


# **“Are you on slide 8 yet?”**

The impact of standardised curricula  
on teacher professionalism

Report for the National  
Education Union (NEU)



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# Executive summary

## “Are you on slide 8 yet?”

### The impact of standardised curricula on teacher professionalism

#### Project aims

In this report we seek to develop a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of teachers' experience and use of standardised curricula. By standardised curricula we mean units/schemes of work, programmes or packages that are ready for teachers to follow in teaching. This includes a wide range of practices including materials self-generated in-house (in an individual school or across a group of schools) and content that is provided by external third parties (such as educational publishers). In some cases, materials are used by teachers in a loose and flexible manner, while in other contexts teachers are expected to adhere very closely to the standardised curriculum design. In the international literature the latter are sometimes referred to as 'scripted curricula'.

#### Our aims in this study are to:

- establish the extent of the use of standardised curricula across primary and secondary schools;
- understand the ways in which teachers experience and evaluate standardised curricula;
- understand the relationship between the use of standardised curricula and the quality of teachers' working lives and in particular their perceptions of autonomy, self-efficacy and workload;
- gain, within this broader framework, an understanding of teachers' responses to the Oak National Academy. Oak National Academy provides a particular kind of

standardised curriculum that has been developed with government support and significant public funding and so there is a public interest argument for focusing on this case.

The data is based on a survey completed by 1655 teachers, interviews with 40 teachers (conducted individually and in focus groups), and a documentary analysis of both policy papers and Oak curriculum resources.

#### Context

For much of the twentieth century teachers in England experienced relatively high levels of autonomy in relation to curriculum design and lesson planning. This was a situation that changed substantially when the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced the national curriculum, and then again in the early 2000s when a Labour government introduced national strategies for literacy and numeracy. In this report we suggest that the period since 2014 can be considered as a 'third wave' of central government intervention into the school curriculum, with publication of the most recent iteration of the national curriculum framework. Alongside the new national curriculum, and its focus on 'core knowledge,' particular pedagogical approaches were promoted, linked to research in the cognitive sciences. Curriculum, test and exam specifications and new approaches to teacher education entailed a greater specification of both content knowledge and pedagogy. In this context there has been an increased use of standardised curricula in schools.

To date, despite these developments, there has been little research that looks at teachers' experience of using these curricula. This research seeks to address that gap in current knowledge.

## Summary of key findings

The summary below represents findings from the project survey, from individual and focus group interviews with teachers, and from an analysis of a range of documents including policy documents and curriculum materials.

### Usage, autonomy, self-efficacy

- Standardised curricula, broadly defined, are used in some form by 90 per cent of primary teachers and 54 per cent of secondary teachers. In the primary sector the most common usage is in Maths and English, but there is also significant usage in subjects such as languages and music.
- There is a wide range of providers of standardised curricula. At secondary school level the most popular (76 per cent of respondents) are those produced 'in-house', either at the level of an individual school or across a group of schools, e.g. a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). (This was also the third most common type of such curricula at primary level (27 per cent of respondents). Oak National Academy usage was identified as low (3 per cent) when compared to other third-party providers.
- Teachers who use standardised curricula reported a reduced sense of professional autonomy. In the areas of teacher decision-making and exercising professional judgement both primary and secondary teachers reported reduced autonomy in relation to all the indicators provided in the survey, particularly in relation to control over 'course content' and 'content of individual lessons. More than a third of primary school teachers (34 per cent) said that they had little or no influence on content of individual lessons. The influence

of external assessments on lesson content was seen as significant in both secondary and primary sectors. 67 per cent of secondary and 52 per cent of primary teachers said that external assessment had a lot of influence on the content of their lessons.

- Teachers in the primary sector reported that senior leaders were the principal influence on curriculum content (with significantly more influence than classroom teachers), while in the secondary sector middle leaders assumed this role (again, with significantly more influence than classroom teachers).
- Across all survey respondents, teachers who did not use standardised curricula reported significantly higher levels of autonomy than those who did use standardised curricula.
- Teachers of non-standardised curricula reported higher levels of self-efficacy in relation to both instructional and engagement self-efficacy, i.e. these teachers were more confident of their ability to both teach effectively and interest and motivate students.

### Workload

A poor perception of workload was a common issue across all respondents, and was not determined by use, or non-use, of standardised curricula. There were no significant differences between the workload perceptions of non-standardised curriculum users and standardised curriculum users. This finding applied to both primary and secondary teachers, and to both full and part-time teachers.

- Workload' emerged from the study as a highly complex issue that cannot be reduced to a simplistic notion of 'hours worked'. Curriculum design and lesson planning are clearly activities that require time. However, if these are activities that

teachers value, then trying to remove these activities from teachers to tackle workload issues does not necessarily tackle the 'work strain' that teachers experience.

- It may also be the case that standardised curricula have not reduced teacher workload, but have simply changed its nature. Instead of spending time researching material and selecting resources, teachers are spending time interpreting and adapting generic materials to meet the needs of their pupils.
- The interviews suggested that teachers saw standardised curricula as having positive uses that were limited and precise: to cover for absence, to compensate for a lack of specialist knowledge, to reduce aspects of workload, and to mitigate the problems of high teacher turnover. Beyond discussion of these uses, respondents repeatedly expressed concerns about a range of issues related to autonomy, self-efficacy and workload:
  - standardised curricula embodied a lack of trust in teacher expertise;
  - teachers lacked the freedom to adapt standardised curricula to meet the particular needs of their pupils;
  - standardised curricula functioned as a control mechanism to monitor teachers' work;
  - practices of collaborative and flexible planning were being replaced by standardised commercial or in-house curriculum packages 'imposed from above';
  - standardised curricula posed risks to the quality of students' school experiences. In particular they did not sufficiently engage or challenge students and did not work for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The data leads us to conclude that there is a significant difference between, on the one hand, the justifications for standardised curricula offered by national policymakers and the managements of some MATs, and on the other, the experiences and perceptions of teachers. This is a gap which can only be closed by encouraging open professional discussion and independent research – and by making the views of teachers more central to curriculum policy-making.

### **Summary of issues relating to Oak National Academy:**

Oak National Academy provided a case study of a standardised curriculum for this project. It was chosen because the initiative received considerable support from the previous government, including substantial public funding. In making the case to develop Oak National Academy the Department of Education (DfE) identified benefits in relation to quality of teaching and impacts on teacher workload.

Oak National Academy is currently being reviewed by the DfE. The review is led by the Chief Executive of [LocatED](#), a 'non-departmental public body' which works with the DfE on the acquisition and management of its education estate. The review is concerned with questions of efficacy, governance, efficiency and accountability, without a strong curriculum focus.

A summary of our research indicated:

- Teacher take-up of Oak National Academy is low. In the survey just over 3 per cent of respondents indicated they followed Oak as a curriculum plan. Most use was occasional and infrequent.
- The most common uses were to provide material for cover lessons (when a teacher is absent), to support students with attendance issues and to support colleagues teaching outside of their subject area. In this sense, there is a limited claim

that Oak contributes to building system resilience, as per the business case that was made to support Oak, and which was developed by the DfE under the last government.

- Oak materials are not being used in the way that was presented in the DfE's business case. The business case argued teachers needed a coherent, appropriately sequenced curriculum plan. However, our research demonstrates that where teachers use Oak materials at all, they do not use them in the way presented in the DfE's business case, that is as a whole, sequenced curriculum plan. Our reading of Oak's curriculum materials does not support the claims that they are of '[high quality](#)' and represent '[great design](#)' (Oak's own claims).
- Given the very limited number of Oak users that were revealed in the survey, our data does not allow us to make definitive claims about the benefits of using Oak on workload. Workload advantages were identified among some survey respondents, but it is not possible to claim these are specific to Oak. Workload benefits may pertain to other standardised curricula or more general benefits deriving from increased collaboration in relation to curriculum planning. We identified no evidence to support the substantial claims Oak makes in relation to workload gains, namely that using Oak materials reduces teachers' working week by 4 hours.

### **Standardised curricula: emerging issues**

As the findings from our research indicate, standardised curricula have become a common feature of the English school system – their use appears to be increasing.

Survey respondents, as well as the teachers we interviewed, recognised potential benefits that arise from the use of standardised curricula when they are adopted and applied

in specific circumstances. For example, many teachers recognise the benefits of a level of consistency in curriculum planning, to improve transitions or to make it easier to cover for absences. Teachers also understood that there ought to be workload benefits from not having to generate one's own materials.

However, both in the survey and in the interviews, teachers expressed a desire to retain meaningful control over their own work. Teachers value the benefits of working collegially and collaborating in the design of materials. However, teachers' involvement in this process needs to be meaningful, and individual teachers want to be able to use and adapt such resources flexibly to be able to respond to the needs of the students in the classroom.

When devising and using standardised curricula, careful thought needs to be given to ensuring benefits are maximised and disadvantages are minimised. Where this is not the case, our research indicates the costs are substantial. Teachers believe they are not able to develop a curriculum which engages learners and matches their needs. Job satisfaction suffers as professional autonomy is restricted and self-efficacy is diminished. As our research indicates, all of these problems can arise – without any discernible improvements in workload.

In its most acute form, we believe it is important to recognise a tendency towards the 'taylorisation' of teaching. Taylorism refers to a particular way of managing a work process, in which managers specify in detail on how any work task is to be performed, and the employee is required to follow this process without deviating from it. Teachers experience this when they are excluded from any meaningful involvement in curriculum design and even lesson planning, and are simply expected to deliver a pre-prepared plan. These developments are internalised by teachers as a form of de-skilling that denudes them of their ability to draw on the full repertoire of their professional expertise.



The approach stands at odds with international research evidence that highlights the need for a high skill, appropriately qualified teacher workforce. This study does not allow us to assess with precision to what extent these practices exist, but we can say with confidence that they are common, and our literature review suggests that there is good evidence that they may be increasing. Such trends have significant consequences for capacity in the school system, and the possibilities that may exist for education in the future.

## Recommendations

Based on the research offered in this report we set out the following recommendations. All our recommendations are rooted in the conviction that teachers should possess the capacity for curriculum design, a skill that requires deep curriculum knowledge that should be valued and nurtured. Dismissing, diminishing, and sometimes denying such skills has a negative impact on teachers' professional autonomy, it erodes their sense of self-efficacy and the quality of their working lives is worsened as a consequence.

Our recommendations are prefaced by a call for more open debate. Many of the developments described in this report arise from initiatives that are far removed from public discussion, whether within the education sector or beyond. A genuinely public education service requires much more open discussion about policy than is typically experienced in the English school system.

## Recommendations to central government

- Curriculum development has suffered from excessive political intervention and from being subject to the personal priorities of politicians. Curriculum responsibilities should be transferred to a public body that is independent from government, and that has broader representation from subject associations, university researchers and teachers' organisations.
- In this context, the review of Oak National Academy, as a DfE initiative associated with the 2019-24 Conservative governments, should be broadened to include a particular focus on the quality of its curriculum offer and its impact on teaching and learning. Set against the original business case, and its current levels of usage as the findings of our research suggest, Oak is a poor return on public funds invested.
- Policy needs to be genuinely evidence-informed. This would involve engaging the teaching profession, its subject associations and trade unions and the whole research community in discussions about curriculum design and pedagogical approaches. Policy on something as fundamental as the national curriculum should not be based on the selective use of favoured research findings.
- The current Curriculum and Assessment Review should open the way to a thorough review and rethinking of curriculum practice drawing on a wide range of research, and undertaken by a diversity of researchers and organisations. The review should be seen as the first stage in a longer-term project. Change is required, and fear of further change in a system that has already experienced upheaval cannot be a justification for not making essential reforms.
- Our research has identified significant problems with the use of standardised curricula when used as scripts for teachers to follow. They work against teacher autonomy and self-efficacy. In some cases, they do not effectively implement principles of inclusive education. In others, they do not engage and motivate students. In this light the Curriculum and Assessment Review should specifically consider the use, effects and value of standardised curricula.
- Teacher education, and on-going professional development, need to help teachers develop their curriculum

design and lesson planning skills as an essential element in teachers' repertoire of professional skills. In this study several teachers questioned whether current approaches to teacher education adequately prepared new entrants for the complexity of their role. Against this background, recent reforms of teacher education should also be reviewed.

- Performance-based accountability and greater external control of processes of teaching and learning have adverse effects on teacher well-being and motivation as well as on the engagement of learners. Reviewing accountability demands in schools, including the very considerable impact of Ofsted, should be a priority.
- There should be a review of working arrangements to prioritise activities that add value to quality teaching and learning, and ensure such activities are not crowded out by low value activities, often driven by excessive accountability demands, that distract from teaching and planning teaching.

### **For consideration by Local Authorities, Multi-Academy Trusts and individual schools**

- Teachers who do not use standardised curricula feel more autonomous than standardised curricula users and have higher self-efficacy. Local authorities, schools and trusts must recognise this and treat teachers as curriculum makers. They should encourage meaningful collaborative and collegial approaches to curriculum design and planning at subject and department level, in which all relevant staff are confident that they have a stake. They should encourage teacher discretion over the use of curriculum materials.
- Professional development should draw from teachers' experience, professional knowledge and research perspectives. Teachers should be encouraged and funded

to engage in professional development as a basis for enhanced professional autonomy and self-efficacy. Teacher-organised activity, school programmes, university courses and those run by training organisations all have the potential to develop teachers' practice. All teachers need to be supported to engage with research from a range of traditions. Teachers need to act as critical participants in a research process, and not be treated as passive and uncritical recipients of research that others have decided as 'what works'.

### **For consideration by the National Education Union**

The Union should:

- continue to raise issues of workload and task discretion at LA/MAT and individual school level, and support school representatives to develop the skills and confidence to bargain over these issues at the relevant organisational level.
- campaign and negotiate for contractual changes that ensure teachers have adequate time to design and plan a high-quality curriculum and to engage with the research to support these activities.
- identify, highlight and prioritise professional autonomy and task discretion as foundational elements that develop teacher self-efficacy and autonomy

# Section 1

## Standardised curricula: setting the scene

### Introduction

Education faces a crisis on many fronts. Real-term funding has fallen by comparison with 2010, while the demands made on schools by a society deeply damaged by austerity have risen (Sibieta 2024, BMA 2024). But the problems are more extensive than these figures suggest. Teacher shortages and high levels of student absence indicate that policies devised by Conservative or Conservative-led governments have not improved conditions for teachers or pupils (McLean, Worth, & Smith 2024, Center for Social Justice 2024). Since 2010, the training of teachers, the conditions of their work, the content and form of their teaching have all been subject to frequent changes. Ministers have often claimed that the result has been a rise in educational quality and that the education system is on track towards being 'world-class' (Gibb 2017a). The experience of teachers, however, suggests a more complicated picture: their work is now regulated and controlled in ways which damage their morale (Green 2021) and which limit their potential to have a positive impact on young people's educational achievement and wellbeing. Partly as a result, they are not able to respond to problems of motivation and engagement among students. An entire educational model has come under stress.

The new Labour government has shown in several ways that it is aware of the scale of the issues it faces. It aims to increase teacher numbers and has already introduced changes to school inspection. It has quickly established a review of curriculum and assessment issues. Whatever the outcomes, these are signs of an intent to change and an understanding

that pupils' learning and the classroom work of teachers are central problems to be addressed. How fully the government's aspiration to reinvigorate education can be realised will depend upon how thoroughly and deeply these problems are dealt with.

This research report addresses a particular phenomenon in schools which is not only under-researched, but which has been under-debated. The rapid growth of standardised curricula, largely driven by government initiatives and priorities, and the policies and practices of many multi-academy trusts (MATs), is having a significant effect on schools. Standardised curricula – units/schemes of work, programmes or packages that are ready for teachers to follow in teaching – were presented by the Conservative governments of 2019-24 as a fix for difficulties with workload and teacher retention, and also as a means of introducing "high-quality curriculum resources" into all schools (DfE 2022).

"Evidence suggests", claimed the Department for Education (DfE), "that within the schools' system in England two main curriculum problems exist: weaknesses in curriculum design and delivery, as reported by Ofsted; and excessive teacher workload associated with curriculum planning." (2022: 6) This was not an interpretation of the evidence that would be universally shared but, in the view of the DfE, greater curriculum standardisation could address both problems. The introduction of standardised curricula, however, may well be having consequences that were not envisaged or admitted by their

advocates. Standardised curricula may have a significant and negative impact on teachers' sense of professionalism, by reducing their scope to exercise professional autonomy and diminishing their sense of self-efficacy. Both these aspects of teachers' work are associated with effective teaching and job satisfaction. Standardised curricula may compromise curriculum quality by restricting the ability of teachers to match curriculum planning to the specific needs of the students being taught. They may actually add, in complex ways, to problems of workload. This report aims to open up such questions for debate, leading, we hope, to a wider recognition of the effects of standardised curricula and their impact on teachers and to a rethinking of their value.

### **Standardised curricula: meaning and significance.**

In one sense, standardised curricula have existed since the beginnings of mass education, in the form of primers and textbooks, or materials to support preparation for tests and exams. In recent years, however, they have taken new forms. The global movement in favour of 'performance standards' in the 1990s promoted standards that "described what teachers are supposed to teach and students are expected to learn" and gave "clear specific descriptions of the skills and knowledge that should be taught to students" (Ravitch 1995: 12). More recently, curricula have gone beyond describing intended outcomes to specify in detail the processes which should be followed for those outcomes to be attained. The degree of specification varies. In the United States, write Fitz and Nikolaidis (2019: 196), teachers more and more are required to use 'scripted curricula', a term which refers to a wide variety of curricular materials or pre-packaged lesson plans that explicitly script out exactly what the teacher will say, show and do so that the teacher only need read from a manual in order to deliver the lesson. Such curricula are also common in the low-fee for-profit sector in some developing countries,

where the business model depends on the widespread use of unqualified labour (Riep 2019).

In England, standardisation tends to be less detailed. Even so, there are instances where teachers are encouraged, expected or required to deliver a programme in a uniform way, regulated by nationally mandated guidance; the teaching of phonics in early years settings and at key stage (KS) 1 is an example (Wyse and Bradbury 2022). As we shall see, the use of standardised curricula, particularly in MATs, is growing. The establishment by the government of the Oak National Academy (Oak) as an arms-length body of the DfE was another significant move in this direction. Oak is the well-funded developer and supplier of curriculum resources, with the government setting aside up to £43 million over the period 2022/23 to 2024/25 (Barran 2023). Provided that the government continues to fund it, Oak expects by 2025 that its resources will cover all national curriculum subjects at primary and secondary levels. It is a substantial, and politically significant, intervention. Yet beyond impact research commissioned by Oak itself, at the time of writing its effects have not been studied (although, as indicated, the current government has commissioned a review).

### **Standardised curricula in the English context**

Standardised curricula build on a raft of education policy measures which over the last three decades have greatly changed the work of teachers. The years that followed the 1944 Act – particularly the 1960s – were a period of reform and innovation, much of it led by teachers and their representatives. Two developments stand out. First, was the drive to develop non-selective secondary education (promoted by the former Department for Education and Science (DES) Circular 10/65 in 1965), and second, was the publication of the Plowden Report into primary education in 1967. Both developments acted as catalysts for innovation in curriculum and pedagogy

as teachers responded to the spaces that were opening up for innovative thinking. Teachers' role in curriculum development was also supported by the establishment of the Schools Council, which had significant teacher representation and was responsible for several important curriculum projects and initiatives.

In the 1970s, the political consensus around education began to fracture and politicians sought to assert greater control over the 'outcomes' of the education system, often in the name of raising standards. In the process, the role of teachers came into question: they were increasingly seen as an obstacle to the raising of standards, a policy 'problem' which government needed to address (Little et al 2023). By the end of the 1970s it was clear that the professional autonomy that teachers had enjoyed in the post-war period would look very different in the future, and that the central state would seek to play a more interventionist role in determining what teachers taught, and how they taught it (McCulloch 2001).

The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) reconfigured English state education and established the system architecture that continues to define today's school system. In terms of teachers' classroom work, the most significant development was the introduction of the national curriculum. Alongside a national system of standardised testing, it was a powerful centralising move – the first significant attempt by the central state to determine curriculum content in schools.

In parallel with measures that increased central control of the curriculum, the 1988 Act encouraged greater school autonomy, in the form of devolved financial management and the licence to 'opt out' of local authority control (grant-maintained schools at the time, now academies and free schools). At the same time, teachers and school leaders were made more accountable for a school's success in tests and examinations, as reported in league tables that intentionally encouraged schools

into competition with each other. The establishment of Ofsted in 1992 completed the picture, with the national body having substantial powers in the school system.

The move to standardised curricula can be seen as the consequence of a range of different pressures being exerted on schools, post-1988, all of which were subject to continual 'ratcheting up' (Ball 2008) as governments pursued various means of raising standards – defined largely in terms of student performance in standardised tests. Many studies have pointed to the unintended consequences of government measures. The centrality of SATs and GCSEs has led to a systematic narrowing of the curriculum so that subjects, such as drama, the humanities and PE are allocated far less time (Berliner 2011, House of Lords 2023). Within all subjects, teaching at both primary and secondary level is geared toward what is likely to be tested. This has the effect that important aspects of learning such as spoken language, group work and practical skills are given less attention, and rote learning far more (Biesta 2012). Likewise, the need to compete against other schools in high-stakes tests has led over time to decisions about curriculum and pedagogy often being taken out of the hands of class teachers. A feature of many MATs in particular is that they often adopt a top-down approach to standardisation across their schools, as a single management group controls multiple schools (Greany 2022). Subject leads make decisions about schemes of work, either selecting published material or creating them in-house for a whole subject area team. High levels of standardisation make it easier to monitor compliance and compare data on outcomes (Ehren and Godfrey 2017). In this sense, there is a real danger that the drive to standardisation is not determined by what is pedagogically in the best interests of students, but what is administratively most convenient for managers.



