The courses or programs of learning offered by an institution of education. A curriculum provides the model for learning, and it includes the goals and objectives of learning. A curriculum also includes criteria for referencing and measuring whether learning goals and objectives have been achieved.

The word ‘curriculum’ comes from the Latin currere, to run, and so links with ‘course’ (as for a race). ‘Curriculum vitae’ is the course of one’s life. The word took on the meaning of a course of study. In schools, it usually means the full range of subjects taught, taken as a whole experience. Nowadays, the curriculum is meant to be ‘broad and balanced’. It should be enhanced in schools by ‘extracurricular’ activities, which are the clubs and trips which pupils can choose to join, beyond the basic curriculum.

The essential forms of the academic curriculum in Britain were set by medieval monasteries and then consolidated by the Elizabethan Grammar Schools, there identified as the exclusive subjects of school study. Fundamental to that education was the principle of inwardness in the relation between the knower and the known. Knowledge was intimately bound to the deep structure of the self; this vital connection is now under threat. Of course as compulsory schooling established itself after 1870, social class differences were soon visible in the curriculum, with the old academic subjects allocated to the managerial and propertied classes and what came to be called the ‘practical’ skills for the working class. Even so, the principle of inwardness – of a personal connection with what one knows and what one does with it – was vehemently taught. Only now is a dislocation of this essential unity becoming apparent, and knowledge is transforming itself into money, divorced from persons and their dedication. Until recently, however varied curricula might have been – and for several decades teachers could pretty well devise their own – there was a shared commitment to knowledge as mattering keenly to those who acquired it.

In 1976, the then prime minister Jim Callaghan made a speech setting out the need for a national curriculum which would provide a common experience for all pupils. One obvious benefit was that children moving schools would be familiar with what was being taught. It was not until 1989 that the ‘National Curriculum Orders’ came into force for Key Stage 1, and 1990 for Key Stages 2–4.

Since 1990, the National Curriculum has been revised at least three times. This has reduced the content of some subjects, but has also added new areas. The 16 subjects are now: art and design, citizenship, design and technology, English, geography, history, information technology, mathematics, modern foreign language, music, physical education, science, religious education, careers education, work-related learning, and personal, social and health education.

This curriculum is compulsory until the end of Key Stage 3 (age 14). What is now called the ‘14–19 curriculum’ has more flexibility, and allows pupils to have more choice. It also introduces vocational subjects. The curriculum at all key stages is still designed to meet the economic needs of society;
nowadays, workers are required to be flexible, technologically adept, independent and creative (without going too far – iconoclasts are not encouraged). There is an emphasis on skills which can be adapted to a range of contexts.

The latest documentation from the QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) gives the following aims for the curriculum – that it should ‘enable all young people to become successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve; confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society’ (working draft, September–December, 2007). These aims cannot be achieved just within lessons. It is the whole-school experience which will produce successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens. This experience includes the atmosphere and environment in school, the way behaviour is managed, relationships between staff and pupils, and opportunities for pupils to make decisions, solve problems and collaborate with each other. Aspects such as these used to be called the ‘hidden curriculum’, and it was recognised that pupils would be influenced by them. Nowadays it is clearly acknowledged that every part of school life affects pupils, and helps to develop their confidence and responsibility – or, if badly managed, turns them off altogether. Some schools plan particularly well for elements such as links with their local community or with the wider world, charity work, or artistic events. All schools are aware of the importance of school dinners, and do their best to encourage a healthy lifestyle. Some schools become beacons of cultural diversity.

As well as the term ‘extracurricular’, which covers all activities outside the timetabled, subject-based curriculum, there is also the term ‘cross-curricular’. This refers to themes or skills which are developed in different subjects across the curriculum, such as literacy, or the use of ICT. These should not be left to chance, but need to be carefully planned, so that all (for example) opportunities to make individual presentations in different subjects are clearly identified. In the case of literacy across the curriculum, all teachers need to be prepared to teach the specific reading and writing skills required in their subject.

FURTHER READING

www.curriculum.qca.org.uk
www.curriculumonline.gov.uk


APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA
