

Learning from the obsession with standards-based education

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Education reform based on standards has galvanized considerable international discussion and debate, particularly concerning measurement and testing, performance standards, international comparisons and accountability.

This article is based on reflections from more than 20 years experience of working with standards and nationally managed curricula in England and Wales. It discusses some of the issues raised, explains how and why the UK is finally moving away from these concepts and asks educators in the German-language world to question why they are embarking on what is a failed political concept.

1 Schools and standards

People who talk about educational *standards* use the term in different ways¹. Sometimes they refer to guidelines for teaching, the implication being that the way it is done should be changed in order to improve the quality of learning. In contrast, raising educational standards can be taken to mean that pupils should know more, do more, and that schools should do better. The former encourages a teacher-centred approach to improving education in a creative and innovative way. The latter implies competition, systems of testing and evaluation of competences, and top-down control. The assumption made through standards is that schools are failing many of their students and the taxpayers who are paying for education are not getting *value for money* from the system.

Standards in school education has swept through school systems around the world (Schmidt et al. 2009). It appears to have reduced the quality and flexibility of education by establishing meaningless evaluation criteria in an attempt to offer equality through one uniform system for all. Its roots

¹ In Österreich wird im Zuge der Implementierung von Bildungsstandards von sogenannten *Regelstandards* ausgegangen. Regelstandards sollen ein mittleres Niveau von Schüler/innenkompetenzen beschreiben, die sowohl über- als auch unterschritten werden können. Das vom BMUKK beauftragte BIFIE (Bundesinstitut für Bildungsforschung, Innovation & Entwicklung des österreichischen Schulwesens) wird ab 2011/12 für die 8. Schulstufe und ab 2012/2013 für die 4. Schulstufe regelmäßig sogenannte Standardüberprüfungen durchführen. Laut BMUKK und BIFIE dienen die Ergebnisse der Standardüberprüfungen der direkten Rückmeldung an die Lehrpersonen, um an Schulstandorten Qualitätsentwicklungsprozesse unterstützen zu können. Eine Koppelung des Outcomes mit zur Verfügung gestellten Ressourcen oder anderen Maßnahmen ist derzeit offiziell kein Thema. Die Bildungsstandards werden im österreichischen Schulwesen derzeit doppelt aufgezäumt: Neben den - an den Nahtstellen abgetesteten - zu erreichenden *Regelstandards* soll nach der Intention des Dienstgebers zukünftig die teilzentrale Reifeprüfung für mehr Vergleichbarkeit am Ende der Sekundarstufe II sorgen. (Anmerkung der Redaktion, Herbert Pichler)

were in Anglo-Saxon countries, specifically in the US and UK. It was unleashed in the name of improving schools and invoked terms such as *tougher standards*, *accountability* and *raising the bar*. Once standards are introduced, the inevitable questions are whose standards should be adopted and what should teachers and students be doing? Unfortunately, the development of standards-based education is founded on the will of decision-makers and administrators, often with little or no understanding of how children learn or the important roles that teachers play in the education process. As a result, standards-based education is normally based on heavy-handed, top-down, test-driven versions of school reform that lowers the rich diversity of education. In the case of Geography teaching it could lead to a very distorted view of the world.

Standards systems also involve the development of systems of evaluation and measurement criteria. In the literature, the dominant vision of standards-based education assumes that the world is flat and all children and schools should be equal. Evaluation is normally based on what is defined as *suitable* or *good enough* in a school rather than on *excellence and achievement*, where the results are usually related to average performance scores on prescribed tests. These tests may be constructed with little thought of what is most important for the pupils to achieve and which reveal little about those qualities most valued in society, such as creativity, organisation and teamwork. There must also be suitable methods of gathering evidence on learning outcomes and disseminating them. To address this situation, suitable quality measures and excellence criteria need to be carefully identified and defined by experts. Portfolios of achievement and transcripts of outcomes should be developed rather than test scores. This process should lead to considerable discussion and informed debate concerning what is essential in geographical education and how we should evaluate and record its achievement.

2 Has the concept of standards-based education been successful?

Alfie Kohn (1999), in his book "The Schools Our Children Deserve", discusses five major problems resulting from standards-based education. These are:

- 1. *Motivation*. Standards assume that students constantly think about improving performance and achievement is all that counts. This undermines their interest in learning, the quality of learning they do and the introduction of challenging and innovative approaches to education.
- 2. *Pedagogical approach*. Most standards documents contain long lists of specific facts and skills that all students at a particular level will be expected to master. The pedagogy prepares learners for the tests and assessment and tries to pour knowledge down their throats. This is far removed from pupil-centred learning that is needed to support students.
- 3. *Assessment of standards*. In practice, *excellence*, *higher standards*, and *raising the bar* all relate to scores on standards tests. Many of those used are multiple-choice, norm-referenced, and otherwise flawed. The effect is that teachers teach to the tests, rather than on the learning processes that should be taking place. This de-professionalises the teaching profession. In other words the sole aim is to improve test scores and not the welfare of the pupils concerned. Such testing and the subsequent use of league tables is a serious indictment of school reform that relies on these tests to evaluate the state of education.