## Standardised curricula: recent developments and growth

The growth in standardised curricula in English schools has been nourished by curriculum and assessment policies introduced since 2014. A new national curriculum framework and assessment system, alongside new ways of tracking school performance such as Progress 8, have increased performance pressures on schools. Knowing that apparent under-performance, as measured in test and exam results, threaten the existence of their school, managements have looked for ways of organising teachers' work that will maximise test scores.

Ehren and Godfrey noted (2017: 346) that some of the MATs established since 2010 had adopted "centralized planning of teaching and learning through the prescription of curricula, lesson planning, timetabling and assessment schemes" – and that the development and implementation of these systems is paid for by top slicing a percentage of the schools' budgets (Ehren and Godfrey 2017: 354). Greany (2018) echoed this finding, making a distinction between a standardised curriculum – a single required approach that all schools must adopt – and an 'aligned' curriculum – an agreed approach that is widely adopted but on a voluntary basis and with some flexibility. Associating the emergence of standardised curricula with the growth of MATs, he concluded that while the majority of MATs and federations were not at that time adopting a standardised approach to curriculum and pedagogy, a minority were doing so. Whether or not a MAT chose to align or standardise its approach to pedagogy broadly correlated with its performance, as expressed in test and examination results. Since 2018, the date of Greany's study, West, Wolf and Yaghi (2024) have identified the development in MATs of more intensive forms of what they term "command and control". Many MATs have now published curricular programmes at a considerable level of detail: a move from aligned towards standardised approaches has thus occurred, with consequences for teacher

autonomy. This is presumably what led the DfE, in its business case for Oak National Academy, to see it as a body that would "on a national scale, mimic the process undertaken by leading academy chains... to develop and refine their own curricula within their multi-academy trusts" (2022: 20). There are grounds for concern about such developments. Worth and van den Brande identified in 2020 that teacher autonomy is lower in school trusts, particularly in those with more than ten schools. They posited that this might be linked to trusts standardising or aligning practices across schools. As this process gathers further momentum, its impact on teacher autonomy merits serious consideration.

## Summary of key issues

- The English school system faces many serious challenges. There has been considerable reform, while the ongoing impacts of austerity have exacerbated problems faced within the system. The crisis of teacher supply is one of the most visible manifestations of the problems being experienced. Standardised curricula have emerged more prominently in the English school system, in part as a response to these problems.
- Standardised curricula are another stage in the process of the specification of teachers' classroom work. Standardised curricula were promoted by the Conservative governments of 2019-24 through the establishment of Oak National Academy, and by several multi-academy trusts. They are intended to provide resources to reduce workload and improve curriculum design and delivery.
- Their use might have the potential to significantly impact teachers' sense of professionalism, specifically in relation to their sense of autonomy and self-efficacy.

## Section 2

# Standardised curricula and teachers' work: understanding the issues

In the opening section we defined standardised curricula as units/schemes of work, programmes or packages that are ready for teachers to follow in teaching. As has been indicated, these can be generated within educational institutions for use by teachers in that institution, or by third party organisations such as commercial publishers or publicly funded bodies such as Oak National Academy. In some cases, teachers may use these programmes flexibly, selecting and adapting the materials they want to use, and in other instances teachers may be required to follow a standardised curricula in a very prescriptive way, with little or no room for deviation from the plan and resources provided.

In this section we seek to open up two specific issues for wider analysis.

First, we explore the contemporary development of standardised curricula and locate these developments in a broader political context. A curriculum is not a value neutral plan of work, but reflects a wider set of values and understandings about the purposes of education. Nor can a curriculum simply be considered as 'content' but it is inextricably bound up with 'process', and the pedagogical approaches used to develop students' understandings. Against this background, statements that refer to "the best that has been thought and said" (the words of Matthew Arnold from 1869, frequently invoked by Michael Gove and appearing in national curriculum documents) need to be opened up to wider critique. What knowledge counts, or more accurately, whose knowledge counts, and who gets to decide? Similarly, approaches to teaching cannot be considered as the 'one best way' to transmit

curriculum content but are located in wider questions that link what children learn with how they learn. These questions are never uncontested, and they cannot be divorced from the political questions that underpin them (what is education for? what vision of the future are young people being prepared for?). It is for this reason that the curriculum has been such a controversial issue for many years, and it is why curriculum issues must always be widely debated.

Second, we seek to link developments in the school curriculum, and specifically in relation to standardised curricula, to wider questions about teachers' work and the changing nature of that work. Substantial changes in the curriculum (such as revisions to the national curriculum), or requirements to adopt particular approaches to teaching (such as the adoption of a standardised curricula) inevitably have a profound impact on teachers and their experience of their work. Such changes, in turn, raise a wider set of questions – who decides what, and how, teachers teach? What is the appropriate balance between the teachers' right to determine the most appropriate approach for the students in their class, and what are the legitimate expectations of others (parents, the community) to have a role in these decisions? Much of this debate has historically been framed around questions of teacher professionalism, and in this section we explore some contemporary debates around teaching as a profession to help understand the relationship between the curriculum and changes in teachers' work. In particular we highlight two elements of teacher professionalism, professional autonomy and self-efficacy, that when combined with

an expanded analysis of teacher workload, provide a useful framework for analysing the impact of standardised curricula on teachers and their work.

### **Standardised curricula: principles of design and delivery**

In this section we offer an outline of the principles that underlie standardised curricula and the practices they lead to. Standardised curricula, as they are implemented in England, are nearly always presented as embodiments of 'powerful knowledge' (Young 2007). According to one of its advocates, powerful knowledge means that "the specifics of what we want students to learn matter and the traditions of subject disciplines are respected... There is a belief that we are all empowered through knowing things and that this cannot be left to chance... [Thus] we want them to amass a specific body of declarative and procedural knowledge [that can be] remembered in detail and stored in our students' long-term memories." (Sherrington 2018). The approach has also been heavily influenced by the US-based cultural theorist, E D Hirsch, whose case for a curriculum based on 'core knowledge' has received significant interest in some quarters (see Hirsch 1987 and 2016). Arguments in favour of such an approach emphasise the entitlement of all students, regardless of background, to be able to access the core knowledge required to be a full participant in society. A failure to make such knowledge available to all not only risked denying opportunities to the most disadvantaged but also threatened the formation of a coherent national identity based on common understandings.

However, the practical consequences of the focus on powerful knowledge have been questioned. Michael Young, who played an important part in putting 'powerful knowledge' on the curriculum agenda, wrote that there had been a tendency to interpret the "knowledge-rich curriculum" as meaning "'get the content right and all will be okay' and, as a result, the vital and difficult role of

teachers in... 'curriculum making' gets lost and teachers become little more than transmitters of knowledge." (Young 2018: 1). In his view, teachers had been led towards focusing "more on examination outcomes and less on the pedagogic strategies that might facilitate better access to knowledge" (Young 2018: 1).

Other critics have gone further, claiming there has been from the beginning a significant flaw in the conceptualisation of powerful knowledge. It did not sufficiently consider the relationship between the formal knowledge of the school curriculum and what Moll et al (1992) described as the "funds of knowledge" that learners brought with them to school; it may have "brought knowledge back" to the curriculum, but it had left out the knower, the child and delegitimised the knowledge that they brought with them to school (Wrigley 2017). In these respects, advocates of powerful knowledge had wrongly set aside established findings of educational research: that effective teaching involves engaging learners' prior understandings and background knowledge, and supporting students in taking an active part in the learning process. Curriculum design that did not sufficiently take into account these principles would not meet the objectives it set for itself.

At this point it is also important to recognise the connections between what is taught (presented as knowledge content) and how teaching is understood (presented as knowledge transmission). Contemporary iterations of 'knowledge-rich' curricula have become associated with quite particular approaches to teaching, with the claim made that such approaches are evidence-based or evidence-informed. Drawing heavily on research based in the cognitive sciences tradition, advocates for a curriculum based on so-called core knowledge principles (using the language of the English national curriculum) place a particular premium on forms of 'direct instruction' as the appropriate pedagogical approach. This approach emphasises the teacher as the possessor of the relevant



knowledge, and the need to transmit the knowledge to the student using the most effective and efficient means. There are inevitably many variations of this approach, but common features are a focus on teacher-centred delivery of content, accompanied by frequent testing of understanding and an emphasis on memorisation (including use of so-called rote learning). The pedagogical method is consistent with the principles of curriculum design presented above with the teaching (and learning) understood as transmission rather than co-construction.

It is not our intention here to engage in a detailed analysis and critique of the above approach to teaching and learning, as that is not the aim of this study. However, we believe it is important to interrogate further the claims that the teaching approaches advocated are evidence-informed, as this has become a powerful lever to drive curriculum policy nationally and teachers' practices in schools.

The idea that policymaking and practice should be informed by scientific research has a long history. Its most recent form, arising in the 1990s and continuing today, was prompted by the evidence-based medicine movement, the source of the phrase 'evidence-based practice' (Hammersley 2013). Over time, what was regarded as scientific evidence, the results of randomised controlled trials, was broadened to include results from other types of method besides randomised controlled trials (RCTs) – other kinds of quantitative research (eg surveys) and various forms of qualitative inquiry (eg interviews). These latter kinds of research were sometimes presented as part of an attempt to build links with the users of evidence-based research such as teachers (Traianou and Hammersley 2008). Goldacre (2013), in a work published by the DfE, wrote that "there is a huge prize waiting to be claimed by teachers. By collecting better evidence about what 'works best' and establishing a culture where this evidence is used as a matter of routine, we can improve outcomes for children and

increase professional independence". Since 2013, policymakers have argued very strongly for evidence-based teaching, but it seems that the professional independence Goldacre hoped it would deliver has not been realised.

The term 'evidence-informed teaching' is used to mean practice that is influenced by robust research evidence (Coldwell et al 2017:5). However, the question of what counts as robust evidence remains unsettled. Owen, Watkin and Hughes (2022: 3) point out a "growing acceptance of terms such as 'evidence-based' and 'evidence-informed' practice in the field of education". They also note that although such terms are increasingly used to justify policy choices, they remain a subject of controversy. Researchers such as Wrigley (2018) and Thomas (2020) maintain that evidence is narrowly defined: the results of randomised controlled trials, for instance, are preferred to the evidence of teacher experience in deciding policy directions, and the data which provide evidence of success or failure usually take the form of test and examination results. Thomas concludes that a selective appeal to evidence has tended to work against teacher professionalism, by steering professional judgement in the directions preferred by politicians and by bodies such as Ofsted, which asserts that effective teaching is evidence-informed and that teaching must make use of the "best available evidence of what works" (see McCrea 2023 for an example). This privileging of particular forms of knowledge has arguably become a common feature of education policy making in England in recent years with Hordern and Brooks (2023a and 2023b) demonstrating how changes to teacher education policy, and the development of the Core Content Framework for teacher training, have been justified by the selective invocation of specific research studies. Bleiman (2013) argues that the preferences of policymakers have led to the squeezing out of questions essential to good educational practice: "... the impact of schooling on pupils' attitudes to learning, their thinking, their enjoyment and their ability and

enthusiasm for tackling problems, engaging with ideas and going on to learn more. ‘How do you engage pupils in their own learning?’ or ‘How do you encourage pupils to read for pleasure?’ are not easily measured by numerical tests, nor can they be assessed in a short time frame.”

There are also, of course, other research traditions that aim to speak to teachers: action research, participatory inquiry, embedded research – in other words, forms of inquiry involving close and continual interaction between research and practice. In this work, there tends to be recognition of the fallible character of research evidence and of the role of other kinds of evidence than that coming from research, including practical experience. There is also more acknowledgement of the role of teacher judgement in practical decision-making (Hammersley 2013). These traditions are not currently preferred by policymakers, though their resources may well be relevant to teachers seeking to understand and improve their practice.

In this study we question the way in which politicians have mobilised particular forms of knowledge, and privileged particular research methodologies, while simultaneously and deliberately neglecting other traditions. This has then been used to drive policy in particular ways. One obvious example is in relation to Oak National Academy where approaches are justified to teachers as being based on the “best available evidence of what works” and linked to curriculum principles informed by a version of cognitive science (Jones 2023). Privileging the results of one kind of research, however, often cannot answer directly some of the most important problems faced by classroom teachers, though it can sometimes provide information that will help answer some of those questions. As Thomas (2020) has argued, in the process of privileging one approach, other approaches to learning and pedagogy have been marginalised, especially those associated with constructivist learning, where the interests

and capacities of the learner are placed at the centre of teaching. We will discuss the limitations of the currently influential version of evidence-informed teaching in the context of the analysis of the Oak National Academy English and history resources in Section 6.

### **Standardised curricula: teachers’ work and teacher professionalism**

As indicated above substantial changes in curriculum plans, and/or expectations that teachers adopt particular pedagogical practices, have a profound impact on teachers’ experience of their work and their agency to determine what they teach and how they might teach. Historically, debates about who determines what is taught, and wider questions about pedagogical approaches, have been framed within wider debates about teacher professionalism and teacher identity – what it means to be a teacher and a member of the teaching profession. In this section we open up some of the changing debates about teacher professionalism and introduce two key concepts – professional autonomy and teacher self-efficacy – that are crucial to understanding the impact of standardised curricula on teachers’ sense of professionalism. We then introduce a third, and linked, concept – teacher workload, to complete the analytical framework we utilise to study standardised curricula and teachers’ work.

Teachers’ identification of themselves as professionals, writes Sachs (2005), is the enduring “core of the teaching profession”. It provides “a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society”. An OECD report (2016) suggests that the framework of teacher professionalism has three components: a knowledge base, defined as necessary knowledge for teaching; peer networks, defined as opportunities for information exchange and support; and autonomy, defined as “teachers’ decision-making over aspects related to their work”.

Research also highlights that teacher professionalism is not 'a fixed or static construct'. It changes over time and varies between individuals and cultures (Suarez and McGrath 2016); it is 'negotiated' (Sachs 2005) in particular contexts. Over the past two decades, the definition of professionalism has undergone significant change.

In this context, Evetts (2009) notes a shift from 'occupational' to 'organisational' professionalism. The former is based on collegiality, on a teacher-driven collective consensus. "Teaching", Evetts writes "is not a narrowly technicist job that involves applying abstract rules but is one that involves making decisions informed by knowledge and understanding of the unique contexts within which teachers are working as well as by their educational values and beliefs." Organisational professionalism, on the other hand, is characterised by hierarchical structures of responsibility and decision-making. It is managerially driven (Evetts 2009). Professionalism in this perspective becomes the skilled execution of programmes and policies devised at a higher level than the classroom. Apple (2007: 185) describes this shift as a redistribution of power and a move from 'licensed' to 'regulated' autonomy. Lundstrom (2015) thinks that this has become part of the lived experience of teachers in the contemporary education system.

An alternative approach has been offered by those drawing from a tradition of sociological research on the labour process, especially the critique of Taylorism (Stevenson and Woods 2013; Little et al 2023). Taylorism refers to the principles of 'scientific management', developed by F W Taylor in the early part of the 20th century. Taylor argued that the role of management was to analyse every work task and, by reducing it to a series of "laws, rules and even mathematical formulae" (Taylor 1947: 40), it was possible to identify the "one best way" to perform any task. Once this was established, management's role was to ensure workers executed the work plan as per the pre-determined design, and to monitor

and measure the performance of individual employees. Braverman (1974), argued that control of the labour process was the central challenge for management, and that this was best achieved by separating the planning of work from the doing of work, thereby "destroying the craft as a process under the control of the worker" and reconstituting it as a process under managerial control. "He [the manager] reconstitutes it as a process under his own control" (Braverman 1974: 78). Several researchers have applied this framework of analysis to the work of teachers and concluded that teaching has often been reduced to a highly prescribed production-line type process which can be considered as the antithesis of a claim to professionalism (Stevenson and Woods 2013; Au, 2011).

In all of these analyses the notion of autonomy emerges as a key concept, and this requires a more detailed analysis.

### Professional autonomy

Parcerisa et al (2022: 6) note that teacher autonomy is understood as "the capacity, freedom and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching". Cribb and Gewirtz (2007: 206) discuss the consequences of autonomy and argue it is a "source of job satisfaction, health and well-being for teachers, a source of creativity, experimentation and variety as well as a source of effectiveness". Their last point is arguably the most important. Job satisfaction and teacher wellbeing, for example, are clearly key factors for ensuring that teachers feel they can be effective in their work (see later discussion on teacher self-efficacy), but ultimately teacher autonomy is important because of the difference it brings to effective teaching. Ensuring teachers have agency to make flexible choices in their work allows them to ensure that the curriculum, and teaching, is responsive to the students in that class, in all their diversity. Autonomy allows teachers to respond to what students bring to the class, and to use this as a platform for further learning. Autonomy is the condition

that allows the teacher to make the maximum use of their skills and judgement to provide the most effective teaching for students. In this sense, teacher autonomy is not an end in itself, but its value lies in what it contributes to high quality teaching by allowing the teacher to apply their skill and expertise to the unique context provided by every student in every class.

Wermke and Forsberg (2016: 156) distinguish between two kinds of autonomy. The first is the institutional dimension, which refers to “the collective autonomy of an occupation to have and to sustain certain criteria: a strong boundary, academic credentials, a self-governing professional body, or a code of ethics”. The second is the “so-called service dimension, which refers to the autonomy of the individual teacher practices in the classroom and also the practice of the school”. For professional autonomy to exist, teacher organisations need “to be recognised as a collective actor and as a valid political interlocutor by the state” (2016: 157). Autonomy at school level is the effect of “teachers’ collective capacity to influence and decide on the main strategies and practices of the school”. Individual teacher autonomy refers to the opportunity and capacity of individual teachers to define their teaching practices and instructional strategies (2016: 157).

Drawing on this model, we could say that in both institutional and service dimensions, autonomy has been reduced. Institutionally, the abolition of the General Teaching Council, the imposition of Professional Standards devised by government rather than the teaching profession, and the curtailing of university influence over teacher education (Steadman 2023) have been a means of derecognising teacher professionalism as a research-informed practice. At school level, a number of factors have worked to limit individual teacher autonomy, including curriculum programmes, eg for the teaching of phonics (Wyse and Bradbury 2022), pedagogies which teachers are directed

to follow (eg Bacons 2018) and the practice of teaching to the test, to the point where “the assessment becomes the curriculum” (Carter 2020).

Worth and van den Brande (2020) report on what is happening to teacher autonomy in an age of managerial control, of control over how teachers do their work. They found that “the average teacher in England reports a lower level of control [than comparable professions] over what tasks they do, the order in which they carry them out, the pace at which they work and their working hours”. Through their survey, teachers also reported relatively low autonomy... over curriculum content, though they reported “relatively high autonomy in areas associated with classroom management and practice, such as teaching methods, planning and preparing lessons, use of classroom time” (2020: 4).

Other studies have tended to confirm this picture. Skinner et al (2021: 10) described teachers’ “resentment” at the loss of decision-making about classroom practice, leaving them in some cases with “doubts and in some cases guilt about their role in the classroom”. The job satisfaction they had previously derived from working spontaneously and, as they saw it, creatively had been eroded by “bureaucratic demands” (Skinner et al 2021:8). McPherson and her colleagues (2023: 8) reported in relation to new GCSE courses that many teachers “felt unable to teach in ways that were meaningful, inclusive and accessible to the diverse range of students in their classrooms”. Workload pressures and expectations around student attainment, in the context of wider cuts to school budgets, were “significantly reducing the amount of time they could spend interacting with the young people they teach and providing pastoral support”.

Autonomy is therefore a key concept in understanding teachers’ work. It links to teacher effectiveness, but it also links to a range of factors, such as job satisfaction and teacher health and wellbeing, that can

be decisive in impacting teacher retention rates. At this point we introduce a linked concept, teacher self-efficacy, because without a sense of self-efficacy the benefits of autonomy are not realised – the two factors are interdependent.

### Teacher self-efficacy

Contemporary literature on teacher self-efficacy, initially developed in the field of cognitive psychology, has made a significant contribution to understanding the conditions under which teachers can be effective. Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation, a belief which is developed through interactions between an individual's behaviour, personal factors and environmental conditions (Bandura 1977). These ideas have now been applied extensively in education and there is a rich literature in the field.

In the context of teaching, self-efficacy refers to teachers' capacity "to implement specific teaching behaviours that have an impact on students' cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes" (Lazarides and Scheifele 2021: 12). Studies have distinguished between individual self-efficacy and collective self-efficacy. The former focuses on a single teacher as a unit of analysis, while a collective approach emphasises the capacity of teachers working together to have a positive influence on teaching and learning. This can be at the level of a single school (that is the school staff as a collective) or it may work at a higher level with teachers experiencing collective self-efficacy through organisations such as trade unions.

The value of self-efficacy lies in the relationship between teachers' beliefs in what they can do, and what they might actually do. Put simply, a teacher who believes in their own capacity to make a positive impact in the classroom is more likely to engage in pedagogical practices that will make a difference. They will be more confident, and more comfortable engaging in more complex pedagogical practices. Importantly, where

teachers experience autonomy, teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to make use of that autonomy in ways that support effective teaching.

In contrast, where teachers have low levels of self-efficacy their belief in their own capacity to make a difference is diminished. The danger is that such teachers do not believe that positive change is possible, and so their motivation to bring about change is blunted. Teachers with limited self-efficacy are unable to capitalise on any autonomy they may have and less able to maximise the value of the agency they may have. Teachers with low levels of self-efficacy are more likely to show symptoms of stress and burnout, with concomitant problems of retention.

