupil interviews in Year 1 and Year 2 when the children were referred to an activity in which they had participated and which the researcher had actually observed earlier. The children were asked, whether they had `liked' or `disliked' doing the activity and to explain the reasons for their answer. The activities around which these latter questions were based were the same as those from which our systematic observation findings were derived and they may be regarded as providing a representative reflection of the Key Stage One curriculum.

Answers to the two questions were analysed using an identical set of codes and, in quantitative terms, the results are shown in Table 6 below. These are provided as percentages of the coded responses for each question.

Table 6 **Pupil criteria for preferred curricular activities** (percentages of codings)

Source	PACE 1 child interviews
Sample	54 Y1 and 54 Y2 children
Date	Autumn 1990 and Autumn 1991
Criterion	Overall preferences
Success/ease	27
Interest	24
Fun	18
Activity	13
Educational	5
Other	7

Six major pupil criteria for evaluating curricular activities were identified - success/ease, interest, fun, activity, autonomy and long-term education. We discuss them in an order which derives from the degree of pupil or teacher influence which they reflect. Thus, the first two concerns, fun and activity, are particularly influenced by child culture, whilst the last two, success/ease and education, reflect conditions and criteria which very much derive from adult perspectives. Between them, pupil concern for interest and autonomy seem to form an intermediate zone.

Fun

The concept of `having fun' is another important child idea which, for them, seemed to need little explanation. Some things were just `more fun' and for 18% of the children this was the main criterion that they used.

> `'Cos it's more better. Fun.'
>
> `Because it's more exciting.'

However, from the children's answers we can perceive the importance of both being with other children rather than alone:

> `Yes. It's fun because we all do it together.'

`Yes, it's all right. `Cos you can talk to your friends.'

And of being able to move about:

`Better, more fun, more moving about.'

`Fun. We have all the apparatus to play on.'

The former pupil priority is, of course, the origin of the perennial teacher concern with there being `too much talking in class' whilst the latter relates closely to another pupil priority, with autonomy and choice.

Activity

Regarding the pupil criterion which we called `activity' many pupils drew a contrast, which gets right to the point, between physical education and story time.

`'Cos you have to sit down when it's story time and when it's PE you can run around.'

`'Cos you can have a lot of running about in PE and `cos you can't in the book corner.'

Sitting down, for long periods of time, such as we had observed in the whole-class sessions on the carpet, were not favoured:

`Because you have to sit on the carpet and listen or you get told off and you think `Oh dear, this is boring."

`We sit on the floor and I get squashed.'

In contrast, physical education seemed to provide variety, excitement and a sense of challenge and fulfilment for almost all children:

`Because you can run about, go up ladders and swing on the bar and go up the plank. In singing you have to sit still on the floor.'

`Because we're allowed a crash mat out and you can do hand-stands and can jump on the box and there's a climbing frame and a rope to swing on. Science - we have to do lots of sitting down and writing and going round the classroom looking for things.'

Interest

`Interest' was an important criterion, used by 24% of children in describing reasons for their curricular activity preferences. From the pupil comments, it could be associated with `fun' but certainly had an obverse in `boring'. As other researchers have found eg: Goodnow and Burns (1985), boredom is a child concept that seems, to children, to need little explanation and the

pupil use of the concept tended to be brief:

> `'Cos science is writing and we have to write a lot'
>
> `'Cos writing you've just got to write things and grown-ups, like my mum, write all squiggly (shows)'
>
> `I just don't like singing, it's boring'
>
> `The stories can be boring if we all have to listen to them'

More positively, on the other hand, the majority of pupil comments noted aspects of curricular activities that were clearly valued. Some were associated with particular subjects, such as those of the core curriculum.

Regarding English:

> `Yes, I like it when you can go and read. I like the good stories. We've got the books at home'
>
> `Yes, I liked finding out the ideas and I like poems'

Regarding science:

> `Easy question! I like doing the things we do like making a light bulb work with a battery and wire. Writing I don't like because we have to write long stories'
>
> `Yes, you can watch and see what happens and learn something'
>
> `Yes, because I like playing with magnets and I brought a train to school and the back magnets to the front'

More play-orientated activities were also prominent:

> `Because you can play schools and stuff in here. Play with all my friends'
>
> `Because you make things good and you play with the train set'
>
> `Because I like making sand castles when it's wet, ... 'cos I've been down to the seaside before, and last year I done a big sand castle ... and me mum did a big flag so I could do a big flag sand castle and some people played with me and I had a `turtle' spade and bucket and we dig right to the bottom and we found treasure and silver'.

