

## Do we need a national curriculum?

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Do we need a national curriculum? This question has not been the subject of much debate beyond some university settings during the current round of curriculum reform. This is probably because a national curriculum has been part of our education system since the Education Act of 1877, and the concept, with its links to the notion of an ideal egalitarian society involving equal opportunity, is now so firmly embedded in our views about schooling that to consider an education system without a national curriculum has become unthinkable. But should it be?

The argument against having a national curriculum is that such a curriculum denies students control over their own learning. By stipulating what is to be learnt, and when, a national curriculum requires students to study concepts which, individually, they may (i) know about already, (ii) not be ready for, or (iii) have no interest in. With respect to the second of these, there is the danger that the curriculum will drive teachers to move students to more and more difficult concepts simply because the students have aged.

One proponent of the non-national curriculum argument is New York State Teacher of the Year for 1991, John Taylor Gatto (1992, p.20) who envisaged a system "...in which students volunteer for the kind of education that suits them" and have access to many different types of schools, some teaching very specialised skills. I have some first-hand experience to illustrate this. Recently I taught an adult woman Level 6 geometry. She said that she had struggled to succeed at mathematics throughout her entire school career. All her life she had wanted to be a gardener, not a mathematician, but gardening was not in the curriculum. Eventually she left school, got an education and became a gardener.

Now she wanted to be a landscape designer and needed to understand trigonometry. She mastered this in four hours.

### Reference

Gatto, J.T. (1992) *Dumbing us down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.