On the basis of the above we may consider agency in teaching as in part a combination of autonomy and self-efficacy. Agency requires the space to use one's judgement and the confidence to exercise it appropriately. However, if autonomy exists without self-efficacy teachers will not be able to utilise the autonomy they have. By contrast, if teachers have high self-efficacy, but little or no space to exercise autonomous professional judgement, then it is likely that their self-efficacy will be eroded, with potential impacts on teaching effectiveness, job satisfaction and teacher retention.

Teacher self-efficacy receives a high profile in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) surveys where this capacity has been studied in three dimensions: efficacy in classroom management, efficacy in student engagement, and efficacy in instruction (OECD 2019: 65–68). Using TALIS data, researchers have suggested teacher self-efficacy is strongly correlated with job satisfaction (Buric and Kim 2021) and with increased teacher and student motivation (Ahn et al 2021). The strength or weakness of self-efficacy is thus related to institutional and policy contexts with changes in working practices having an identifiable



effect on self-efficacy. In the case of England, Wilkins (2020) suggests that teacher self-efficacy has been eroded in recent years.

In the following section we focus on issues of teacher workload and connect these issues to the questions of autonomy and self-efficacy.

## Teacher workload

Studies of teacher professionalism do not immediately focus on teacher workload, but many studies of teacher professionalism do highlight the importance of working conditions, more broadly, that are appropriate to undertaking a complex role with substantial responsibilities. Workload is one element of these working conditions but, as we highlight here, it is also important to understand workload in a more sophisticated way than is often the case.

The issue has long been one of concern, with central government, local authority employers and school sector trade unions all convening in 2003 to formulate plans to tackle concerns about rising workloads (Carter, Stevenson and Passy 2010). Since 2015, when teacher recruitment and retention became an issue that was impossible for government to overlook, workload has been the object of continuous attention on the part of the DfE. The School Workload Reduction toolkit was first published in 2018. Produced by school leaders and teachers, in collaboration with the DfE, it included “resources that support wellbeing and workload reduction around the areas of data management, feedback and marking, curriculum planning and resources, behaviour management and communications” (Churches and Fitzpatrick 2023: 6). The DfE’s own research suggests that such initiatives have not been wholly successful. A survey carried out in 2023 found an increase since 2022 in hours worked (from 48.7 to 49.4). Average hours worked per week increased for full-time teachers from 51.9 to 52.4 (DfE 2023). In response to these problems, the DfE has repeatedly returned to questions of workload, most recently through the reports

of the workload reduction taskforce (DfE 2024b). It is in this context, that the DfE has promoted the use of standardised curricula. The Oak National Academy claims that teachers who use its curriculum resources report significant time savings (Oak National Academy, 2022). The DfE’s business case for Oak (DfE, 2022: 12) was supported by a claim that “many teachers struggle to find quality resources and end up having to create their lessons from scratch”, a problem to which Oak resources could provide an answer.

However, although policymakers have tried to address the extent of teacher workload in terms of numbers of hours worked, the wider questions of work intensity which was introduced earlier, have not been addressed. Green (2021) argues that work strain is a much more useful concept when analysing teachers’ work than workload, measured as hours worked. Work intensity looks at the effort expended within the hours worked, while work strain combines an analysis of workload (hours worked + work intensity) with an analysis of task discretion (analysed as control over one’s work). Green’s study of the British Skills Survey demonstrates that teachers experience work intensity and work strain at levels that are significantly higher than other occupational groups and that levels of work intensity within the teaching profession have risen markedly since 1992, when data was first collated. Moreover, as work has intensified, task discretion has declined, especially between 2012 and 2017, the last available data. Green concludes: “High work strain – the combined indicator of low task discretion and high work intensity – showed a remarkable increase over the long term: the proportion of teachers working under high strain has gone from virtually none in 1992 to 21.3 per cent in 2012 and to 27.3 per cent in 2017. Taken over the whole period, teachers are nearly twice as likely as other professionals to be working under high strain (16.2 per cent compared with 8.5 per cent).”

International comparisons highlight this problem of strain. In the last OECD TALIS study (2018) teachers in England ranked 46 out of 48 when asked if they were satisfied with their level of professional autonomy, and England again occupied the same lowly position when teachers were asked if they felt involved in decision-making in their school (the government withdrew England from TALIS 2024). Other studies (Stacey et al 2023) have suggested that strategies that seek to address issues of job satisfaction and teacher retention through the development of measures such as the centralised provision of curriculum resources may actually increase work strain, by removing elements of teacher autonomy and creating deskilling effects. In this context Sallen (2016: 8) pointed out that teachers in England “deal with a more heterogeneous pupil composition and are more likely to give differentiated work to their pupils”. It may therefore be appropriate, he argued, for teachers in England to be able to spend more time planning, rather than less. Curriculum planning is thus not something that can be stripped out of teachers’ work as easily as current policy assumes. This may be why the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) reports that although teachers acknowledge it is time consuming, they saw it as “a vital part of teachers’ work that they would not wish to relinquish because it helped them to prepare for their teaching by thinking through the steps they would take during the lessons” (Martin 2023: 18).

### Summary of key issues

- Standardised curricula have emerged as an important feature of the English school system. The design of standardised curricula is influenced by conceptions of powerful knowledge and evidence-based teaching which have been themselves open to question.
- Changes to curriculum practice need to be understood and evaluated in these contexts.
- The importance of autonomy and self-efficacy are key concepts when analysing teachers’ work. They link directly to teacher effectiveness, but also to their job satisfaction and wellbeing. Where job satisfaction is higher, teacher retention problems are likely to be lower and system resilience will be increased.
- Teacher workload is recognised as a very significant problem in the English school system, with problems experienced more acutely than in other OECD countries. However, workload needs to be analysed in a more nuanced way – including an assessment of hours worked, work intensity and task discretion, ie looking at work strain. Teachers in England experience high work strain due to high work intensity and low task discretion.
- Professional autonomy, teacher self-efficacy and teachers’ workload are interdependent concepts that provide a powerful framework for analysing the impact of changes in teachers’ work on teachers’ sense of professionalism and professional identity.
- Standardised curricula have the potential to significantly impact teachers’ work and their sense of professionalism.

# Section 3

## Research aims and data sources

In this section we describe our research aims, the data sources we used, and the research methods we employed.

### Research aims

The broad aim of this research is to illuminate the ways in which standardised curricula are experienced by teachers in primary and secondary schools in England. In particular, our research aims to:

- establish the extent of the use of standardised curricula across primary and secondary schools
- understand the ways in which teachers experience and evaluate standardised curricula
- understand the relationship between the use of standardised curricula and the quality of teachers' working lives, and in particular their perceptions of autonomy, self-efficacy and workload
- within this broader framework, to gain an understanding of teachers' responses to curriculum resources provided by the Oak National Academy.

### Review of the literature

To begin with we conducted a review of the literature (Section 2) to explain in some depth the meanings attached to key concepts that we use in the report, particularly in the construction of the survey, and the interviews:

- to present a review of the literature on professionalism (including autonomy and self-efficacy) and workload

- to provide a historical context for the introduction of standardised curricula
- to give an account of the curriculum and pedagogic thinking that underpins the introduction of standardised curricula
- to give an account of some of the debates and controversies around this thinking.

To do this, we have analysed and discussed:

- policy documents and political texts (eg the speeches of ministers)
- key articles, including literature reviews, around topics of professionalism, autonomy and workload.

### Data sources

The report draws on two main data sources:

- a. a specially conducted survey of NEU members
- b. interviews: focus group interviews and individual interviews with NEU members.

These are complemented by an analysis of a sample of curriculum resources devised by the Oak National Academy (see Section 6 of this report).

Ethical approval for the research was gained from Goldsmiths, University of London research ethics and integrity sub-committee, and the University of Nottingham research ethics and integrity committee. A data-sharing agreement was also signed between the NEU and Goldsmiths, University of London.



## Survey

As we discussed in the previous section, teachers' professionalism is associated with teachers' autonomy to make decisions about their teaching, and their self-efficacy – their belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation. In the same section we also discussed the ways in which the 2014 revision of the national curriculum had changed teaching and learning, and how these changes had been consolidated in in-house and commercial curriculum packages – what we have called standardised curricula. We also noted the government's intention that the use of curriculum packages will reduce teacher workload.

In order to understand the extent of standardised curricula use in English schools, its implications for teachers' professionalism and their perceptions of workload, we developed a survey.

### Survey design

The survey took the form of an online questionnaire which presented teachers with a range of open and closed questions. It was intended to provide an oversight of curriculum practices in schools in mainstream England. It took respondents approximately ten minutes to complete.

The survey established eligibility and collected some demographic data about the teachers and their schools; the data were used to ensure that the characteristics of the respondents reflected those of the broader teaching population. Next, the survey established if teachers had followed any

kind of standardised curricula in the past 12 months. Those who answered 'yes' were invited to answer a set of additional questions about the resources they had used and their perceptions of standardised curricula. Those who identified that they used Oak National Academy resources were asked a set of specific questions about these materials. The next sections of the questionnaire focused on our main variables of interest:

- autonomy
- instructional self-efficacy
- engagement self-efficacy
- workload perceptions.

These areas were measured using well-validated measures which were presented to teachers on a Likert scale. The five-item autonomy scale was drawn from TALIS<sup>1</sup> and there was an additional question in the 'autonomy' section of the questionnaire about who had influence over lesson content. This question was devised and piloted by the project's research team.

Instructional self-efficacy and engagement self-efficacy were each measured by a four-item scale adapted from Hanna et al (2020). Instructional self-efficacy relates to the teachers' belief in their ability to instruct their students effectively, and 'engagement' refers to their ability to interest and motivate students in their learning. Teachers were asked to state whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, agreed or strongly agreed with the questions about autonomy and both types of self-efficacy.

<sup>1</sup> TALIS is the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey, which collects comparative data from teachers and school leaders about their school environments and working practices.

Following the Teacher Workload Survey (TWS) (2019) wording, teachers were presented with three statements about their workload. In our survey they were asked to indicate if they strongly disagreed, somewhat disagreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, tended to agree or strongly disagreed. We retained the TWS five-point scale with the neither agree nor disagree option because the scale had been validated with a large national sample in this way. When calculating, we scaled all responses to each of the scales from 0-10 where 0 is low and 10 is high, so that it was easy to compare and look for patterns across variables.

## Hypotheses

In designing the survey, we made three hypotheses about the relationship between our three variables (autonomy, self-efficacy and perceptions of workload) and the use or non-use of standardised curricula:

- that teachers who did not use standardised curricula would express a sense of greater job autonomy compared with teachers who did use such curricula.
- that teachers who did not use standardised curricula would have a higher level of self-efficacy compared with teachers who did use such curricula
- that there would be a difference in perceptions of workload between teachers who did use standardised curricula and those who did not.

We tested these hypotheses against the data from our survey (Section 4 in the report discusses the findings of the survey).

## Survey distribution

The survey, which included a consent form, was distributed online to NEU members in February 2024 and remained open for two weeks. It was completed by 1,655 classroom teachers or middle leaders who worked in a) mainstream schools for students aged 0-18 (including nurseries); b) state and independent sector; c) in England. The great majority of teachers – 1,609 – worked in the state sector.

The survey was distributed to eligible teachers on a membership list provided by the NEU. It was therefore a survey of NEU members and not of all teachers who work in England. In order to assess the representativeness of our sample, we used the school workforce census data (2022/23) to calculate the proportions of classroom teachers working in mainstream state schools in England by: gender, ethnicity, school phase (nursery, primary, secondary, mixed age group), region and work pattern (full-time/part-time). We are satisfied that our sample was broadly reflective of the characteristics of mainstream school teachers in England.

The survey was made up of two closed questions (with sub-questions) and two open questions. The first open question asked teachers whether they had used standardised curricula in the past 12 months. The second question related to teachers' autonomy and self-efficacy. A further two open questions allowed those teachers who are using standardised curricula to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of their use. The data from these open questions was analysed using a content analytical approach. Additionally, in a section for those who specified that they used Oak National Academy resources, we asked two closed questions about the frequency of use of Oak resources and the extent to which teachers adapted the resources prior to use. Finally, the Oak section included two open questions about advantages and disadvantages of using Oak resources.

## Interviews

### 2a. Focus group interviews

While the survey helped us to understand the scale and impact of standardised curricula on teachers' sense of professionalism and working lives, we also wanted to get a deeper understanding of their experiences. We addressed this issue at two levels. At first, we organised focus group interviews with teachers who work across English schools and who have used standardised packages (including Oak) to enable them to discuss the curriculum planning process in their school. In the research methodology literature, focus group interviewing is an effective method for bringing together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting and the questions are designed to shed light on a topic of interest (Bloor et al 2001). In the case of our research project the topic was the curriculum planning process.

An invitation letter was sent to delegates at the NEU 2024 annual conference by the union in February 2024 explaining the aim of the research and asking teachers who have used standardised curricula to take part in focus group interviews. A total of 19 teachers, from both primary and secondary sectors, participated in these interviews. We intentionally formed three mixed (primary and secondary) groups. All teachers were active in the NEU in some capacity, at least as a national conference delegate. As people involved in the union, we anticipated these interviewees would be well placed to offer insights into how curricular issues were managed at school level, as well as having their own experiences as teachers. Those teachers who agreed to participate received the consent form prior to the interviews. In each group we asked teachers to describe the process of curriculum planning in their schools, including who makes such decisions (eg head teacher, classroom teachers, middle leaders) and what kind of consultation, if any, takes place with individual teachers. Those interviews lasted about

45 minutes each. They were recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber. They allowed us to understand some of the common issues regarding the use of standardised curricula, but also the variation of their impact on teachers' lives. They also helped us to refine the questions for the individual interviews.

### 2b. Individual interviews

Individual interviews allowed us to explore in more depth teachers' experiences. We organised individual semi-structured interviews with those who had offered to have further contact with the project when they submitted the survey. We were interested in talking to participants who had had experience of standardised curricula (including Oak). In contacting potential participants, we ensured that teachers from across English schools were approached, both primary and secondary, the latter covering a range of subject specialisms. This helped to ensure consistency in our sampling approach.

As with the focus group interviews, all participants were NEU members and therefore their perspectives are not necessarily representative of all teachers. However, our sampling approach allowed us to make comparisons between survey and interview data. In the interviews, we asked teachers to describe the decision-making process on curriculum planning in their schools and the extent of their involvement in this. We were keen to understand how standardised curricula (including Oak's resources) were employed in planning, as well as the extent of flexibility offered to teachers to adapt the resources to the needs of their students in their class and to their own approaches to learning and teaching. We were also interested to explore teachers' understanding and evaluation of the research that often accompanies standardised curricula. Finally, we wanted to know what aspects of standardised packages teachers found useful, which ones they found

problematic and whether they felt that the use of standardised curricula helped to reduce teachers' workload.

We sent consent forms and information about the interview questions prior to the interview. We conducted 21 individual interviews with teachers between April and July 2024. Interviews were conducted online in order to enable participation of teachers who worked in schools across England. The interviews lasted 40–60 minutes; they were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber. Seven of the participants were primary school teachers, and 13 were secondary teachers. The secondary school teachers specialised in English (2), maths (2), science (1), history (2), geography (1), music (1), biology (1), chemistry (1) and drama (2). Two of the 20 teachers were middle leaders in their schools (one primary and one secondary). To both sets of interview data we applied qualitative content analysis to identify themes across the material. The analysis of the data from both kinds of interview is presented in Section 5. The analysis of the interview data related to Oak is included in Section 6.

### Analysis of Oak curriculum materials

We also analysed a sample of Oak's curriculum materials: two units of work from KS3 English and KS2 history. The material can be downloaded freely from the Oak National Academy website. Our purposes in doing so were:

- to cross-check teachers' comments on Oak materials against our own readings of them
- to understand Oak's understanding and enactment of its curricular and pedagogic principles
- to evaluate the materials against different perspectives of curriculum and pedagogy.

Our sample was small, but because Oak employs a consistent approach to questions of content and pedagogy across all subject areas and key stages, we think we can reasonably claim that it is representative. We focus on these subjects partly because they are subject areas which are most representative of Oak's recent work. We are also interested in them as they are curriculum areas in which teacher-led innovation has been prominent for decades, through such initiatives and institutions as the Schools Council History Project and the English & Media Centre, where principles of diversity, responsiveness to student experience and evolving disciplinary knowledge have been important. In this context, it is thus possible to compare Oak's principles and practices with those developed from different perspectives. In analysing these resources, we were guided by the following questions:

- How is subject knowledge presented?
- What pedagogical approach is evident?
- How is the role of the teacher understood?
- What assumptions about how learning takes place are evident?
- What role does cognitive science play?
- How is the role of the learner understood?
- How are the needs of students with SEND addressed?
- In what ways is ethnic and social diversity acknowledged?

The analysis of the Oak resources is included in Section 6 which is dedicated to the Oak National Academy.

# Section 4

## The survey

Here we present the findings of our survey on the use of standardised curricula. It was completed in February 2024 by 1,655 classroom teachers and middle leaders working in English mainstream schools for students aged 0-18, nurseries included. The great majority of teachers – 1,609 (97 per cent) – worked in the state, rather than the private, sector.

### The extent of standardised curriculum use

Most teachers made use of standardised curricula in at least some of their work. Overall, 71 per cent of participants reported having followed standardised curricula (SC) in the past 12 months.

At primary school level, 90 per cent of respondents were standardised curricula users (SCUs). This fell to 54 per cent at secondary level.

### Have you followed standardised curricula in the past 12 months?

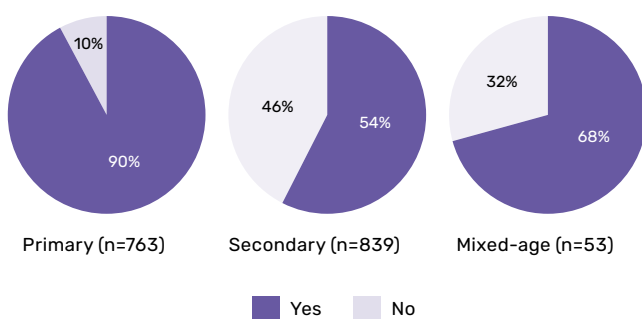


Figure 1.

The data thus provided us with knowledge about the extent of standardised curriculum use. Just as important, it helped us understand whether and how teachers who

used standardised curricula had a different experience of their work from those who did not.

We asked users of standardised curricula: “Which standardised curricula have you followed in your teaching in the past 12 months?” The findings are shown below, in two separate groups – primary teachers and secondary teachers. Figure 2 (primary) shows standardised curricula that were identified by 20 or more respondents. Figure 3 displays responses from secondary school teachers and it shows the ten most popular standardised curricula.

### Standardised curricula use (primary)

Which standardised curricula have you followed in your teaching in the past 12 months?

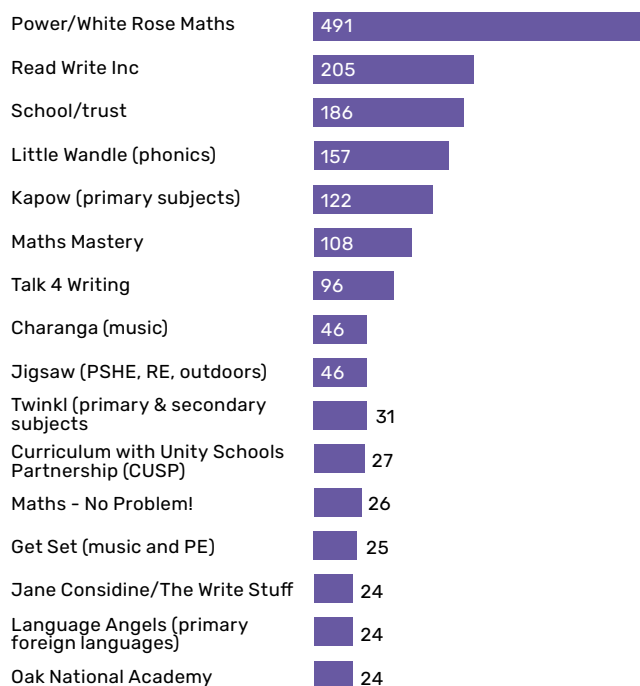


Figure 2 n = 683

Figure 2.

### Standardised curricula use (secondary)

Which standardised curricula have you followed in your teaching in the past 12 months?

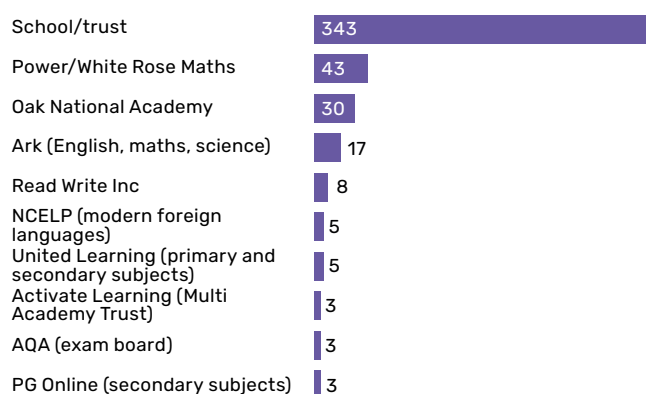


Figure 3 n=499.