Egan's (1989) argument, that the understanding of young children should be linked, through curriculum, to their interest and facility in fantasy and imagination, takes on a direct significance with play of this sort. The children whom we interviewed confirmed his priority.

Autonomy

Autonomy was coded as the main criteria for 5% of pupil answers, `though it featured as a factor in many other responses. Children recorded statements such as:

> `Because you can play in the sand but you can't in science and writing.'
>
> `It's fun and you can choose what to do.'
>
> `Because you can choose what to dress-up in and it's fun.'
>
> `'Cos you don't have to do so much work and that stuff.'
>
> `Because I can build something I like doing - I built a really good ark.'

Success and ease

`Success/ease' was the primary coding of 27% of pupil responses and there were four major sub categories of this code..

First, some children were aware of the problem of *understanding the tasks set and teacher expectations* of them:

> `I don't know what to make and what not to make'
>
> `Yes. When Miss tells me to do it, I like it.
>
> In science it's a bit hard 'cos sometimes you don't know what you are doing it in'.

Second, there was the issue of just *how hard tasks or activities were to complete*. There was a variety of views across curriculum subjects and activities but the calculation appeared to concern maximising the product for a given effort. There was a hint of the need for children to meet teacher-set work quotas or targets here, but also the theme of intrinsic fulfilment from learning itself:

> `Maths is easier because if we get our writing really spidery we have to write it all again; in maths we don't - we just rub out the answers and write them again. Reading is easy 'cos I could read when I was three. I like singing because of learning Christmas songs.'
>
> `Because, well, I like doing maths and they're easy. Writing is more difficult because I have to keep on going to get words from Miss.'
>
> `Because I sometimes get it really quickly done. I got 10 sums done in 5 minutes which are hard ones. Writing takes me a long time because the spellings trouble me

and I can't rush it. Miss wants it done quick.'

`'Cos writing and reading is my favourite things at school. `Cos at reading you don't have to do any sums, you just write the letters.'

Third, was pupil awareness of *the importance of success*. On this, they were concerned with their personal performance in both absolute and relative terms. For instance, some appreciated their attainment in itself:

`Yes. I like adding in my head. Getting the right answer: That's what I like.'

`I quite liked it. `Cos I knew all the answers - one of them was so easy - it was two add two.'

`Yes, I like getting on hard books.'

Fourth, was pupil knowledge of their *achievements in relation to others* in their classes, and the status that this gave them.

`Miss said mine was excellent. She gave me one of the hardest - Simon had the hardest. Because it looks like a tortoise.'

`Because I like - it isn't really a contest, but I like feeling if you want to win you can do a lot and if you don't win you can say, `well, I don't mind."

Education

The 5% of occasions when long-term educational reasons were cited by the children is a low figure but perhaps one which would be expected from children so young. Their perceptions were of a relatively generalised sort - something good was being done to them:

`Yes, 'cos I like learning how to add all these things up and I wouldn't know all these things if I don't go to school'

`Yes. I think they're good for you - you learn'