- 4. *Improvement and progress*. Standards-based education implies that we can judge progress on simple tests. It makes the assumption that what is being done is suitable and that progress is based on doing it harder, longer and stronger. It is not a reflective process and assumes that teachers do not know what their pupils need.
- 5. *School reform*. Standards-based education has an inclination towards specifying exactly what must be taught and learned, resulting in a curriculum that is highly prescriptive and does not take account of the specific nature or context in which the school is based or the needs of the pupils. It assumes *one curriculum for all* and tight control over what happens in classroom by people who are not in classroom. Such reform is normally misinformed and ill advised.

Standards-based education has not been successful because it is based on the suggestion that there is a perceived problem with the learning that takes place in schools, i.e. that the quality of education is not good enough and schools are not performing. It also assumes that learning can be measured at specific points in time, determined external to the learning system. This leads to a misanalysis of the causes of perceived under-performance and a simplistic prescription for improvement that, according to educators, frequently ends up doing more harm than good.

Standards-based education is also detrimental to the role and status of schools and teachers in society. That is why, in countries where they have been used, most educators are alarmed at what has become the dominant model of school reform. This is because using standards ignores the diversity among students and forces them to conform to a single approach to learning. Its effect has been to wipe out much of the most innovative teaching and learning of the best teachers and schools.

3 What lessons should be learned?

There have been shorter and longer-term responses to standards-based education. In the short-term though individual teachers are encouraged to prepare students for the assessments in a worthwhile and creative fashion, they are however advised to mainly focus on *the real learning* that needs to take place. Groups of teachers in a school or via the work of the Geography subject associations discussed strategies together and supported one another with ideas and best practice. However, creatively preparing students for bad standards-based education and evaluation does not help change the situation.

In the long-term more *political* forms of action have been required. In the UK, since the 1980's standards-driven education has been founded on a centrally developed national curriculum and testing system based on judgment and competition, conformity and obedience to *outside* authority, a system according to Moorman (2009), based on shame, fear and punishment. The rhetoric of *standards* and *competences* turned schools into giant test-centres, so that the Ministry of Education could compare schools with one another and produce national league tables primarily based on assessment scores. The result has been to remove any form of intellectual enquiry from the classroom, as teachers have been increasingly pressured to *teach to the tests*. This in turn undermined enthusiasm for learning and the desire to develop and use stimulating activities.

Curriculum change to make space for standards and their evaluation reduces the amount of classroom time available for relevant subjects like Geography. In many European countries like Italy, Sweden and Greece it has increasingly forced secondary school Geography to the margins.

In 2006, the former UK Education Secretary David Blunkett was forced to admit that despite nearly a decade of standards policy and significant investment it would take billions of pounds and at least another ten years for secondary schools to see any noticeable improvements. Teacher's unions and professional subject associations initiated a campaign against standards and testing. This eventually had an impact when in the Summer 2010, approximately one-third of Primary School Head Teachers refused to implement the government tests in their schools. This was despite the fact that they are employed as civil servants.

An education system that was not able to generate generations of creative lifelong learners for the workforce caused the government to set plans in motion to transform the National Curriculum into one that would be more suitable for the future needs of the country. In 2009, plans for Curriculum 2020 were announced (QCA, 2009) and details published for consultation (Figure 1).

The new curriculum seeks to create a new era in education, moving away from standards-driven practice. Curriculum 2020 is described as a holistic approach to curriculum planning defined through the entire planned learning experience and underpinned by a broad set of common values and purposes. It could be considered to be a time of awakening founded on trusting the professionalism of teachers, enabling learning, allowing choice and recognising individual needs and the power of the learners themselves. The reasons why different subjects are important in meeting the overall aims of the curriculum were considered in the curriculum, with the aim of making learning highly relevant active rather than passive events. The developments specifically encouraged field trips and study outside classrooms in an effort to get pupils to understand how curriculum subjects are related to the real world. Schools and teachers were finally to be allowed to create their own curricula for their own classes. The goals are to encourage pupils to become more enthusiastic about learning and to produce successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens (Figure 1). The new curriculum has not yet been implemented following the change in government at the election in May 2010.

In the US, where standards-based education has dominated for more than 20 years, parents, educators and students have been uniting to oppose it for the sake of improving the type of education on offer. Some of their campaigns can be seen at www.fairtest.org, www.susanohanian.org, www.pencilsgdown.org and www.nomoretests.com. The standards agenda has also been positively used to fight for Geography so that it can have its place in the school curriculum by geographical organisations like the National Council for Geographic Education (<http://www.ncge.org>).