Figure 3.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the vast range of offerings and providers. Standardised curricula are developed and offered by peers within and beyond participants' organisations, exam boards and publishers (eg Pearson), 'celebrity educators' (eg Jane Considine), not-for-profits, commercial providers, local education authorities, and – in the case of Oak National Academy – an arm's length government body.

Despite the plethora of paid-for or downloadable options, curricula developed within respondents' schools or wider organisations, ie multi-academy trusts, were the most commonly cited standardised curricula at secondary level and the third most common type at primary level.

The two most popular programmes reported at primary level cover the core subjects of maths and English. They are Read Write Inc, England's "leading synthetic phonics programme" developed by Ruth Miskin and published by Oxford University Press, and Power Maths created by Pearson in partnership with White Rose Maths, a programme incubated within a MAT.

It is reasonable to think their popularity is a consequence of the demands of statutory testing at KS2, alongside the requirements of the phonics screening check and multiplication check. The prominence of Read Write Inc and Little Wandle reflect this need in respect of phonics. Power Maths/White Rose Maths, alongside Maths Mastery, published by Ark Curriculum Plus, connected to another MAT, address what policymakers have seen as a longstanding weakness in primary education, the quality of maths teaching (Ofsted 2023). Commercial standardised curricula for subjects such as languages and music were also popular. In these cases, it is likely that respondents are not subject specialists in these areas and so seek the support of commercial packages.

Twenty-seven per cent of primary teacher respondents who used standardised curricula (186/683) reported that they used standardised curricula developed at the level of the school or the MAT. Among secondary teachers, the proportion rose: 76 per cent of respondents (343/449) used school/MAT curricula. The finding may point to the desire on a MAT level to create a standardised classroom experience for pupils, one which accords with the MAT's 'brand'. Additionally, rolling out standardised curricula on a MAT level may be aimed at reducing teacher workload related to lesson planning.

Responses to the question "Which standardised curricula have you followed in the past 12 months?" do not provide information on the way in which such programmes are developed and implemented. They do not show whether classroom teachers themselves have a part in developing the programmes or if they are required by senior leaders to follow these curricula strictly. The process underlying the development and implementation of such programmes may be key to understanding the effect that they have on teachers' sense of autonomy – an issue we explore in a later survey question and in our interviews with teachers in Section 5.



Despite being free to the user and offering a range of subjects across age phases, Oak National Academy, the focus of our case study, proved a relatively unpopular provider. Across our sample of teachers and middle leaders, only 55 teachers (three per cent) reported following Oak curricula – 24 in primary schools, 30 in secondary and one in a mixed age setting. In the case study section (Section 6), we offer further insights from the questionnaire and interviews into the way Oak is used by teachers.

**The relationship between standardised curricula use and autonomy, self-efficacy and workload**

We wanted, through the survey, to understand how the sense of autonomy, self-efficacy and workload (see Section 2) differed among teachers using standardised curricula, compared with those using non-standardised curricula. As we explained in Section 3, to do this we asked for their response to a series of questions on a 4-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. For each question we added together the scores obtained, first from the group of standardised curriculum users, and separately, from teachers who did not use standardised curriculum. We placed the responses on a standardised scale of 0-10 to make it easier to interpret the data. We were then able, for every answer, to express in the form of a number on the ten-point scale the difference between the scores for the two groups. Figures 4 and 5 present these findings.

Figure 4 (primary) and Figure 5 (secondary) show teachers' mean score for autonomy, two kinds of self-efficacy (instructional and engagement) and perceptions of workload. The dark purple bars denote the mean score for those who did not report following standardised curricula (non-standardised

curricula users: N-SCU), whereas the light purple bars mark the mean score for each variable for those teachers who used standardised curricula (standardised curricula users: SCU).

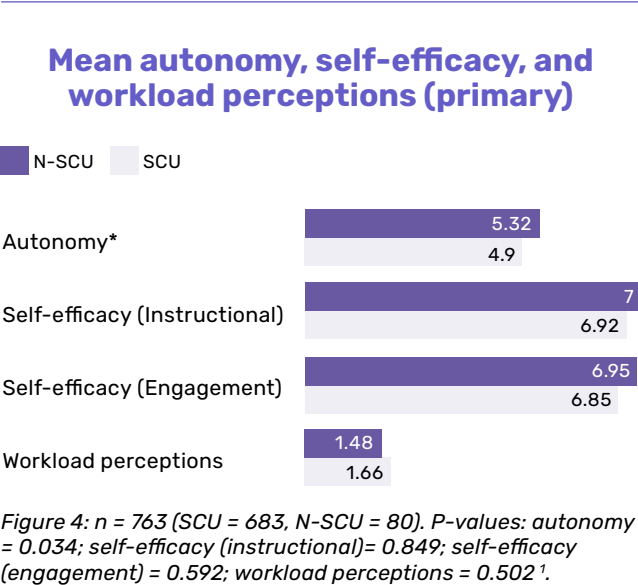


Figure 4.

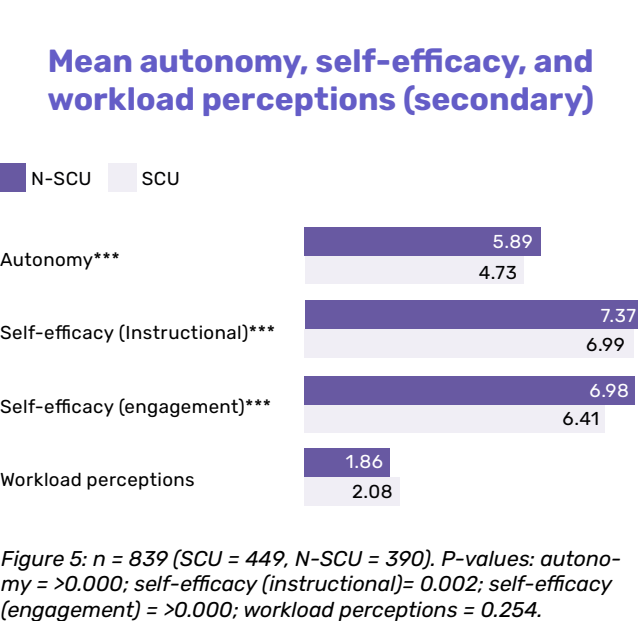


Figure 5.

<sup>1</sup>We ran Wilcoxon tests of significance to identify if the differences between those teachers who used standardised curricula (SCU) and those who did not (N-SCU) were statistically significant. Asterisks (\*) next to the variable names are used to visually indicate the level of statistical significance based on the p-value, with one star signifying a p-value less than 0.05, two stars for a p-value less than 0.01, and three stars for a p-value less than 0.001; essentially, more stars indicate a higher level of statistical significance. Where there is no asterisk, it means that any difference was not found to be significant, ie any differences between the two groups (SCU vs N-SCU) are likely to be due to chance rather than another factor.

Figures 4 and 5 show that teachers at both levels were more autonomous if they did not follow standardised curricula. For primary school teachers (Figure 4), there were no significant differences for the other variables that we looked at: self-efficacy (instructional), self-efficacy (engagement) and workload perceptions. In brief, there did not appear to be a relationship between using standardised curricula and primary school teachers' sense of self-efficacy or their perceptions of their workload.

At secondary level (Figure 5), teachers who used standardised curricula (SCU) were significantly less autonomous and significantly less self-efficacious in their instruction and ability to engage pupils than those who did not use such materials. However, as with the primary teachers, there were no significant differences in the way in which teachers perceived their workload. Although there are no clear links between the use or non-use of standardised curricula and workload perceptions, Figures 4 and 5 clearly show that teachers in both phases have extremely poor perceptions of their workload.

The following sections provide a more detailed analysis of these findings.

Autonomy

**Teachers who do not use standardised curricula reported experiencing more autonomy than standardised curricula users. This finding was true for both primary and secondary level teachers.**

There was a significant association between using standardised curricula and teacher autonomy with those who did not use such curricula expressing higher levels of autonomy. As explained in Section 3, the autonomy scale, was made-up of different question items, all starting with the same question stem, "To what extent do you agree or disagree that you have control over...?". Teachers' responses were rescaled from 0-10 (0 = low autonomy and 10 = high autonomy).

These items were added together to give an overall score for teacher autonomy; the higher the score, the more autonomous the teacher felt.

Figures 6 and 7 show the responses for each item of the autonomy scale, and for the overall autonomy scale, grouped by whether the respondents were standardised curricula users or not. The dark purple bar shows the mean response for teachers who did not report using standardised curricula and the light purple bars show the mean response for standardised curricula users.

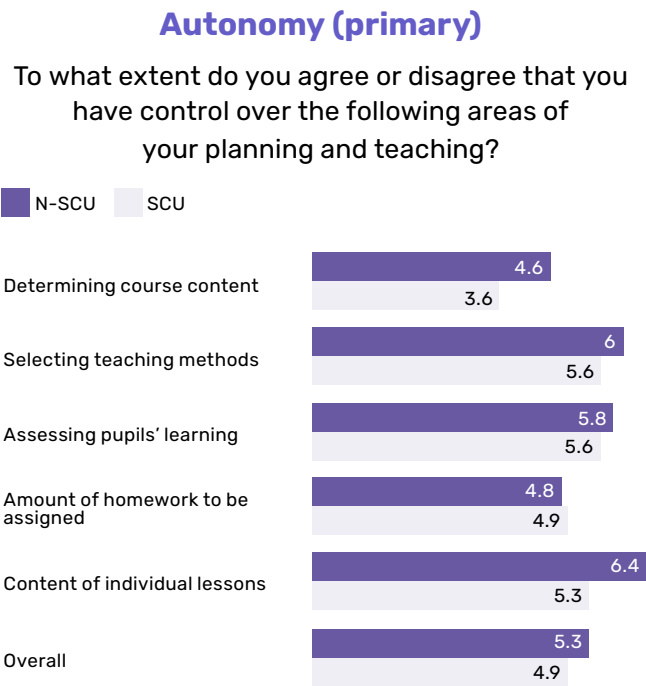


Figure 6: n = 763 (SCU = 683, N-SCU = 80)

Figure 6.



## Autonomy (secondary)

To what extent do you agree or disagree that you have control over the following areas of your planning and teaching?

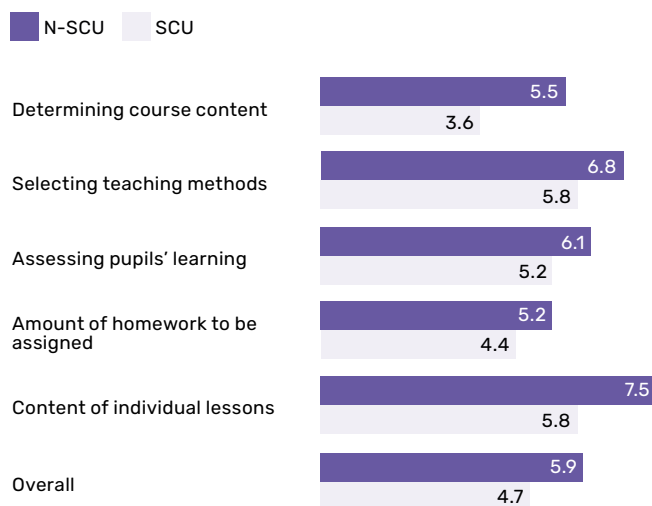


Figure 7: n = 839 (SCU = 449, N-SCU = 390)

Figure 7.

When these individual questions are looked at, the greatest differences for users of standardised curricula compared to non-users were control over course content and content of individual lessons. The finding was true for both primary and secondary level teachers.

## Who influences lesson content?

More than a third of primary school teachers said that they had little or no influence over lesson content.

A further question aiming to understand teacher autonomy focused on influence, asking, "How much influence do the following have over lesson content in your school?". Teachers were asked to evaluate the influence, separately, of classroom teachers, school leaders, school middle leaders, the requirements of external assessment, parents and the leadership of multi-academy trusts (if applicable). Figures 8 and 9 display the results by school phase.

## Influence over lesson content (primary)

How much influence do the following have over lesson content in your school?

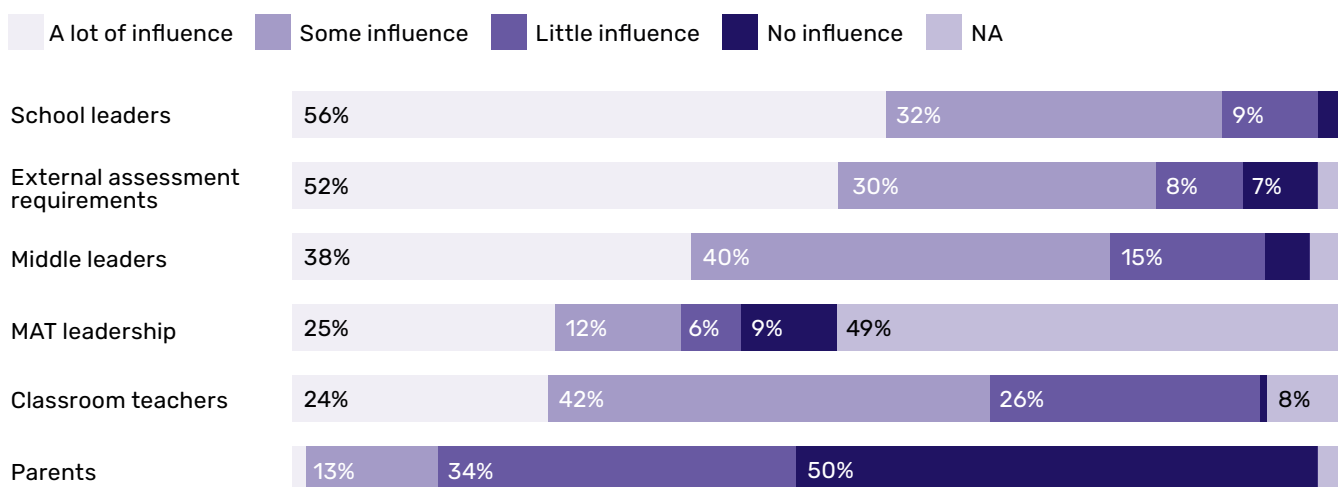


Figure 8: n = 763 (SCU = 683, N-SCU = 80)

Figure 8.

## Influence over lesson content (secondary)

How much influence do the following have over lesson content in your school?

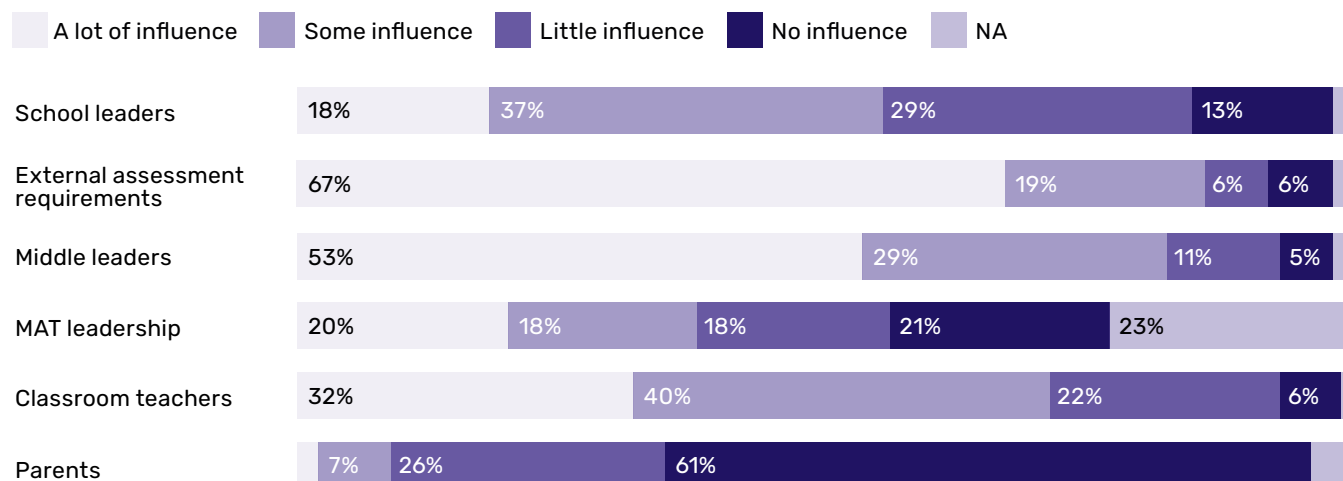


Figure 9: n = 839 (SCU = 449, N-SCU = 390)

Figure 9.

In primary schools, respondents indicated that classroom teachers had less influence over lesson content than school leaders, external assessment requirements or middle leaders. Although most (66 per cent) considered that classroom teachers had a lot or some influence over lesson content, more than a third said that they had little or no influence.

In secondary schools, external assessment requirements appeared to be the factor that most influenced lesson content – 86 per cent stated that assessments had a lot or some influence. The finding reflects the pressures of a system in which high-stakes assessment is a prominent feature.

Compared to primary school teachers, those at secondary level saw their school leaders as less influential over lessons. We explore the reasons for this in the Interviews in section.

### Self-efficacy

**Secondary teachers who do not use standardised curricula have significantly higher self-efficacy than those who use standardised curricula.**

Self-efficacy, as we have seen in Section 2, relates to teachers' beliefs in their own capability to work in a way that positively affects and influences outcomes. It is often measured in terms of the sub-categories of instructional self-efficacy and engagement. The former relates to the teacher's belief in their ability to teach or instruct well, the latter to the teacher's ability to interest and motivate students.

As explained in Section 3, teachers' self-efficacy was assessed by asking them a series of eight questions, four of which made up the instructional scale and four which comprised the engagement scale. The teachers' mean responses for each item are displayed in Figures 9-12. The overall score is the average score for the overall scale, ie the teachers' overall belief in their ability to instruct students well or to engage students in their learning. The dark purple bars show the mean response from standardised curricula users, whereas the non-standardised curricula users' mean responses are depicted by the light purple bars. The scale runs from 0-10, where 0 = low self-efficacy and 10 = high self-efficacy.

### Self-efficacy: Instructional (primary)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

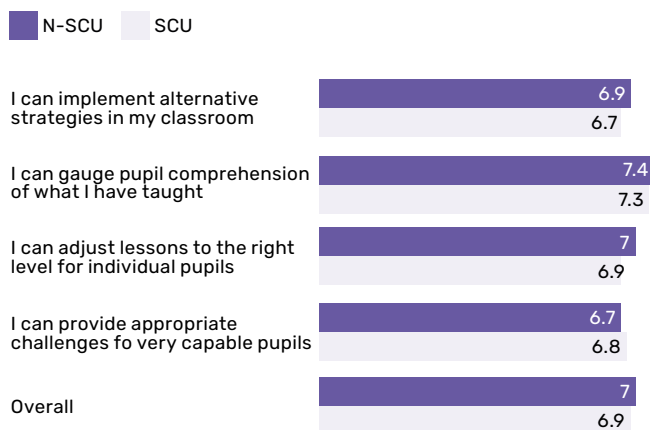


Figure 10: n = 763 (SCU = 683, N-SCU = 80)

Figure 10.

### Self-efficacy: Engagement (primary)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

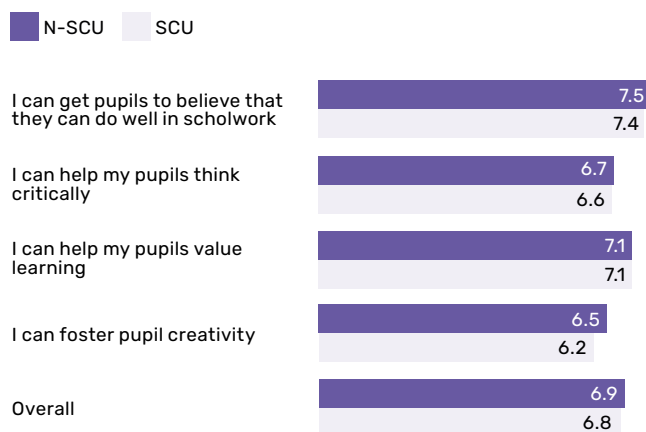


Figure 12: n = 763 (SCU = 683, N-SCU = 80)

Figure 12.

### Self-efficacy: Instructional (secondary)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

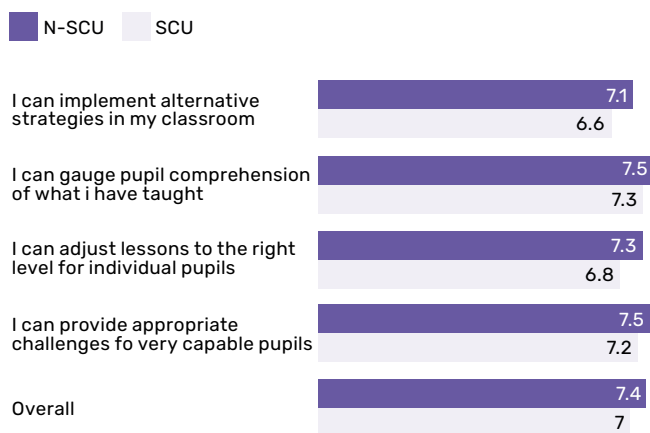


Figure 11: n = 839 (SCU = 449, N-SCU = 3)

Figure 11.