An interpretation

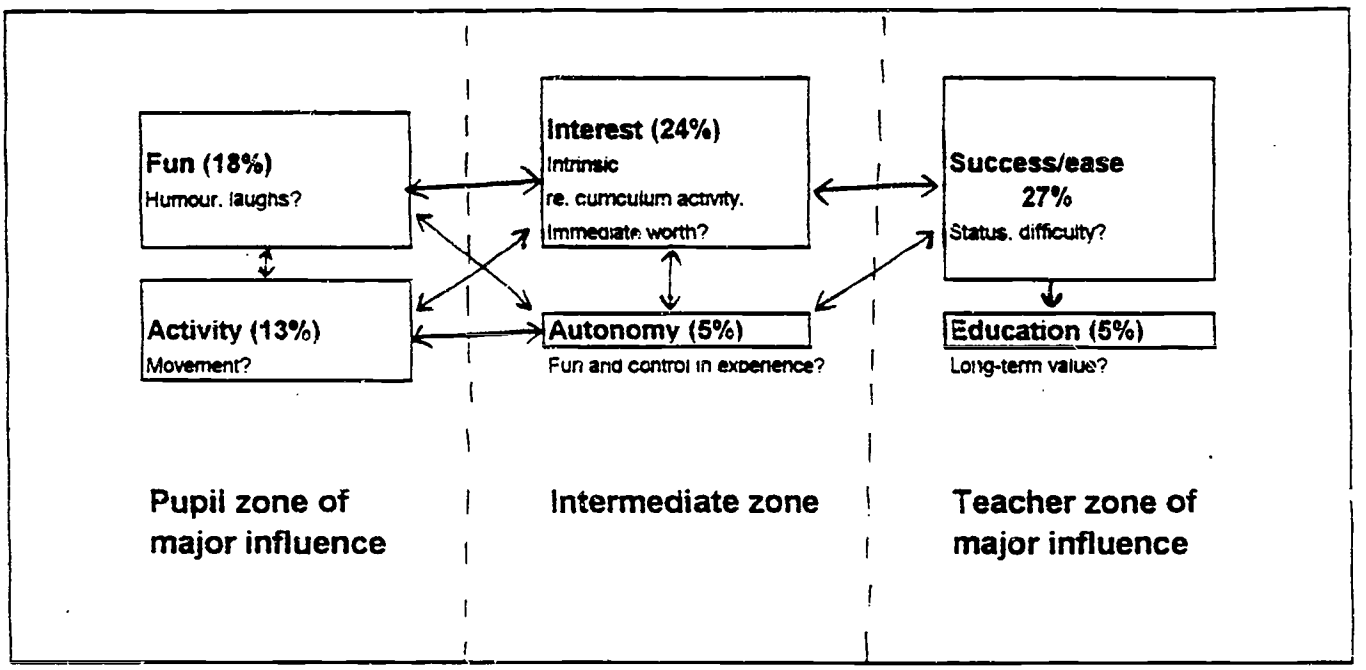
Our interpretation of these data relates to the context of power relationships between pupils and teachers in classrooms. As one of us has argued (Pollard 1985), pupils seek to cope in primary school classrooms by juggling major interests-at-hand. Primary pupil interests can be identified as the maintenance of self-image, enjoyment, control of stress and the retention of dignity and these are satisfied by the enabling interests of peer group membership and learning.

Each pupil, in other words, has to satisfy three main parties - themselves, their peers and

significant adults. Different pupils adopt particular strategies for doing this, as we shall explore fully in future books from the PACE project.

In aggregated and analytical terms however, we can relate pupil criteria for evaluating curricular activities to the zone of major influence of pupils and teacher respectively - to the power context. This is represented by Figure 1.

Figure 1



This model locates `fun' and `activity' within the pupils' zone of major influence. The criteria relate to the unique sense of humour, mischief and sociability of young children and to the physical energy and developmental stage that sets them apart from adolescents and adults alike. Teachers can neither keep up with children as they climb, skip or run about in physical education or the playground, nor can they appreciate their jokes in the same ways as they do. The activities which relate to these criteria are therefore the children's own. They relate to being a child and to child culture.

Of course, it comes as no surprise to realise that the most popular Key Stage One pupil activities, physical education, painting and `home corner' play, give relatively large scope for fun and activity, whilst less favoured curricular activities, such as writing, tend to be seen as difficult and as a potential source of failure.

In what we have called the `intermediate zone' we have located pupil criteria which identifies the `interest' of the curriculum activity and the degree of autonomy which is provided. Interest is particularly important for, together with its obverse of `boring', it represents a pupil evaluation of the intrinsic and directly experienced, worth of educational activity. As such it is also a pupil concern through which teachers can connect with pupil curiosity and imagination and can thus support them in the moving from the pupil zone of fun and activity towards the more staid goals of the adult curriculum. Nor, it should be said, are pupils unwilling travellers

on this developmental and educational track, particularly if it is achieved in ways which leave them appropriate dignity and autonomy. The latter criterion, although articulated relatively less often than the others, is important for that processual reason. The fact that it was not cited by more than 5% of pupils could, of course, be taken as an indicator that classroom relationships were seen as good by both teachers and children.