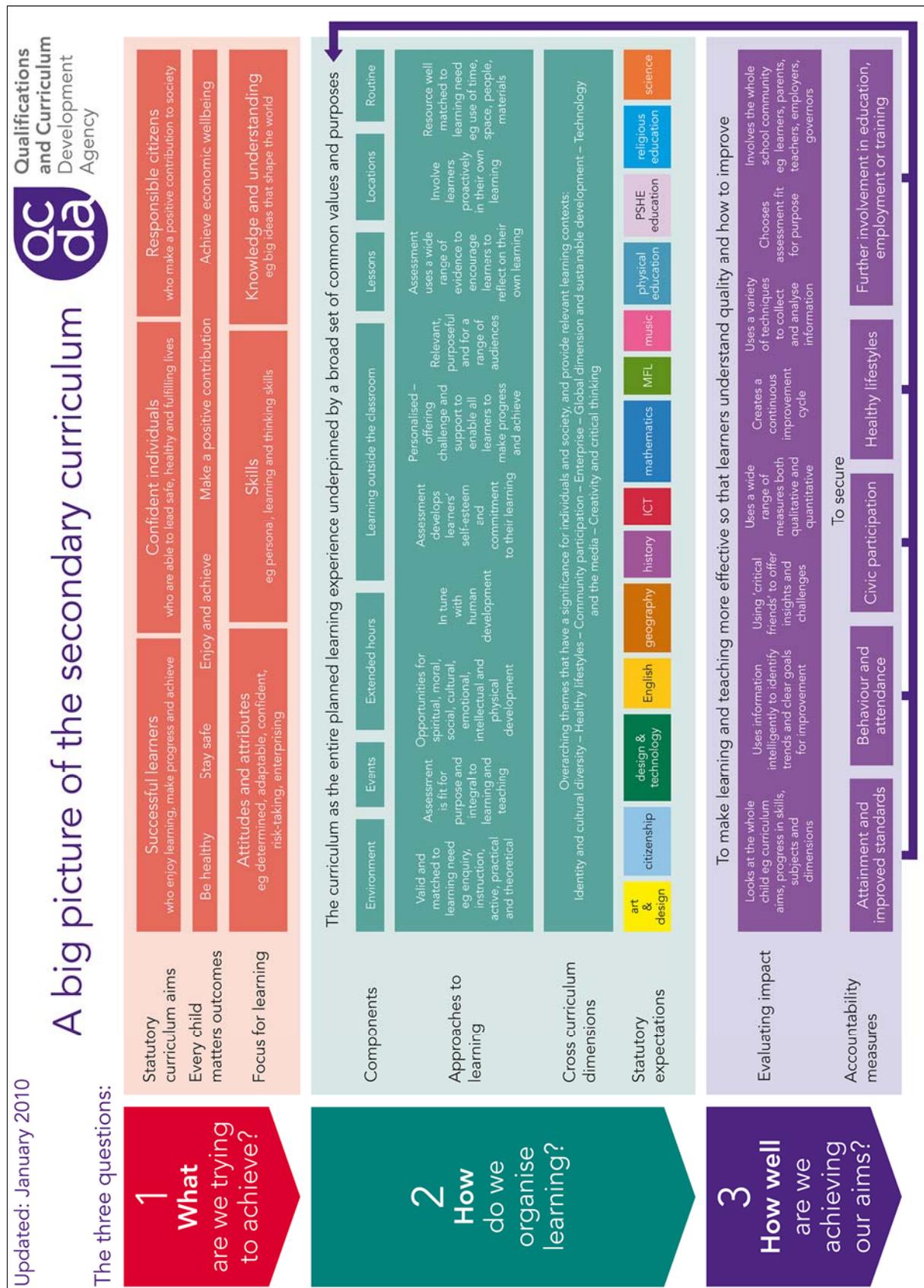


Figure 1: Plans for the UK Secondary School curriculum (see <http://www.ttrb.ac.uk/viewarticle2.aspx?contentId=13333> / Available from http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/uploads/BigPicture_sec_05_tcm8-15743.pdf).

4 Conclusions

"Standardization of our educational systems is apt to stamp out individualism and defeat the very ends of education by leveling the product down rather than up." Harvey Cushing (1869-1939)

All of us working in education recognise that it is impossible to create a single set of standards that would serve every child. Such standards also fail to get to the roots of problems in education and prevent significant improvements in our schools. The reality is that pupils need to be set free from the confines of rigid, age-based grading in order to allow them to achieve their potential and encourage them to progress as quickly as they are able. We therefore need to develop a Geography curriculum that encourages exploration and enquiry and which allows teachers to create suitable and relevant learning environments in their classrooms and beyond.

As German-speaking countries adopt standards-based education, teachers should ask why they are being told to follow this failed political agenda, which does not focus on the knowledge, skills and understanding that young people need to acquire to compete in a global economy.

5 References

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