### Self-efficacy: Engagement (secondary)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

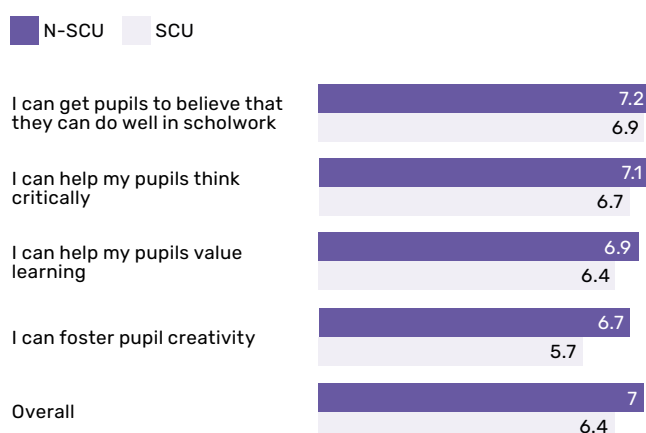


Figure 13: n = 839 (SCU = 449, N-SCU = 390)

Figure 13.

Secondary teachers who did not follow standardised curricula considered themselves significantly better able both to teach and engage students than those who did.

Responses to an open question later in the survey may help explain these differences: many teachers, in both age phases, wrote that the standardised curricula they followed were boring and ill-adapted to the specific needs of their pupils; this may perhaps explain teachers' lower feelings of self-efficacy when it came to engaging students. Likewise, teachers reported that when following standardised curricula, they experienced a loss of professionalism and skill because they were not using their expertise to develop and tailor materials for their classes. It may be that standardised curricula constrained them to the point where they were unable to develop or exercise the skills needed to tailor instruction to the requirements of particular learners. As we shall see in Section 5, this was a problem frequently mentioned in the interviews.

## **Workload perceptions**

**There are no significant differences between the workload perceptions of non-standardised curriculum users and standardised curriculum users. This finding applies both to primary and secondary teachers, and to full- and part-time teachers, and raises a significant question against the claim that the use of standardised curricula provides part of the answer to the problem of excessive workload.**

To understand teachers' perceptions, we made use of questions from the DfE's Teacher Workload Survey (Walker et al 2019). We asked teachers to respond to three statements which, following the TWS (2019), were presented on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree) which was later rescaled 0-10.

### Workload perceptions (primary)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your working hours?

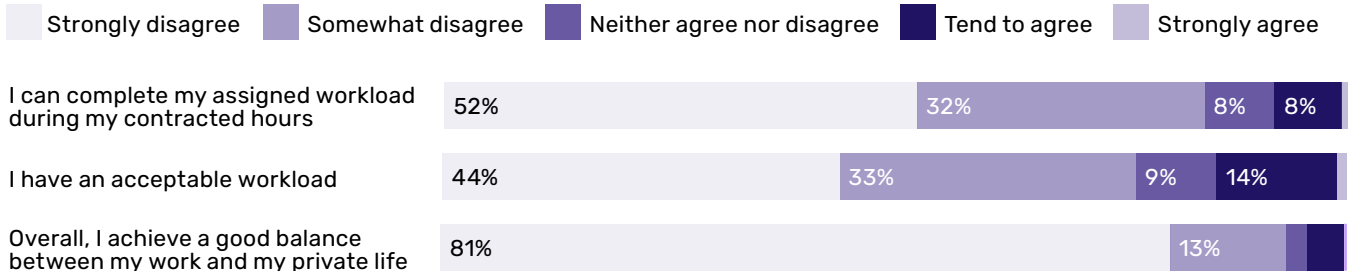


Figure 14: n = 763 (SCU = 683, N-SCU = 80)

Figure 14.

### Workload perceptions (secondary)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your working hours?

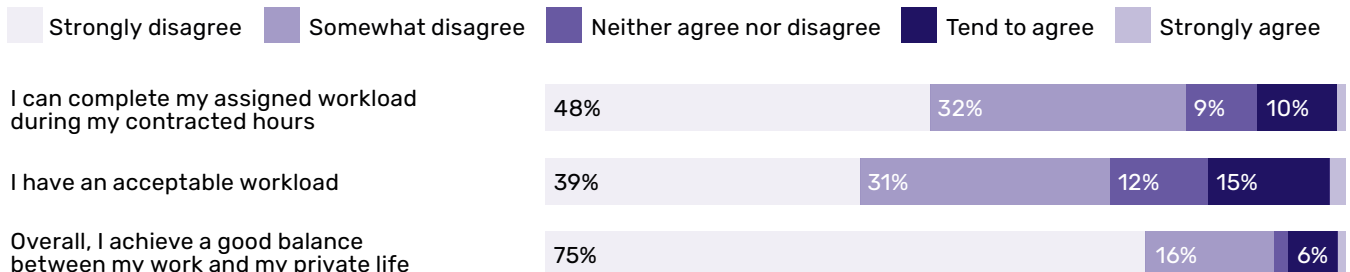


Figure 15: n = 839 (SCU = 449, N-SCU = 390)

Figure 15.

Overall teachers' perceptions of their workload were poor across the board, regardless of school phase or whether they followed standardised curricula; this is also evident in Figures 4 and 5.

Responses to open questions: teachers' experiences of standardised curricula.

To gain a richer understanding of teacher experiences, we asked those who said that they had made use of standardised curricula over the past 12 months some follow-up questions. We then coded the answers thematically. We began by asking: "What do you think are the advantages of following standardised curricula?"

Standardised curricula advantages

What do you think are the advantages of following standardised curricula?

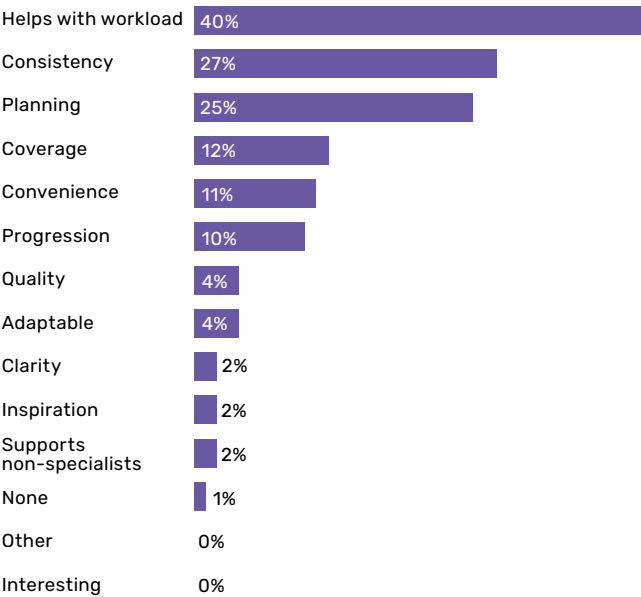


Figure 16: Summary of thematic codes: advantages of SC use (n of respondents = 1,115: primary = 665, secondary = 414, mixed aged = 36)

Figure 16.

The responses to this question initially appear to conflict with the findings from the question about workload perceptions, in which 40 per cent of teachers stated that reducing or otherwise improving workload is an advantage of standardised curricula use. One quarter of respondents pinpointed planning as an area or activity that particularly benefitted.

Given these comments, we might have expected that teachers who followed standardised curricula would have better perceptions of their workload than those who did not. However, this is not the case. As previously reported, when we compare standardised curriculum users with non-users we find no significant differences in teachers' perceptions of their workloads. These seemingly contradictory findings point to the complexity of workload; it has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Efforts to 'spot-reduce' workload from particular sources, such as planning or marking, can in practice lead to an increase in complexity and/or intensity (Green 2021). For instance, having to use resources which are out of step with students' learning needs may mean that teachers must find additional ways to cover content that has not been understood. Seemingly simple solutions to a perceived workload problem may have knock-on or unintended effects elsewhere. This may be why teachers can say both that standardised curricula reduce workload – true in a narrow and immediate sense – and also that in overall terms workload has not been improved.

Teachers’ perceptions of the disadvantages of following standardised curricula

Impaired autonomy, curtailed professionalism and/or deskilling of teachers were the most cited disadvantages of standardised curriculum use.

Standardised curricula disadvantages

What do you think are the disadvantages of following standardised curricula?

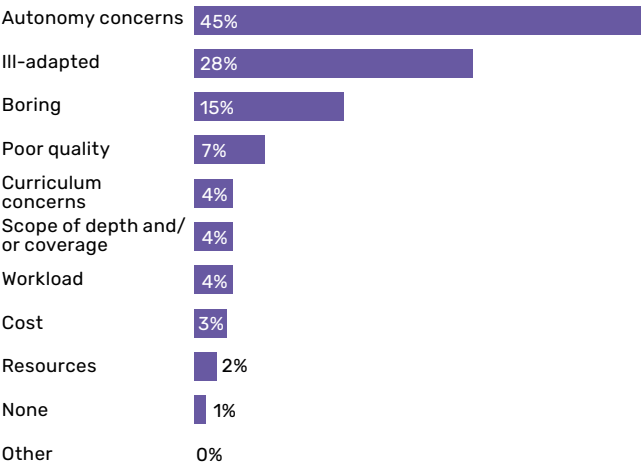


Figure 17: Summary of thematic codes: disadvantages of SC use (n of respondents = 1,115: primary = 665, secondary = 414, mixed aged = 36)

Figure 17.

What was perceived as the generic or ill-adapted nature of standardised curricula was highlighted by 28 per cent of responding teachers. In responding to the ‘advantages’ question, 27 per cent had said that standardised packages brought consistency and ensured that all students received the same experience. However, in answers to the disadvantages question, responses flipped. Many teachers lamented that the ‘one size fits all’ approach was unsuitable for students. Some wrote that lessons were “pitched too high” or that content was covered too rapidly for some students including some of those with SEND. Others thought that standardised

packages did not provide an adequate challenge for high-achieving students. Other teachers reported spending a lot of time adapting standardised curricula to meet the needs of their classes. Fifteen per cent, meanwhile, identified them as boring.

Summary of key issues

- The survey illuminates the widespread use of standardised curricula, both bought-in or produced in-house by schools or MATs. It is seen by teachers as a support for planning and a way of bringing consistency to a school’s curriculum. Teachers are much less convinced of the quality of standardised curricula and, in significant numbers, they are concerned that it is not well-adapted to students’ needs and that its use decreases teachers’ autonomy and sense of self-efficacy.
- There is clear evidence that, on questions of autonomy and self-efficacy, there are important differences between the experiences of users of standardised curricula and non-users, with secondary level users being inclined to report less self-efficacy and reduced autonomy. These factors have a significant impact on perceptions of job quality and hence job satisfaction.
- On workload, the picture is complex. Workload relates not only to quantity – number of hours – but also to task discretion and the level of professional autonomy afforded. Comparison of standardised curriculum users with non-users suggests no significant differences in teachers’ perceptions of their workloads. The use of standardised curricula appears to shift the workload burden from one area of teachers’ work (planning) to another (adapting material). These are all issues we shall return to in reporting on our interviews with teachers.

- We have pointed to difficulties in interpreting the data and we have also advanced the argument that the use of standardised curricula shifts the workload burden from one area of teachers' work (planning) to another (adapting material). These are all issues we shall return to in reporting on our interviews with teachers. We should note that the data do not support the claim that the use of standardised curricula has a positive effect on teachers' workload.



# Section 5

## The interviews

Our survey findings demonstrated that teachers felt the use of standardised curricula limited their autonomy and reduced their self-efficacy. In this section we explore in detail how this experience of limitation and reduction works in practice, and the impact it has on teachers' job satisfaction and sense of professional autonomy. We also discuss the effects it may have on workload.

### The positive uses of standardised curricula

All the teachers we interviewed had experience of using standardised curricula in curriculum planning, though the extent and type of this experience varied widely. Those who taught in MATs were likely to use curriculum packages created by a lead practitioner to be used by all the schools in the trust. Those in single academies or local authority schools were more likely to use commercial packages for at least part of the curriculum.

All the teachers took the view that a certain level of standardisation in planning was desirable to achieve consistency across classes and students, for example, in meeting learning objectives:

*I suppose at one end you might have, which would be quite an old-fashioned way, teachers basically teaching their own thing. At the other end, I know you get some schools where it's like the trust says, "This is the curriculum and you are teaching it." We obviously don't want that, but we sort of want to be all teaching the same thing, so all the kids are getting the same course. (Interviewee 3, secondary history).*

*Having a standardised curriculum, I think there's an element of equality for the children who are receiving that education. (Interviewee 8, primary)*

For some teachers, the main benefit of a standardised curriculum came from the access to resources and subject knowledge that packages could provide. Three primary teachers spoke of themselves as generalists, and their need for support in some curricular areas:

*I feel I'm looking for quality resources... I'm not a historian, I'm not a geographer, I can't design a map, I don't have access to all the amazing things that the people who design standardised curriculum do have access to. So, yeah, personally, for me, I think a starting point would be really good. (Interviewee 8, primary)*

*We see that in Spanish. We love the fact that it's ready and we know that we can just go on, select on the things. I think it depends how you use them. (Interviewee 2, primary)*

*I [also] like that a scheme is written by experts as well. So as a teacher, especially a primary school teacher, you have to have that knowledge in every single subject. Certain subjects you are stronger in than other subjects. So, it is nice to be able to pick a scheme up and know that an expert person has written it. (Interviewee 11, primary)*

One secondary teacher was enthusiastic about the way packages organised complex material at GCSE level:

*When they came out, oh my god, that was a dream because suddenly I had everything on PowerPoint, follow the spec points and, you know, it was brilliant. ... It explains things really well and you've got it, but you use that as a starting point and then you can add different bits to it. (Interviewee 14, secondary science)*

## Filling the gaps

Other teachers spoke of the role that standardised curricula play in helping to fill gaps in their school system, either to support supply teachers and non-specialists, or to support consistency in schools with high teacher turnover:

*When we get a supply teacher in, which is fairly regularly... they just go through the slides. People who don't like maths very much just go through the slides. (Interviewee 5, primary)*

*I've got seven physics teachers in my physics team, so not all of them are fully physics teachers, some of them are not as experienced as others, so having something I know that at worst they can teach the lesson that's there and it'll be a good lesson. It might not be a perfect lesson... but there's something good there. (R4, focus group 2)*

*I would like to see more use made of standardised curricula because I think that would really be quite useful, it would save quite a lot of time, and it would probably improve the quality of quite a lot of teaching. Particularly people who are teaching outside their specialism, especially areas where they haven't taught for a while, are a bit rusty. (Interviewee 10, secondary science)*

*One of the benefits of it has been that actually if you've got a standardised*

*curriculum and standardised resources, it maybe doesn't matter so much who the teacher is because there's plenty of schools, particularly in London, where they have a very high staff turnover. The resources stay the same. (Interviewee 17, secondary history)*

According to these teachers, standardised curricula are being used as a solution to several major systemic problems: teacher shortages, high turnover and lack of professional development.

But for the most part the emphasis of the interviewees falls on the usefulness of the material rather than its quality.

## Workload

In both focus group and individual interviews, teachers identified workload as an ongoing issue. Several teachers in our sample spoke to us about how planning an entire course of lessons was very difficult alongside the other demands of their work:

*I'm very much resisting the idea of us being able to create every single lesson that we're supposed to teach, it's impossible. We are not at home. We are in school seven to seven. We don't have the time. (R6, focus group 1)*

In this context standardised curricula were perceived as helpful. One teacher felt that her school's adoption of commercial schemes after the pandemic had saved time with whole-school planning:

*Adopting a scheme like that saves a lot of time because all of that has been done behind the scenes for you. Whereas trying to do it on your own and work out what that individual teacher's done, and does that provide progression or doesn't it, that was taking forever to do. (Interviewee 6, primary)*

Thus for particular purposes and particular circumstances, standardised curricula were seen to have their uses. To cover for absence, to compensate for a lack of specialist knowledge, to reduce aspects of workload – these were seen by several interviewees as legitimate and welcome uses of standardised curricula. Beyond such uses, most of the teachers in our sample were inclined to be much more critical.

### **Saving time is complicated**

When we asked teachers whether they felt that standardised curricula saved them time, several agreed that it could, but added important and revealing caveats. Two teachers felt that what they gained in time they lost in the quality of their teaching:

*I like to have ownership of my lessons and how I teach them, and how I put them together. But because of time constraints, I do like to dip into schemes written by experts that I can then use to help me build my own lessons. (Interviewee 16, primary)*

*I think if you're maybe experienced you can pick those materials and just use them. And, yes, they do save a bit of time, although they're delivering a, kind of, second best experience really, in my summary of the whole thing. (Interviewee 9, secondary English and drama)*

One teacher made the point that standardised curricula do not work for children with SEND and this is not a viable workload reduction strategy for teachers in such settings:

*For myself, it wouldn't reduce workload because of the nature of the children that I work with, so because everything has to be adapted and has to be suited to them, it wouldn't be possible for me to fully subscribe to a website like that and to be able to get everything off there that*

*I needed because it just wouldn't all be relevant. (Interviewee 13, primary SEND specialist)*

Other teachers were clear that standardised curricula were an important resource, but recognised that they could not be used as simple scripts to be followed:

*I have worked in one-form entry schools where there's certain subjects, just having a scheme ready-made, it's a lifesaver, you know, it gives you time back. So, yes, it does reduce workload... The flip side of it though would be that, you know, if you picked up a scheme thinking, I don't need to look at this beforehand, everything is going to be ready-made, I just load the PowerPoint, the worksheets ready, actually the problem you can then get as a professional is around behaviour and engagement. (Interviewee 11, primary)*

*You can change them yourself and you probably spend as much time changing them yourself as you would making them yourself because each class isn't the same this year as it was last year, and yours isn't the same as mine, so we spend quite a lot of time editing. (R7, focus group 1)*

Thus it may be that standardised curricula have not reduced teacher workload; they have simply moved it to another place (see the findings of the survey Section 4). Instead of spending time researching material and selecting resources, teachers are spending time interpreting and adapting generic materials to meet the needs of their pupils.

## Autonomy: the importance of flexibility

All the teachers in our sample took the view that a certain level of consistency was desirable. For some, their sense of autonomy was expressed as the right balance between consistency and flexibility in curriculum planning:

*We all like to have something to base our planning around. We've always had this kind of stuff. It's useful, so long as you can adapt it and pick out the bits that work for you and your students and set aside the stuff that doesn't work. For me, the problem comes when you must use it unmodified and it's compulsory. (Interviewee 12, secondary English)*

*It's about finding the balance really... I don't want to make my own slides, you know, I've not got the time to do that, but having that professional judgement just to say, the children are ready to move on... and have the confidence as well to be able to say, "I skipped those slides, and I know why". (Interviewee 8, primary)*

The need for consistency was mentioned as an advantage of standardised curricula by 27 per cent of the teachers in our survey. A smaller proportion of the teachers we interviewed also raised the issue of consistency in planning and teaching, and felt that standardised curricula had a role to play in this:

*Any student walking into any classroom knows what to expect. None of them are going to get surprised. You're not going to have a student who's going to go, "Oh, I didn't expect this to happen" and suddenly flip out. (Interviewee 17, secondary history)*

However, three quarters of our survey respondents did not select consistency as a benefit of standardised curricula, and again our interview data can shed some light on why they did not see the focus on consistency as a positive development. Across the interviews, a pattern emerged of practices of collaborative and flexible planning being replaced in several schools by standardised commercial or in-house curriculum packages 'imposed from above' as one teacher put it, with no input from class teachers, and often without consultation:

*Twenty people in the department, we're a very big school, twenty people. They might have a say, they might have a view, were not even asked what they thought. (R6, focus group 1)*

*We have directors of science who basically planned the whole scheme of work. ... the lessons are planned and literally you pick up a PowerPoint and you teach it. (Interviewee 14, secondary science)*

*Rather than being able to choose texts that we think will engage our children and enjoy them, we've again got to go through the PowerPoint and follow a very precise order with the way you read. So it's completely robotic. Really sad. (Interviewee 5, primary)*

*There's certainly less lesson planning, but there's also less ownership. It's that thing of we're no longer teachers because we're no longer teaching lessons that we have ownership of. We are just delivering. (R2, focus group 1)*

These perspectives suggest that the drive for consistency has had a negative impact on professional autonomy, and more specifically on what Green (2021) terms teachers' task discretion, their ability to make decisions about how to carry out their work (see Section 2).

## The power of PowerPoint: 'Are you on slide 8 yet?'

The imposition of schemes of work 'from above' was seen as problematic by several teachers. The biggest challenge to teacher autonomy, however, was the requirement to use a specific set of PowerPoint slides for every lesson. Time and time again, teachers detailed what one teacher described as the 'suffocating' restrictions imposed on teachers and students:

*We do not teach a single subject now without slides... for one of our lessons we might have 20 to 30 slides... it's ridiculous. (Interviewee 2, primary)*

*Every single English teacher up and down the corridor would be doing the same PowerPoint at the same time and SLT would look in and say, 'Are you on slide 8 yet? Are you on slide 9 yet?' which was just horrific. (Interviewee 12, secondary English)*

*There's just PowerPoints and smart boards all day long. We're just staring at a screen and a lot of the get up and go and collaborative learning has gone. (Interviewee 16, primary)*

## Imposed learning models

For several teachers, the compulsory use of PowerPoint slides was associated with the imposition of particular models of learning and teaching, based on retrieval and recitation:

*It would be retrieval, introduction and then the children have a go, then your plenary. They now do something like my turn, our turn, your turn. Then there is arithmetic built in to the retrieval of a maths lesson and a grammar focus on the writing lessons now as well. (Interviewee 13, primary SEND specialist)*

*Start with between five and ten questions. They have to be short answer questions. They're recall, nothing else. Then you have teacher instruction, which is approximately five to ten minutes. Then you have 'I do, we do, you do'. Then you have a learning check where all the students must respond, preferably with a whiteboard... One of them has got to be a hinge question, it's got to be a pause point, it's got to be this, it's got to be that, then you have the final learning check, then they stand behind their seats. (R7, focus group 1)*

The pattern of 'I do, we do, you do' and the check for understanding, which was mentioned with subtle variations by some teachers, derives from Lemov's (2015) hugely influential book *Teach Like a Champion*. It was intended to provide a scaffold as pupils move toward independence. While this can indeed be a useful structure, the use of this formula as the non-negotiable template for all lessons attests to the extent to which many of these ideas have assumed the status of an unquestioned orthodoxy that further undermines teacher self-efficacy and sense of professional autonomy.