The criteria of success/ease is located squarely within the teachers' zone of major influence. Curriculum activities in classrooms yield success or failure, ease or difficulty, depending on the nature of the tasks which the teacher sets and the assessment procedures which they implement. The teacher has power of structuring and decision and the pupil is maximally exposed - hence the very high proportion of children mentioning this criteria. After all, as Blyth (1984) put it, `the curriculum is an *intervention* in a child's development and experience.

Finally we have the criterion which identifies the long-term educational benefits of particular curricular activities. Explicated rarely, it is a good indicator of the extent to which most young pupils do or do not understand the reasons behind the educational experiences to which they are exposed.

2.3 Summary

Overall, our interviews with six and seven year old pupils showed that, whilst they enjoyed many curricular activities, they had strong preferences. Pupils liked activities which offered them interest, success, activity and fun. They disliked curriculum activities which produced boredom, difficulty, sitting, listening and writing.

In expressing their concerns in terms of activity and experience the children reflected the meaning of the curriculum to them, as primary school children had also done in previous studies. It is unfortunate though that, in general terms and with the possible exception of mathematics, our findings show the core subjects of the National Curriculum were less favoured than activities such as physical education, painting and play which give children more scope for movement and autonomy. At face value, this would seem to suggest that pupil motivation regarding the most important subjects of the curriculum was a concern and that the curriculum as a `planned intervention' was proving inadequate to harness the energy and interest of the children in support of the learning process. Perhaps this is partly true.

However, it would be unfair to make too much of this argument about the `failure' of the English and mathematics curriculum to motivate children because it has probably always been the case. Indeed, it could be argued that the more significant finding from our pupil interviews is that there is very little evidence that the National Curriculum has made any substantial difference at all to the curriculum as it is actually experienced by pupils. Findings from previous research are not strong enough to enable us to be categorical on this, but the criteria that the children used are very consistent with previous research and the understanding of the purposes of tasks (or lack of it) is also as expected. Whilst we cannot say that the children have not been affected by the National Curriculum, we cannot show evidence of any dramatic effects. Pupil perceptions and experiences seem to be much the same as before its introduction. As a child once put it, `School is school and learning is something that they do

:o you.'

CONCLUSION

Findings from the PACE project have shown how teachers supported the principle of the National Curriculum but, as it was progressively implemented, they felt it to be both overloaded with subject content and over prescriptive.

In these circumstances a major objective of the Education Reform Act 1988, of achieving the implementation of a broad and balanced curriculum was not achieved, and despite the renewed effort associated with the Dearing Review, looks unlikely to be achieved. The emphasis on the basic curriculum of English and mathematics remains, and this, we would speculate, will be amplified in future by the publication of standardised assessment results in these subjects.

Of course, the `basics' have been regarded as an essential foundation for education and work since the Industrial Revolution (Alexander 1984). These priorities have been consistently endorsed by many generations of teachers. For instance, King (1978) reported that:

> `There can be no doubt about the primacy that all the teachers gave to ... `the basics' ... `the academic side', or `the three R's. Whereas children could sometimes choose to paint, draw ... or dress up, none could refuse to read, write or do mathematical or number work when asked to do so. Sometimes they could choose when they did these things but never whether they did them.... Of the traditional three R's, reading was given paramount importance.' (1978: 24)

The educational value of breadth was promoted by HMI (eg: DES 1978b) was endorsed by the Educational Reform Act, 1988, and has been reaffirmed by Dearing (1993) in his review. However, we cannot be confident that breadth will be achieved. Whilst the new curriculum content has challenged teachers considerably, the actual proportions of time spent on the basic curriculum has not altered significantly. Certainly there is a little more time spent on science and a little less being spent on art and music, but the key constraint in the creation of a more balanced curriculum is the focus on the basics.

Regarding the pupils, one might say that the National Curriculum has produced remarkably few changes. Expressed succinctly, this reflects the fact that pupils in primary schools have always been under the relatively tight control of teachers and expect to experience a solid diet of reading, writing and mathematics.

The overall effect then, has been of considerable perceived change for teachers, but relatively little measurable change in the time spent on different subjects. For this reason, there has been an element of continuity in terms of pupil experience and perception. For English pupils, schooling is still schooling, whether its form and content is decided at a classroom level or is directed by national policy.

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