Teachers in the early years worried that using screens to teach every lesson, even in key stage 1, meant that valuable basic skills were not being developed:

*We've got a load of kids who can't use their hands and can't cut out and can't hold a pencil because all those things that were considered to be, oh, a bit of a waste of time, they're fluffy, but the purpose was that they learnt how to use a pair of scissors. I've got children coming out of year 2 who still say, "Can you fold my piece of paper in half?" because we haven't done a lot of folding and sticking. (Interviewee 6, primary)*



*When we planned our own maths we would have started naturally with the concrete far more often. We would have done more of the practical elements of maths.*  
(Interviewee 2, primary)

## Passive learning

Secondary teachers expressed their concerns about how passive the learning in their classrooms had become, as a consequence of the PowerPoint-led lessons they were delivering. As in primary schools, the focus was on memorisation and retrieval, something 'delivered and imposed' (Wyse 2014), rather than active engagement and critical thinking:

*They're not questioning. They're not thinking. Neither is the teacher. You teach the lesson, you're at the board and then for half an hour they write, and that's the lesson. There's no engagement. There's no discussion.*  
(R2, focus group 2)

One teacher spoke of booklets rather than PowerPoints that imposed the structure and content of each lesson, but the effect was the same:

*You'll have maybe a seven- or eight-page booklet and each lesson will be one page, and you will read the content with the students, you will note the key words, and then you'll provide sentence constructions for the students to write down.*  
(Interviewee 17, secondary history)

## (Not) adapting to the pace of learning

Teachers were also concerned that standardised curricula did not allow them to make their own professional judgement about the pace of learning. One secondary teacher articulated the views of many when she explained that she saw this as a fundamental aspect of her role:

*Sometimes you do the starter and they have forgotten everything, so the starter becomes a whole lesson because you have to cater for the needs of the student. That's the whole idea of teaching: you have to be flexible and responsive.*  
(R5, focus group 2)

Another teacher discussing the same responsive approach found, like many working in schools which allowed limited autonomy, that adapting teaching to take account of students' responses to the material was not permitted:

*You can't say, "We'll revisit this tomorrow because you're clearly not getting it. This is a really tricky concept guys, we'll do it again tomorrow". You can't because we've got to go onto something else.*  
(R7, focus group 1)

Primary teachers articulated the same sense of pressure:

*It just moves so fast and there is no flexibility in the year to say, "Woah we need to slow down, these kids don't get money, we can't move on to pounds and pence yet". But if I don't, I won't cover the whole curriculum.*  
(Interviewee 8, primary)

The teachers were clear that this pressure to cover the curriculum at the same pace, regardless of the response of the pupils, came from senior leaders, who were in turn reacting to pressure from Ofsted to demonstrate progression and curriculum coverage (see Section 2). One teacher recalled a conversation with her head teacher, when he decided to implement standardised packages across the curriculum:

*We asked the question, "What happens when you know that the students in your class haven't understood the content of that lesson? Do you redo*



*that lesson exactly as it was? Do you adapt it? Or do you just move on?" He said, "You just move on. You go onto the next slide, basically". (Interviewee 4, secondary science)*

### **'One size fits nobody': adaptive teaching and children with SEND**

One of the major criticisms teachers had of the PowerPoint based lessons they were required to teach was the lack of freedom to adapt them to meet the particular needs of their pupils. Both primary and secondary teachers objected to what many called the 'one size fits all' or as one teacher put it, 'one size fits nobody' approach to learning and teaching embodied in standardised curriculum packages.

One teacher in our sample was a SEND specialist. Another worked in a mainstream secondary class with a large number of students with SEND. They both spoke of the impossibility of enabling these children to access the standardised curriculum. The mainstream teacher noted that it was the generic, decontextualised material that was the main barrier for her students:

*There was a huge number of kids with learning support in there, half of them, and they hated those materials. They didn't cope well with things that they couldn't understand the logic for. (Interviewee 12, secondary English)*

For the SEND teacher standardised curricula had ended the possibility of inclusion in mainstream classrooms for her children:

*Our big problem is we try to follow mainstream because our kids need some mainstream experience but they're just blocked by the curriculum because it's too restrictive. So, we do our own curriculum, but it means that we don't have really any inclusion to mainstream. (R5, focus group 1)*

She felt that her expertise had been devalued. The focus on didactic whole-class teaching meant that the idea of adapting the curriculum for children with SEND had become problematic:

*They [colleagues] don't want to learn anything from us. Even for the SEND children that are in mainstream, they don't want to know because it goes against the grain of that. (R5, focus group 2).*

Teachers thus found themselves having to choose between taking on a good deal of additional work adapting commercial materials for specific children, or leaving them to struggle. For these teachers, standardisation increased, rather than diminished, workload.

### **The appeal to 'evidence'**

As we discussed in Section 2, standardised curricula are often presented as 'evidence-informed' or at least as based on the 'best' available evidence. During the interviews several participants told us that the approaches they were required to adopt were justified by references to 'the research'. When we asked if they had engaged with this research directly, none of the teachers in our sample said that they had. A few teachers expressed deep scepticism about a direct link between research and teaching or about the use of research to justify a particular approach in teaching:

*It's a loaded thing, isn't it, research in teaching? It's not like research in science... "Oh, we've looked at the research." "Oh, have you, good. What's it say?" "Well, it turns out it says what I want it to say." "Oh, good, great." (Interviewee 17, secondary history)*

*I noticed we're always being told, "It's research-based", and I'm always saying, "Where is the research? Please show me the research." They say, "Oh, well we can't. Go and look on Google*

*Scholar or go and look on something else." Everybody says, "Oh this is evidence-based." That's the other thing, it's evidence-based, but when you actually look at the evidence it doesn't stand up.*  
(Interviewee 5, primary)

*It's just constantly, "research suggests, research suggests, research suggests". But it's never, "I'm going to email this out to you and you can look at it". It's just, "I've gone away, I've done the reading, and you can just trust me on it".* (R2, focus group 1)

Thus, teachers indicated they were seldom encouraged to engage with the research themselves or given access to competing research-based arguments. Rather, it was gatekeepers within the school who were empowered to identify what research should count as important. The preferred research was invoked both to justify implementation of a particular curriculum and to deny the validity of alternative approaches.

### **A neglect of trust**

Several teachers saw the imposition of standardised curricula as indicative of a lack of trust and lack of respect for their expertise:

*You don't trust your teachers to be able to deliver and that means you want every classroom to teach exactly the same thing. This is not a factory.*  
(R5, focus group 2)

*It's a combination of, in my case, a head of department's preferences and the SLT's view, and that combination or the partnership is completely taking us out of the decision-making process. I mean, I have no say as an expert.*  
(R6, focus group 1)

Given the previous government's interest in standardised curriculum packages as a way to reduce workload (see Section 2)

and ultimately retain teachers, it is notable that three teachers in our sample said they had left their schools as a direct result of restrictions on their professional autonomy, and had moved to schools that allowed them more freedom. One teacher commented that she was one of many:

*I decided to leave my last school because I had no freedom over the curriculum... I was one of the last ones to leave, but everyone who felt the same way left because I think they felt that was a culture they couldn't exist in.* (Interviewee 16, primary)

Others, working in schools where teachers had more control over the curriculum, said they would leave teaching altogether if this changed:

*I'm really fearful of something being implemented nationally and being a compulsory kind of curriculum. That terrifies me, because I love having that ability to really think about the content that my students are learning... I think if there was a compulsory curriculum, I'd probably be out the window.*  
(Interviewee 18, secondary geography)

Others stayed for a variety of reasons, but acknowledged that their love of their work had been damaged:

*I looked into stress and I discovered that stress wasn't necessarily being caused by workload. It was also being caused by a lack of professional freedom... from not being able to, you know, take ownership of what we do anymore or how we teach. My colleague describes it as she feels like she's a warm body at the front of the classroom, that sense of disconnect from what you're teaching because you haven't planned it, it's not meaningful for you.* (Interviewee 2, primary)

This is an eloquent description of work strain (Green 2021), involving low task discretion and high work intensity. It adds to our understanding that workload issues alone are not the only or even the main reason teachers decide to leave the profession. As McQuade (2024: 1391) points out, initiatives aimed at reducing workload “miss the point if they focus on the mechanics of teaching (managing data, planning and marking) rather than overarching pressures (such as perceived efficacy, social relationships and autonomy) that influence teachers”.

## Resistance

Some teachers felt able to retain a level of autonomy, either publicly or privately adapting materials in their own classrooms. They feared, nevertheless, that this would come at a price:

*He's [head of faculty] given us his PowerPoints that we're supposed to use and I adapt them and put in my own bits to make it a better lesson... If I know he's doing a learning walk, I have to be a bit more careful with what resources I'm using because if he finds me using a resource he doesn't want me to use then I will get told off. (Interviewee 7, secondary maths)*

In some cases, this fear was borne out. Some of those who had diverted from the lesson structure or content, in schools which allowed little autonomy to teachers, reported that they had been challenged:

*I've had recent observations and they come in and go, "But you didn't use the standard, like, five questions". I go, "No, because I was talking to the students". They're like, "Everybody has to do the same five questions". (Interviewee 4, secondary science)*

*I had a set in year 10 where, quite literally, more than half of them were on the learning support register for*

*a range of behavioural difficulties... I was told with all these kids that I had to match pace with my head of department... I took some of the slides out of the PowerPoint, modified them, simplified the language... and I was subjected to a lesson observation where I was absolutely panned for modifying the vocabulary for the needs of the students because it wasn't exactly the same material. (Interviewee 12, secondary English)*

As we noted in Section 1, so-called scripted curricula have been in use in the USA for many years. Similarities seem to be increasing between this approach to curriculum and pedagogy and the use of standardised curricula in England. In many instances it is clear that the PowerPoint has become the English version of the script.

## What about the students?

Some teachers criticised the generic nature of the materials because they reduced their self-efficacy. They denied them the opportunity to adapt the stipulated content so as to teach to their own strengths, and to interest and excite their students. Opportunities for higher levels of engagement – and thus for higher quality learning – were spurned. Engagement was sometimes described in terms of drawing on children's existing interests:

*I've had classes that love drawing and are very artistic and any opportunity in a lesson for comic stripping or representing our work through a drawing, you know that that's going to capture their imagination. Other years we've had quite chatty classes that love working as teams and they'll say, "Oh, can we make a poster? Can we present something at the front of class?" You as a class teacher know your class, you know their strengths, their weaknesses, what's going to really inspire them. (Interviewee 11, primary)*

Sometimes it had to do with making learning accessible and engaging through other kinds of pedagogy, beyond those involved in a scripted or PowerPoint approach.

*Half of what I've always believed is, you know, I go into the classroom and I'm playing a role, I'm an actor. You want them to be engaged, so you become a stand-up comedian, or whatever it takes to get that particular group of kids hooked. If you're following a script, word for word, from a PowerPoint and every lesson is the same, it doesn't work. (Interviewee 12, secondary English)*

Others felt that, just as the generic nature of the standardised packages made it difficult for children with SEND to access the curriculum, so it also made it difficult for higher attaining students to reach their full potential. One history teacher described the problem as a general lack of challenge in the in-house booklets he was expected to work through with his students, one page per lesson:

*We need to be talking to students. We need to be challenging them. They need to have their thought processes challenged. But, I think, in moving to standardised booklets, it's moving away from that. It's like, let's not have the conversation because it's too difficult. Whereas I'm of the thought pattern of, well, yeah, it's meant to be difficult because these students need to be thinking. (Interviewee 17, secondary history)*

A primary school teacher made a similar point. She found a maths package useful, but limited, and used her own subject expertise to offer more challenge for her class:

*There's a scheme called Times Tables Rock Stars which is all online and it helps increase times tables fluency. It's great... and then they get a tables test which is something like, one*

*times seven equals, nine times seven equals. Okay, fine, they know their tables. But every Friday, I give them a [handwritten] tables test which will be more like, "What is seven squared? How many sevens are there in 21? How many sevens are there in 25?" and get them to express the remainder, so that they're actually using that tables knowledge in a variety of different ways. (Interviewee 5, primary)*

Another teacher spoke of the very structured format of English lessons. Sentence starters and prescribed vocabulary prevented confident students from developing skills:

*The father of the year 7 child was really worried because his child is very creative and writes stories a lot at home and has been all her life. But in lessons we put up the slide with, you need to start a sentence and then throughout the story this is the word bank that you have to use. The child feels that she is not enjoying writing anymore. (R6, focus group 1)*

Across the interviews we heard substantial evidence for what has been termed the 'expertise reversal effect' (Kalyuga 2007) which suggests that while direct instruction may be a successful approach for beginners, more enquiry-based and student-led approaches are likely to be more effective for more confident and experienced learners (Muller and Cook 2024). In this context, the comment of an English teacher from an independent school is significant in its detection of a lack of ambition in standardised curricula. Looking at some widely available standard materials he concluded:

*For our students they're too simple. I think they're going to get very bored; they're going to get disengaged. I think they're going to feel a little bit patronised by that material as well. (Interviewee 9, secondary English and drama)*

The lack of ambition was connected to the prohibition on adaptive teaching discussed above, as well as, in some cases, a lack of in-depth subject expertise on the part of curriculum designers. Some teachers were keenly aware that the packages they were required to work with did not always embody good subject knowledge. A secondary English teacher told a story which illustrated the gulf between their expert disciplinary knowledge and the formulaic approach taken in the standard curriculum:

*We had a walk around while I was teaching, and it's like, "Oh you have to use two adjectives to describe every single noun that you write", and it's this, sort of, very reductive, tick box, this is what the examiner is after. I'm like, adjectives are, like, sort of, herbs and spices in cooking, you can't just use all of it all the time, because otherwise it's overwhelming and you won't want to eat it. The kids are coming along with it and they're getting it, and then I got called up for it in a meeting later. It was like, "You just teach the thing that we tell you... especially if we've got someone from the trust watching". (R2, focus group 1)*

A very experienced English teacher articulated her students' frustration when she was not allowed to use her pedagogic and subject expertise to interpret the curriculum for them, because of the tightly structured and generic lessons she was required to teach, always beginning with vocabulary list:

*They needed to see why we were doing something rather than having the decontextualised vocabulary to begin with. It needed to be located in something for them. (Interviewee 12, secondary English)*

Thus, in a way much criticised by subject associations like the National Association for the Teaching of English (Richmond 2016), young people are expected to assimilate

knowledge divorced from its application or context. In contrast, some teachers working in schools with higher levels of autonomy told a different story in which autonomy and self-efficacy featured more strongly. This led to greater job satisfaction and, in their view, to a better experience for pupils:

*If something happens in the news, then you can change and tweak. So, I mean, when you had MeToo or when you had Black Lives Matter, it was a case of maybe we need more of a focus on here, more of a focus on there, so we respond to what's going on in the world as well, as well as what's going on in academia if something new comes out. (Interviewee 3, secondary history)*

*I love making resources. I love thinking about what my students need. That's half the joy for me. So, if someone took that from me, I'd just be like, well this isn't creative anymore, is it? (R2, focus group 1)*

Two teachers also spoke of their close involvement with collaborative curriculum planning, and the benefits they felt this brought to both staff and students:

*We completely overhauled key stage 3 about three years ago just to bring more into it and there was no, kind of, like, what we could and couldn't do. It was just we do we feel is right for our students and our staff, and what was the expertise within the department, and what we were missing, and what we were going to have to bring in. It was just really, yeah, lovely and creative. (R2, focus group 2)*

*We got together with one of our other bigger schools who teach A-level chemistry and basically, we started from scratch... So, actually we chatted about it and then that's what we did. Then, because I knew the curriculum*



*better than anybody else because I taught that course for years, I was actually allowed to go through and check things. As you move from one board to another there's slight differences and things. Then because that's been done by us staff, it is a lot better. (Interviewee 14, secondary science)*

There is some evidence here that a two-tier system may be developing, in which schools with more resources and better exam results allow both students and teachers more freedom in the classroom, while schools which are 'struggling' are forced to adopt a more restrictive approach. Where this is the case it mirrors international experience, in particular that of the United States, where it is in schools serving disadvantaged communities that scripted curricula are commonly found (see Section 1). This suggests that it is those students who face the most complex challenges, and have the most diverse needs, who are also most likely to experience the most restricted curricula.

### **The 2014 national curriculum as a problem**

Several teachers challenged the notion of teaching as the simple transfer of information, a monologue rather than a more complex dialogue between teachers and learners, in which their role was to offer ideas, elicit responses, enable engagement and exploration, and adjust their teaching accordingly:

*That's the whole idea. I am there as someone who knows something and wants to happily share with them and hears back their opinion. (R5, focus group 2)*

*[Education is] a creative and active process where students need to be engaged, they need to be actively taking part in lessons and thinking*

*actively rather than just receiving material. (Interviewee 9, secondary English and drama)*

And while the intention may have been to create a more challenging curriculum, many teachers spoke eloquently of the, at times, brutal realities of the current focus on factual knowledge exemplified in the 2014 national curriculum:

*It's described in different ways by my colleagues. They might say they're shovelling knowledge, you know, shovelling knowledge into the children. Real sense that the children are vessels to be filled at the moment. Or pummelling, another word is pummelling, they feel they are pummelling the learning into the children. (Interviewee 2, primary)*

*The children have to behave like little robots really. They need to sit. They need to look at the PowerPoint. (Interviewee 5, primary)*

One teacher spoke explicitly of the difference which several teachers alluded to between knowledge retrieval and real learning, which involves students actively engaging with the material the teacher brings, and making sense of it:

*It almost seems to be that the student actual understanding of it has been left on one side. (Interviewee 4, secondary science)*

Another teacher reflected on the gulf between the ideals of the national curriculum and the reality:

*What it says on the government website, "broad, balanced, inspiring, enthusing curriculum" isn't what we're doing, and that's partly because of the restrictions of how the curriculum is set up and that's partly because*



*the restrictions of evidence-based structure within a lesson. (R7, focus group 1)*

Primary teachers we interviewed felt that the conception of learning as an immersive, creative and hands-on experience, which had been a cornerstone of primary pedagogy until the introduction of the national curriculum in 1988, and had survived in the practice of many teachers, had no place in the standardised curricula they were now required to teach:

*That sense of really bringing the children on board with the learning and bringing the learning to life, the things that would have mattered when I trained 16 years ago, those things feel like they don't matter at all. Every single subject we teach, including art, has slides and follows the same format of retrieval. Then it has a slide of "I see, I think, I wonder", which sounds lovely, but if you do it in every single subject it's dull and dead. (Interviewee 2, primary)*

*There's no opportunity for, sort of, the kind of open-ended, letting the children lead part of it. (Interviewee 8, primary)*

*I do feel at primary, certainly in key stage 1, we've lost some of the joy of it. (Interviewee 6, primary)*

These experiences strongly suggest that, while the 2014 curriculum may have set out to be challenging, the reality now is a curriculum which restricts the intellectual and creative potential of both teachers and students. Standardised curricula have had a major part in this unwanted achievement.

## Fear of Ofsted

Several of the teachers in our sample saw the pressure to move through the curriculum in a uniform way as largely to do with making it easier for senior managers to monitor progression and curriculum coverage. They understood standardised curricula as another way to control and monitor their work, and they identified Ofsted as a key driver of this process:

*The schemes were quickly purchased on the back of we'd had a previous Ofsted, got 'requires improvement', so they'd literally just gone out and brought every scheme they could and they were adopted very quickly. (Interviewee 16, primary)*

*Standardisation just makes it a lot easier for subject deep dives and Ofsted, for SLT to explain exactly what is going on in each subject. They can clearly link it to progression and where they've come from. I think it's that pressure really... Also, when they're either going round with Ofsted or whether they're doing learning walks, before they go in the room they can exactly say, "This person is doing this. They're on lesson three and they're doing the Romans". (R4, focus group 1)*

Ofsted has stated its view that teachers should be given flexibility to adapt teaching in response to learners' needs. That such flexibility is not typical in our sample suggests that this is another example of the unintended consequences of the very tight accountability regime in English schools. One experienced school leader has argued that Ofsted's interest in 'progression' has scope for flexible interpretation, but that the reality in schools is that progression is experienced as a crude performance metric (Lowbridge-Ellis 2018). There have been changes in the Ofsted framework recently, but our research suggests that the sharp focus on a reductionist measure of progress

remains deeply embedded in the school system. Similarly, the Ofsted-driven pressure to ensure 'consistency' becomes interpreted in schools as a need for identikit teaching. As one teacher commented:

*People don't understand the difference between uniformity and consistency. So, Ofsted, quite rightly, want consistency, but what's ended up happening is... it's uniformity, everybody does exactly the same. (Interviewee 5, primary)*

This perception of uniformity was echoed by several other teachers in the sample:

*[The head teacher] was so pleased to be able to say during an Ofsted monitoring or a mocksted or a deep dive, whatever it was... He was so pleased to be able to say at one point that in our GCSE and our year 10 classes you could have virtually taken the wall down because it was the same thing happening in the same classroom. I'm like, "What? What? Why is that a good thing? I don't understand why you're so pleased with that". (R8, focus group 1)*

One teacher offered a succinct summary of a position held by several in the sample:

*The curriculum is supposed to be led by the needs of the pupils, not about accountability, and I think that's where it's going wrong, personally. (R5, focus group 1)*

Most teachers identified Ofsted as the key factor in influencing schools to move toward a standardised curriculum. But several of those who worked in schools with low levels of autonomy went further, describing what one teacher called a "culture of fear" towards Ofsted. Another spoke of their senior management team "running scared of Ofsted". While Ofsted does not advocate support for

any particular curriculum package, teachers thought that senior managers were driven by fear and a belief in "what Ofsted wants" to implement standardised packages, and, more damagingly, to require rigid conformity to them:

*There's this sense that by standardising things, by using pre-brought packages, it's like a safety raft. It's like an armour against Ofsted, that they will somehow say, "Oh, yes, we recognise this. This is okay. It's already been rubberstamped, somebody's already Ofsted-proofed it", almost. Anything beyond that could be just too risky. There is this sense that everything has to just be safe... Consistency, and sameness, and conformity is so valuable because it will be recognised as being the right way by Ofsted. (Interviewee 2, primary)*

The influence of Ofsted extended to its subject reports, eg National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE 2024) and its research views of the curriculum (Porter et al 2022; Compton and Boylan 2024). One teacher talked about how her school had used the subject reports to inform their whole school planning, because "our SLT is chasing the outstanding". Teachers found the resulting curriculum very knowledge-heavy and restrictive, but the high-stakes nature of Ofsted inspections meant that the school would not move away from the Ofsted approved approach:

*I think it was felt that if we were brave and put our foot down, actually we might end up on the back foot of RI [requires improvement], which nobody wants to be in that position. (Interviewee 8, primary)*

There is evidence here that Ofsted's publications on subject knowledge extend its influence beyond its role in school inspections. In this sense, the comments

of teachers are aligned with the findings of researchers (Compton and Boylan 2024, Porter et al 2022, NATE 2023) who show how the lines between inspection and curriculum development have been blurred, and who criticise Ofsted's advocacy of one particular view of how learning takes place – an advocacy which shades into enforcement.

Another teacher spoke tellingly about the less fearful attitude to Ofsted she encountered in her current, academically successful, school compared to previous schools she had worked at:

*When I was the head of humanities, the curriculum there, I felt, was a lot more constrained because of the pressure of Ofsted. Even though it was a free school and we didn't have to follow the national curriculum, we basically did because it looks good for Ofsted. You can show the progress is being made from key stage 2 to key stage 3 and so on. But at the grammar school, it was a lot easier to be able to go, "This is our intent. This is how we're doing it. Look at the GCSE results".*  
(Interviewee 18, secondary geography)

Here we meet again the sense that a two-tier system of curriculum provision is developing, in which schools with strong exam results (often in more advantaged locations) are allowed to innovate, while decision-making in schools which are struggling (and typically in more disadvantaged areas) is more restricted.

### **De-professionalisation?**

Our questions were focused on teachers' experiences in their schools, and we did not explicitly ask about more general professional issues. However, several teachers spontaneously raised concerns in relation to teacher professionalism. They expressed their fears about a diminishing role for the teacher, which might centre merely on delivering decontextualised content created elsewhere.

New policy developments, including the establishment of teaching apprenticeships, were seen as a sign that such a move was well underway.

*There is a danger that, well if we create a national curriculum and a PowerPoint that matches every national curriculum statement that every school is expected to cover, what does the role of a teacher then become? Where is the autonomy of your teaching style and the needs of your class? (Interviewee 11, primary)*

*I think one thing about these curricula, [they] enable us to be de-professionalised and replaced by people who aren't actually teachers and that's a real worry, and eventually, AI... you can imagine in the future, you know, hundreds of kids in one big room who are taught by AI... because you don't need teachers to do this. (R5, focus group 1)*

*If you're delivering something off of a screen that's already been bespoke or set up for that particular lesson and you're not going to adapt it yourself, then all of a sudden you are the TA in the room rather than the specialist delivering the education. What concerns me more broadly with that is that the outcome of that will be de-professionalising education, removal of specialists from the classroom. They've already got a plan for apprentice teachers. (Interviewee 4, secondary science)*

If all you are doing is changing the slides on a PowerPoint and reading from a script, you do not need qualified teacher status. (Interviewee 12, secondary English)

Several teachers saw the beginnings of this de-professionalisation in the reduction in opportunities for continuing professional

development (CPD). Without it they would lack a means of maintaining their subject and pedagogic expertise:

*About ten years ago I went on a maths course run by the local secondary school. It was fabulous, really inspiring and enjoyable... Now when you look at continued professional development, it's not there. The actual subject knowledge, nobody seems to worry about. (Interviewee 5, primary)*

*To be honest, we don't really talk much about pedagogy. We don't talk much about learning in terms of the actual process of learning. We don't really receive CPD. (Interviewee 2, primary).*

In this context several teachers noted that early career teachers (ECTs) were much less likely than their counterparts in the past to expect to plan their own curriculum:

*What I've noticed with some of the ECTs... one of the very early questions, if they're asked to teach something slightly off the specialism, their first question is, "Where's the PowerPoint?" rather than, "How do I plan my learning?" I think the individual taking responsibility of the learning that you are going to deliver to the young people in your classroom is being diminished. (Interviewee 4, secondary science)*


*We've got trainees coming through who have literally in their previous training schools just been given the PowerPoint: "You will stand and deliver, this is where you stop and three questions..." It's like a formula and it's so bizarre. They come to us and they're really confused. They're like, "What do you mean I've got to... Where's my PowerPoint?" (R2, focus group 2)*

One teacher shared her experience of talking though what she saw as the teacher's role in designing appropriate learning experiences for their pupils:

*It's got worse over the years, definitely. I've worked with trainee teachers as a professional tutor... One of the things I had to do was actually sit down with them and look at, "Well, what's the big picture of this unit? Where are you trying to take them?" and help them to pick out the content and the concepts that the students are learning... They have found it really difficult to actually put together the big picture and I think that's so much because it's being fed to them as opposed to them actually coming up and looking at the whole process, rather than just that little bit of learning, this bit of learning, that bit of learning. (Interviewee 18, secondary geography)*

## Summary of key issues

- The teachers were clear that standardised curricula had their positive uses. They saw these as limited and precise.
- Teachers perceived, however, a spread of standardised curricula beyond particular uses. Especially, according to some, in schools serving disadvantaged communities, they were becoming standard practice.

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- Standardised curricula, driven by school or trust managements, often took an inflexible and mandatory form with serious consequences for students and teachers alike.
  - Their use had in some cases been placed beyond discussion: it was presented by managers that the research case for standardised curricula and the pedagogic practices that were linked to them had been 'proven', and so the issue was not open to discussion.
  - Teacher education, especially through the early careers framework, was being organised around an inflexible notion of curriculum and pedagogy and new teachers were being denied access to an expertise that might enable them to develop their work beyond such norms.

The effects of these developments on teachers' morale, motivation, professional autonomy and educational quality were a topic of much concern to interviewees.

# Section 5

## Oak national academy: a case study

In this section of the report, we focus on the activities of Oak National Academy, presenting a brief policy background, a commentary and analysis of a sample of English and history curriculum resources, and a summary of survey and interview material. As we discussed in the introduction to the report, our focus is on Oak partly because of its scale and ambition – it aims to provide curriculum materials across all subjects within the primary and secondary curriculum – and also because of Oak’s political significance. Oak National Academy secured substantial political support from the Conservative government, along with public funding, the government setting aside up to £43 million over the period 2022/23 to 2024/25 (Barran 2023). This makes the organisation unique among all the examples of standardised curricula and provides a public interest argument for discussing Oak National Academy in some detail.

### Origins and development

Oak National Academy emerged in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, when much teaching and learning had been moved online. Writing on the Parents and Teachers for Excellence (PTE) website, Oak’s then principal, Matt Hood, described its beginnings:

*Our online classroom has been created by 40 state school teachers from across the country, for their colleagues, in response to current coronavirus lockdown. And they have done it in less than two weeks over their Easter holiday. (Hood 2020)*

Its work in the Covid period was seen in policy circles as a successful example of rapid innovation: government had provided funding, while trusting experts to innovate and lead. These experts were a cohesive group of “likeminded and influential people, many of whom were Teach First alumni” and they managed to engage the “enthusiasm of a wide range of people who wanted to do good in a crisis” (Davies and Johal 2022: 24). Two years after it was established, and sometime after the threat of the pandemic had receded and schools had returned to in-person teaching, the government announced that Oak National Academy would be established on a permanent basis as a non-departmental public body, supported by £43 million of public money for three years.

The commitment by government to support Oak National Academy with substantial resourcing may appear unusual given the pandemic no longer posed any immediate threat to classroom teaching. The clearest explanation for this decision is contained in the business case prepared by the DfE in 2022, in which it argued that Oak National Academy should be established as an arms-length body “strategically aligned with, but operationally independent from government” (DfE 2022: 7). The business case presents four aims for the new version of Oak, only one of which – “continue to provide a national contingency for remote education” – links to the original motivation for establishing it. All the other aims point to a much more ambitious plan to influence teaching and make an intervention into curriculum design and delivery. Analysing the business case in some detail offers an important understanding of the intended role of Oak, and its links to wider strategic reforms in the school sector.



The central argument presented in the business case is that implementation of the 2014 national curriculum (NC) was proving problematic. The 2014 iteration of the NC had represented a significant reform, “involving major revisions to all subjects” based on what the business case calls the “findings of international best practice comparisons” (DfE 2022: 12). However, the revision had not resolved difficult questions of curriculum provision; rather, it exposed their depth and intricacy. The business case cited research by Ofsted to make its point: Ofsted’s research on the enactment of the 2014 national curriculum reforms identified serious weaknesses, finding that curriculum knowledge has weakened across the sector over time. Ofsted reported serious concerns with the quality of curriculum design in schools and concluded that there are “a number of deficiencies in curriculum thinking” and “limited evidence of a thoughtful approach to curriculum” (Ofsted 2019:6).

In presenting these conclusions, there is no attempt to link the weakening of curriculum knowledge over time to reforms of teacher training, where teachers might reasonably expect to develop their knowledge and skills in relation to curriculum design. Rather, the business case draws a different conclusion. It acknowledges that teachers have had “comparatively little practical guidance” (DfE 2022: 12) to support implementing the 2014 national curriculum, but problems of inadequate support have been exacerbated by teachers having “more autonomy” (ibid). This statement is put forward without supporting evidence – yet it provides much of the basis of the argument for investing large sums of public money in Oak National Academy.

Uncontroversially, the business case draws attention to problems associated with teacher workload. More contentiously, the sources of the workload problems identified are related to curriculum planning, which suffers in both primary and secondary schools from lack of time (2022: 13) as well as, apparently, lack of teacher expertise. Much lesson planning

is dismissed as “reinventing the wheel”, in a way that is “inefficient across the system”. Teachers are said to engage in ‘pick and mix’ planning, thinking about lessons individually rather than as part of a carefully sequenced curriculum design (2022: 14). Thus, it is claimed, quality is at risk while workload increases.

The business case goes on to identify what it claims is a lack of demand on the part of teachers for high quality resources. This is said to contribute to an “absence of consensus at the system level about curriculum design best practice, which also further depletes curriculum expertise”. This is a cycle, the business case concludes, which is unlikely to be “broken quickly enough” without government intervention (2022: 14). Action by government is needed to “get teachers to engage with high quality curriculum resources” (2022: 14) – which is best achieved by making such resources easy to locate and free to use. However, the business case recognises that implementation is a likely problem, with lack of teacher buy-in and lack of curriculum expertise creating barriers to progress. Neither the DfE nor the private sector, the business case argues, will be trusted to provide curriculum resources. “Teachers and schools guard their autonomy from the DfE”, while it is doubtful whether private providers “can be continuously strategically aligned with government policy in an area as central as the curriculum” (2022: 15).

To these problems, Oak National Academy is presented as the solution – the means of delivering the government’s vision for the curriculum. It had “been a success story at a time of great national need”, was apparently positively endorsed by independent research studies (eg ImpactEd 2023) and, crucially, had built “strong brand recognition”. Drawing on Oak’s strap line (“by teachers, for teachers”), the business case argued that Oak National Academy offered a unique opportunity to act as a “system leader” and secure buy-in from teachers.

In our view the business case needed to be interrogated much more robustly. There are several references to research, but research sources cited are limited (often relying on research commissioned by, or close to, the DfE). At the same time, some of the arguments presented and conclusions drawn (in particular those relating to teachers' reluctance to engage with high quality resources) seem convoluted and, at best, tenuous.

To supplement claims around matters of curriculum quality, other arguments have been marshalled. Oak has continued to service a contingency function, during weather-related disruption and strikes (Budai 2023). Its resources, according to an evaluation it commissioned, had enabled significant time savings for teachers, both during and after the pandemic (ImpactEd 2023). Wellbeing scores were, it was claimed, higher for Oak users and Oak users were less likely to suggest they were contemplating leaving teaching within the next two years (ImpactEd).

In its new guise as an arms-length body of the DfE, Oak assembled a range of curriculum partners, supported by 'expert groups', tasked with developing resources for the entire school curriculum. Partners were drawn mainly from academy trusts and subject associations, with some participation from private firms, notably Pearson. Each of the expert panels included an Ofsted inspector, with academy trusts being well represented on most panels (see, for example, Fountain 2023). Some subject associations, including NATE, declined to participate. NATE explained this refusal by reference to its "scepticism about Oak's claim to be 'arm's length' independent of its funder, the DfE; and, secondly, a fundamental pedagogical disagreement with the Oak model of English so far evident from its published materials" (NATE, 2023).

## The Oak curriculum

In this section we examine the approach to curriculum and pedagogy taken by Oak National Academy, as set out in its resources for teachers. As we discussed in Section 1, Oak is the best-funded supplier of such resources, with the government setting aside up to £43 million between 2022 and 2025 (Barran 2023). By 2025, Oak expects that its resources will cover all national curriculum subjects at primary and secondary levels. All the resources we used were freely available on the extensive and user-friendly Oak National Academy website. We chose to analyse a sample of Oak's work in a core subject and a foundation subject and across two key stages. We draw on two units for examples: a KS3 English unit on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and a KS2 history unit on early Islamic civilisation. This provides a context for, and illustration of, the points made below by teachers in our survey and interviews. Our analysis is guided by the following questions:

- How is subject knowledge presented?
- What pedagogical approach is evident?
- How is the role of the teacher understood?
- What assumptions about how learning takes place are evident?
- What role does cognitive science play?
- How is the role of the learner understood?
- How are the needs of students with SEND addressed?
- In what ways is ethnic and social diversity acknowledged?

## The Oak resources

As we explained in Section 3, we focus on English and history partly because they are subject areas which are most representative of Oak National Academy's recent work. We are also interested in them because they are curriculum areas in which teacher-led innovation has been prominent for decades, through such initiatives and institutions such as the Schools Council History Project and the English & Media Centre, where principles of diversity, responsiveness to student experience and evolving disciplinary knowledge have been important. In this context, it is thus possible to compare Oak's six principles (knowledge and vocabulary rich, sequenced and coherent, evidence-informed, flexible, diverse, accessible) and practices with those developed from different perspectives.

In English and history, too, the material is plentiful: at the time of writing in KS3 English its coverage amounts to 863 lessons, grouped into 85 units; in KS2 in history 234 lessons are available, grouped into 34 units. In other subjects, such as KS4 geography and KS1 art and languages, coverage is less comprehensive.

Emma McCrea, Oak National Academy's head of curriculum design (McCrea 2023), explains Oak's role directly to teachers on a blog on the website:

*We can't plan a curriculum that is contextualised for your school and pupils, and nor should we try. But we can share high-quality models representing great design from across the sector to inspire and inform your own thinking. These models will be informed by the best available evidence of what works and be guided by our subject expert groups.*

## Format of the resources

For each of the new units there is a package of materials, comprising:

- a starter quiz
- a learning outcome
- a list of key words
- a slide deck, comprising around 30 slides
- a video, in which a teacher presents the slide deck directly to an imagined pupil
- a worksheet
- an exit quiz.

All Oak lessons follow the same four-phase format:

explanation  
check for understanding  
practice  
feedback.

Each lesson is organised into between two and four small units, named cycles. After each short cycle of explanation, usually comprising one to four slides, the following techniques are used to check for understanding:

- a multiple-choice question
- completing a sentence
- placing three or four events in chronological order
- distinguishing a true from false statement.

In the second half of the lesson, a slightly longer independent activity is planned, in which pupils practice using the knowledge gained in the lesson, and receive feedback.

## Year 7 English: The Tempest

The first set of materials we analysed was a unit of work comprising 28 lessons, for year 7 English students on *The Tempest* (Oak 2024a). The lessons are based on a package which comprises:

- A learning outcome. For example, “I can write an accurate, thoughtful diary entry in the voice of Miranda” (Lesson 24). The outcome statement is accompanied by a list of key learning points. In the case of Miranda’s diary, these cover the conventions of diary writing and how to write in character.
- A set of keywords, with their definitions. For lesson 24 they are: convincing, chronological, isolated, society.
- A slide deck, with around 30 slides, organised into between two and four small units, termed cycles. After between one and five slides of explanation, there is a multiple-choice question to check for understanding. For example, in lesson 24 pupils are asked to select two sentences which are written in the past tense from a list of four.
- A video lecture of about 20 minutes, in which a teacher presents the slides. He speaks directly to an imagined pupil and directs them to pause the video to answer questions, suggesting it is intended to be used as a cover lesson, homework or catch-up activity. It may also be intended as a model for teachers planning to teach the lesson.
- A worksheet containing prompts for a writing task. For lesson 24, pupils are asked to, “complete the table to think about how Miranda might have felt at each of the plot moments”.
- A starter and exit quiz. The exit quiz for lesson 24 asks pupils to select from a choice of four the statement which relates

to the sense of sight. The correct answer is given as “the sudden appearance of the sun temporarily blinded me”.

## Commentary and analysis

### How is subject knowledge presented?

The prominence of grammar and vocabulary in the resources reflects the priorities of the 2014 national curriculum for English, which included an 18-page glossary of linguistic terms (DfE 2013). The resources correspond to the knowledge-rich model of the national curriculum adopted by the previous government in the belief that the ‘cultural literacy’ enabled by a knowledge-rich curriculum is essential for social justice (Gibb 2017a). The emphasis placed on vocabulary and historical context is integral to this model.

In designing its lessons, Oak appears to give primacy to factual recall. While this has its place in some subjects, its suitability for English – and other arts and humanities subjects – in which single correct answers are less common, and interpretations and personal responses are fundamental to the discipline, is questionable. In English, as Eaglestone (2020: 3) points out, the emphasis on the communication of knowledge by the teacher leads to a failure to “address the student’s own experience of literature”. It [makes for] “an overemphasis on mastering vocabulary”. It leads to “a right-or-wrong-answers approach which... relies on simplistic misapplications of historical context, fosters a bad version of direct instruction and devalues the learner’s own creative reading”.

### What pedagogical approach is evident?

The resources do not appear to acknowledge the existence of other, more common, approaches to the teaching of Shakespeare’s plays. These address relationships between the curriculum and the experiences and cultures of learners. It has frequently been argued that by recognising and drawing from student experience, teachers can engage

students more productively in learning (Moll et al 2013). This is a principle which has been extended to the teaching of Shakespeare and the practice which stems from it is well documented (Yandell 1997, Coles and Pitfield 2022). Yet we found little evidence that this a perspective in the resources that Oak provides to teachers.

### **How is the role of the teacher understood?**

The teacher's role is purely didactic. Their role is to speak to the whole class at almost all times. This is given a much stronger priority than activity-based learning on the part of students. The centrepiece of each lesson, the 20-minute lecture, is the clearest example of this approach.

### **What assumptions about how learning takes place are evident?**

On grammar and – particularly – vocabulary, Oak National Academy's understanding of how students learn is at odds with a significant body of educational research. A tradition drawing from writers like Vygotsky, Bruner and Britton has argued that cognitive functions are a product of social interaction (Barrs 2021, Britton 1970, Bruner 1990). Concepts are developed and elaborated in the course of interaction, as a result of what Vygotsky saw as a vast creative effort by the learner. In contrast, Oak National Academy materials present learning as a much more passive process focused on memorisation and repetition of factual information.

### **What role does cognitive science play?**

Instruction is sequenced, moving from a focus in earlier lessons on context, plot and characters to a treatment of more thematic issues in the later part of the unit. There is a preference for understandings of learning which are attributed to cognitive science perspectives. Frequent quizzes and recaps are intended to help students process a manageable cognitive load that will enable long-term memory

storage and future recall – again a practice which has been recommended by former government ministers (Gibb 2017b). However, other approaches which have also been recommended to support cognitive load, such as collaborative learning so that pupils “can share the demands of problem-solving tasks” for example (Perry 2021), are not adopted.

### **How is the role of the learner understood?**

Space for pupils' experience of the play is almost completely absent in this unit. Oak National Academy's adoption of this approach amounts to an implicit rejection of the innovative methods of teaching Shakespeare developed over the last two decades. The English & Media Centre (EMC), for instance, has created resources which encourage students to be makers of meaning rather than simply recipients of instruction. The EMC's workbook on *Much Ado about Nothing* (2004) presents students, before they read the play, with images from the play and asks them about the expectations that these create. Likewise, it offers them cast lists and asks what they can tell about the play from the way characters are grouped. Students are given images and very short extracts from speeches and asked what kind of story these suggest (EMC 2004). In a similar way, the Royal Shakespeare Company's education programme, adapting the company's 'rehearsal room' techniques for school purposes, assumes that the meanings that students make can lead to more complex understandings of the play. This interest in the making of meaning by students is not a feature of Oak's approach to English.

### **How are the needs of students with SEND addressed?**

We found in this unit, as in all mainstream Oak units, no explicit attention to children with SEND. This is consistent with Oak's position, stated in their principles, that differentiation can be limiting, and that the chunking of information, uncluttered slides and frequent recaps offer a sufficiently accessible



curriculum. However, it is acknowledged that “for some pupils, a more tailored and specialist approach to the curriculum is needed”. Notably, no support for this is offered.

### **In what ways is ethnic and social diversity acknowledged?**

The materials are attentive to issues of social diversity within the play, which is interpreted in thematic terms of power and inequality. For example, one lesson defines and explores the concepts of colonialism and patriarchy, in relation to the treatment of Caliban and Miranda. There is also some attention in the early lessons to the context of the play’s reception in early 17th century London, a city presented as a place of sharp differences between social classes.

### **Year 5 history: Early Islamic civilisation: How did Baghdad become the ‘City of Peace’?**

The second set of materials we analysed was a unit of work comprised of six lessons for year 5 pupils on early Islamic civilisation (Oak, 2024b).

The lessons are based on a package which comprises, for each lesson:

- A learning outcome. For example, in the second lesson this is: “I can describe the reasons for the early success of Islam in the mid-7th century CE.” Three other lesson learning outcomes require children to describe events. One uses the term explain, and another identify a region on a map.
- Key learning points for each lesson. In lesson 2 they concern detailed facts about the early years of Islamic Empire and the establishment of Mecca as the religious centre of Islam.
- A list of key words. For lesson 2 this is: Medina, Arabian, truce, pilgrimage.

- A slide deck, comprising over 30 slides, organised into between two and four small units, termed cycles.

After each short cycle of explanation, usually comprising three slides, there is a check for understanding. For example, in lesson 2 pupils are asked, “Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to which city in the year 622 CE?” and are given a choice of three cities.

A model answer to each question is then provided on the slides. In the Oak video, the teacher offers praise to students giving factual information correctly, or for written answers “if your answer was close to this”.

- A worksheet. For lesson 2 pupils are asked to state whether they agree with the statement that “the early Islamic civilization started in Medina” and to justify their answer in one or two sentences. There is a prompt to include mention of the Hijra and the constitution of Medina.
- A video, in which a teacher presents the slide deck directly to an imagined pupil.
- An exit quiz and a starter quiz. The starter quiz for lesson 2 asks pupils to select the name of the holy book of Islam from a list of three holy books.
- Independent tasks for the practice and feedback element at the end of the lesson include completing a table with simple information, answering three factual questions in writing and completing a simplified crossword.

### **Commentary and analysis**

#### **How is subject knowledge presented?**

Historical subject knowledge is presented in this unit as the recall of factual information, including a strong focus on precise dates. The approach is focused on ‘first-order’ historical concepts, concerned with the



content of history, rather than 'second-order' concepts concerning how that content has come to be known, and how it is interpreted and debated (Historical Association). In this respect, it departs from the approach to history in the national curriculum at key stage 2, which, alongside a strong emphasis on factual knowledge, includes among its aims the need to make connections within and between time periods, frame valid questions, analyse trends and understand different interpretations of the past. We found no evidence of these aims in this unit of study. A possible explanation for this is provided in Oak's discussion of the importance of the third phase of its lessons, practice: "By embedding key learning through practice, cognitive load is reduced, paving the way for complex thinking." It appears that factual knowledge is seen as a precursor to complex learning: children must learn a set of facts before they can begin to use them to do more challenging work. There is a lack of ambition and a lack of inspiration in this model, as well as a lack of understanding of the capabilities of 10- and 11-year-old children.

### **What pedagogical approach is evident?**

As in all Oak lessons, the teacher is in complete control of the lesson, and pupils are expected to take in the factual information they are given and reproduce it at regular intervals. The specifics of pedagogy in history, such as using primary and secondary sources of evidence, considering similarities and differences, and experiential approaches such as role play, are almost entirely absent.

### **How is the role of the teacher understood?**

The teacher's role is to speak to the whole class at nearly all times, with short breaks for individual work. No guidance is provided to the teacher to think through and plan for any of the more complex questions that might arise as a result of their teaching this unit, such as contemporary Islamic practice, Islamophobia and the relationship between Islam and Christianity.

### **What assumptions about how learning takes place are evident?**

This unit of six lessons includes no open questions and only one opportunity for paired talk. Learning appears to be understood as the memorisation of factual information.

### **What role does cognitive science play?**

As with all Oak lessons, teaching is broken into very small chunks with frequent checks for understanding. This approach gives primacy to detailed factual information that can easily be checked, such as dates and battle sites. More complex learning, for example about historical sources, interpretations of events or comparing this period to others, is not addressed in these six lessons.

### **How is the role of the learner understood?**

As we have already noted, there is little evidence in this unit of attention to making learning engaging or relevant to children. The material does not make connections to the contemporary world, and few links are made to prior learning or prior experience in any of the history materials. While the teacher in the video uses words like 'exciting' and 'adventure', in the lessons pupils are simply required to take in and almost immediately reproduce a series of facts.

### **In what ways is ethnic and social diversity acknowledged?**

We selected this unit partly because it enabled us to consider this important question in more detail. The Oak statement on diversity, one of its six principles, states: "In selecting what knowledge to teach we... introduce diversity and help children find and be proud of who they are." (McCrea 2023). Indeed, there is some attention to ethnic diversity and the struggle for race equality in some of Oak's resources. For example, in a key stage 3 unit on World War I there is acknowledgement of the impact of large numbers of Indian troops on the war, and a key stage 1 history unit looks

at the Bristol bus boycott. However, a key weakness in the early Islamic civilisation unit is that there is no acknowledgement in any of the six lessons that some of the children in the class might be Muslims and/or have connections to the region being discussed. Further, no attention is paid to the sensitivities that this topic might arouse. At times, the materials lapse into an exoticisation of Middle Eastern culture which exaggerates difference and unwittingly reinforces stereotypes. For example, a slide explaining that Mohammed (pbuh) started preaching about Islam to the people of Mecca is accompanied by a western painting of men with lances on horseback.

The materials at times touch on topics which invite attention to a useful discussion of the cultural diversity and racism, but this is invariably sidestepped. For example, in one lesson the fact that Muslims were intolerant of other religions is identified as a possible misconception in the lesson plan. There is an opportunity here to challenge a contemporary stereotype about Muslims, but this is not taken. Indeed, across all six lessons, we identified only one mention of Islam as a contemporary faith. This is a missed opportunity to address questions which may well arise from these materials, and to acknowledge to the seven per cent of children in compulsory education who are Muslims (DfE 2024a) their place in the world. Given the longstanding concerns about stereotyping of Muslim students in schools, related to the Prevent agenda (Byrne et al 2020), these are missed opportunities. They appear to stem from a decision not to engage with the more sensitive and controversial aspects of any of the material Oak provides. This represents another missed opportunity and a consequent impoverishment of the learning experience for young people.

### **How are the needs of students with SEND addressed?**

There is in this unit, as in all Oak units, no explicit attention to children with SEND.

Opportunities for a more accessible approach to this very distant period were available, using some of the visual materials provided. But the images in the slides are rarely referred to and do not form part of any of the learning activities.

This unit provides information and visual material which has not been readily available in the past, although the topic has been on the curriculum for the past ten years. It will potentially allow teachers who are unfamiliar with this period of history to teach with more confidence. It also touches on the exceptional social, intellectual and artistic achievements of the Islamic world at that time, providing an opportunity to correct historical misconceptions and challenge contemporary stereotypes. But there remains a good deal of work for teachers to do to make the unit engaging and relevant to the students in their class, and to ensure that it contributes to their developing understanding of history as discipline. While we see the inclusion of this period of history as potentially beneficial to children's understanding of the past and contributing to their understanding of the contemporary world, some decisions have been made in the design of these materials which may serve to reinforce rather than challenge existing stereotypes.

### **Discussion**

Across all the materials we examined, there is evidence of the enactment of the previous government's preferred approach to teaching and learning (see Section 2). In terms of pedagogy, the teacher's role is didactic: it is to speak to the whole class at nearly all times. The emphasis is on giving factual information and supporting pupils' ability to recall it. There is very little space for discussion or pupils' active involvement.

While Oak claims its materials are evidence-based, we found that where evidence points to the efficacy of a non-didactic approach to teaching, it is overlooked. For example, the lessons we examined, as with all Oak

lessons, begin with a list of vocabulary with definitions. This is based on the EEF's finding that one way to improve children's vocabulary is explicit teaching (Higgins et al. 2021). However, the EEF suggests several strategies to improve children's vocabulary, including giving children opportunities to articulate their ideas in lessons, planning collaborative learning activities and "high quality dialogue in the classroom, between the teacher and the pupils and between pupils" (Higgins et al 2021: 10). Teaching new words explicitly is another suggested strategy but, according to the EEF report, central to this approach is that pupils have opportunities to use new words in context. None of these approaches are adopted by Oak in the materials we examined.

The short cycles of taught input and quick recall of facts which are key features of Oak lessons may not lend themselves to the more challenging aspects of some subjects. For example, in English most pedagogical approaches value the individual pupil's creative response to texts, but these were absent in the unit on *The Tempest*. In the early Islamic civilisation unit, questions about historical sources and interpretation do not arise.

On its website Oak states that sequencing of curriculum content is one of its six core principles, and it regards this as "vital to ensure pupils are building on and making links with existing knowledge". Yet there is no prompt for teachers to elicit pupils' existing knowledge in the first lesson of either of the two units we examined in detail. Recapping of previous lessons is limited to the starter quiz and is not touched on in other parts of the lesson, nor in the videos. There is a high degree of consensus that learning involves making connections between what pupils already know and new knowledge being offered. The EEF's (2021: 31) review of research on cognitive science and its application to the classroom acknowledged this: "When learning, the mind connects new information with pre-existing knowledge, skills, and concepts thereby developing

existing schemas." The EEF report also noted that: "Teachers often want to develop and refine learners' prior conceptions as opposed to teaching something entirely new." However, the assumption in the materials we have seen is that the pupils are treated largely like a blank slate and bring little existing knowledge to the lessons. We acknowledge that Oak makes it clear they expect their materials to be adapted by teachers. However, given the level of detail provided in other aspects of the materials, the lack of attention to prior knowledge risks conveying an unintended message about its importance.

### **Oak National Academy: teacher perspectives on use**

Our survey (Section 4) collected information from those who had engaged with any type of Oak National Academy materials in the past 12 months – curriculum plans or individual lessons. These teachers were asked broadly about their use of Oak resources. The findings from each question are displayed below. They are accompanied by data from interviews we conducted with individual teachers (see also Section 3 for further explanation of this part of the survey).

What is immediately apparent from the survey is that use of, and engagement with, Oak resources is very limited. Among 1,655 survey respondents only 24 primary teachers and 30 secondary teachers (plus one teacher in a mixed age range school) indicated they followed Oak materials in any systematic way. This represents 3.3 per cent of survey respondents. A larger pool of respondents (16 per cent) indicated some engagement in the previous 12 months (124 primary teachers and 133 secondary teachers), but across both phases by far the most common response when asked about frequency of use was "less than once a term".

**Tell us about your use of Oak National Academy resources. How often do you use them?**

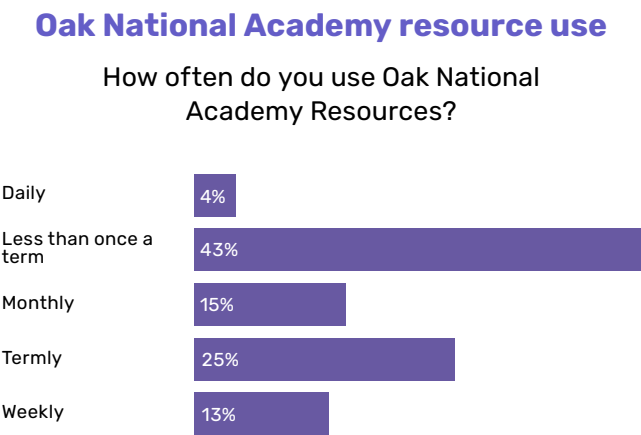


Figure 18 Frequency of Oak Use (n of respondents 265: primary 144; secondary 133; mixed age 8).

Figure 18.

The data on Figure 18 suggests that overall use of Oak National Academy resources is quite limited, and we believe is substantially less than that suggested by evaluations that Oak has commissioned itself.

When teachers have used Oak resources, more than two thirds (68 per cent) indicated they adapted the resources either ‘a great deal’ or ‘somewhat’. However, where materials were provided to support cover for absent teachers or students absent from school, we speculate that materials are more likely to be used without adaptation.

**Advantages of Oak resource use**

Oak’s advantages (Figure 19) are perceived by the 233 respondents to this question mainly in terms of their time/convenience (35 per cent), though significant proportions of the responses (25 per cent and 24 per cent) recognised the quality and content of Oak’s

resources. Eighteen per cent of responses acknowledged Oak’s usefulness in out-of-classroom contexts, as catch-up work for absent students or as homework/revision tasks. The data relating to time/convenience is important to note but this must be set against our wider conclusion this study does not support Oak National Academy’s claims about the impact of its materials on teacher workload. Rather we believe the relationship between the use of standardised curricula (generally), and teacher workload is complex and by no means clear-cut. Simple statements about reductions in working hours are not helpful.

It is also important to note that several of the responses presented in Figure 19 do not translate into an uptake in the use of Oak’s materials. Our view is that if advantages identified in the survey were substantial and meaningful then this would be expected to translate into higher use than the figures shown in Figure 18. This is not the case.

**Advantages of ONA resource use**

What do you think are the advantages of using Oak National Academy resources?

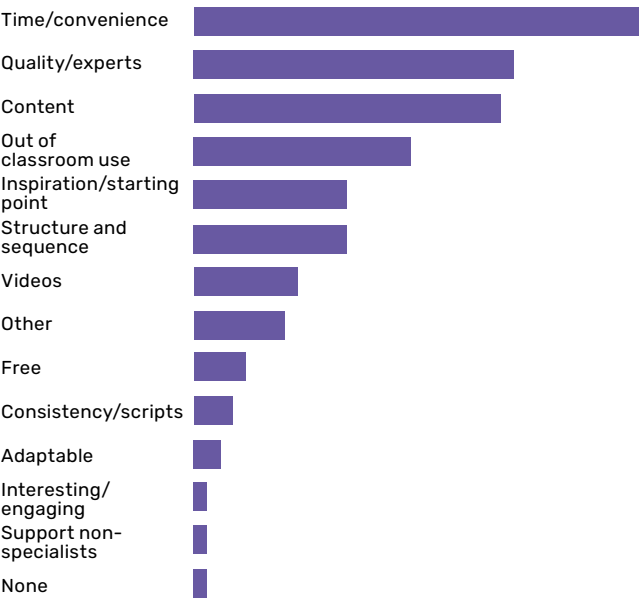


Figure 19.

The perceptions of interviewees reflected some different perspectives to the survey.

In some cases, there was support for the principle of a national resource bank, articulated by a teacher as follows (although, significantly, this teacher did not use Oak materials):

*I think that's a real strength of the Oak resources that they're just there. It's just great just to have stuff that is there and can be used when needed, I think. It almost is like... if you think about it, it's almost a question why it's taken so long for it to happen. If you're a secondary school or a primary school in the UK and you have not got resources, there really should just be some resources out there for you. (Interviewee 19, secondary music)*

This kind of response was very much a minority perspective. Providing cover for absent staff and supporting staff with limited subject experience were the most common reasons given for using Oak materials. Giving Oak materials to students absent from classes – a recognised problem post-pandemic – was also commonly cited. This was an issue evident in several comments, which tended to combine a low estimation of Oak's quality for everyday purposes, with an appreciation of its usefulness in particular contingencies:

*I've just literally dipped in for bits that have been useful for things like setting cover work. I personally have found the format too formulaic and as a result I've not wanted to use them as the basis of my teaching. So, I've made use of them in the sense that cover work, excellent, but not teaching resources for the everyday. (Interviewee 18, secondary geography)*

*So, for any reason we're absent, rather than leaving somebody work that they may not be suitable for, then generally it's, "There's an Oak National video*

*and the PowerPoint behind that". Attendance has obviously dropped hugely, so it's how do you then provide something for students who may not be in class? ... if a student wasn't in class, what could we give them that meant they weren't falling behind? (Interviewee 14, secondary history)*

*I've got a brilliant [music] department here. I've got a great team of staff who support me in everything that I'm doing. It's absolutely wonderful and I'm very, very lucky. But there's lots of schools where there will be one music teacher with a xylophone and a bucket in the corner. It's like, well, you know, they need help. (Interviewee 19, secondary music)*

*We still use it for DT, not because it's the best necessarily, but because a lot of our teachers didn't have a lot of experience or confidence in doing DT. (Interviewee 6, primary)*

In other contexts, such as curriculum planning, some teachers reported a limited and selective use of Oak materials:

*We've used Oak mainly when we're doing our own planning, if something is missing. So, for example, we were planning a unit looking at ancient Egypt and we were missing some information on the hierarchy of ancient Egypt, so I think through Googling it's thrown up Oak and we've taken a lesson from there. So, it's very much, we don't follow Oak as a scheme, it's more a resource that we can dip into to supplement, sort of, PowerPoints and maybe just for some ideas. (Interviewee 11, primary)*

We found no evidence from interviewees that teachers were using Oak as a sequenced curriculum plan – the principal justification for Oak National Academy presented in the DfE business case. As indicated,



the survey suggested very low levels of use as a sequenced curriculum plan, and so it is difficult to sustain the argument that Oak has anything like the impact on curriculum design and lesson planning that the DfE business case envisaged. In as much as Oak material was used as a means of sequencing learning, it was more to satisfy accountability requirements, than to meet student needs:

The fact that somebody has sat and planned it all out, like, the progression and produced all those ridiculous progression documents and all the justification for it all that Ofsted wants to see when they come, it saves time. (Interviewee 6, primary)

In this sense, it was evident that some teachers used Oak materials in ways similar to other standardised curricula, that is to be able to 'prove' progression.

### Disadvantages of Oak resource use

Teachers were also asked to identify the disadvantages of using Oak materials. Responses were as follows:

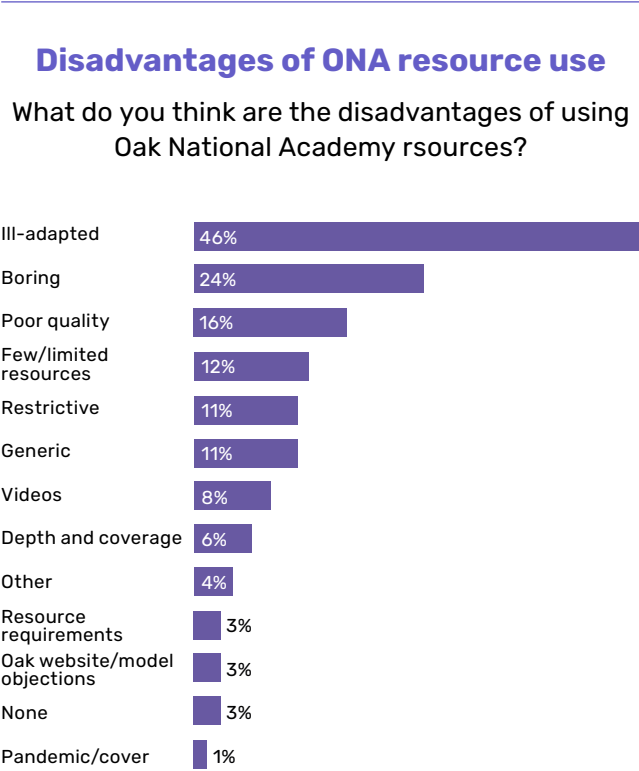


Figure 20.

In terms of disadvantages, 46 per cent of responding teachers suggested that Oak resources were ill-adapted to the needs of their class/students (Figure 20). Some of the responses in this category identified that it was a disadvantage that the teacher needed to spend time adapting the lessons to suit their classes. In the qualitative data the view was expressed that it was unrealistic to expect resources to be used without adaptation, and that the role of the teacher was to adapt resources as necessary. However, this clearly created a tension between the need to adapt, and the desire to reduce workload. The need for adaptation is one explanation as to why we believe the claimed impacts on workload may be greater than the reality.



Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of respondents suggested that the Oak resources were boring, disengaging or repetitive. Sixteen percent said they were low quality or that they contained errors. Twelve percent noted a shortage of Oak resources in certain subjects or curriculum areas, and 11 per cent indicated that the resources diminished creativity, were too restrictive in format and approach, or deskilled teachers. While 13 per cent of teachers had written that Oak materials matched the school or national curriculum, a similar number (11 per cent) stated that the resources were too generic and so often did not match school or national curriculum requirements.

Interview data highlighted a tension between the underlying pedagogical approach of Oak materials, and the preferred approach of individual teachers. Many interviewees made explicit links between reliance on particular evidence-based justifications, an emphasis on direct instruction and knowledge recall and a failure to engage students:

*The content, I feel, has been good, but I don't feel like the materials helps students to really think critically about the information. It very much feels like it's a "you need to know this in order to do this". I don't feel like there's much creativity in the options that they've provided. I do find it quite difficult when there's a very, kind of, traditional approach being insisted on, when actually there's so many other ways of doing it. (Interviewee 18, secondary geography)*

*I think the Oak approach seems to be very much the teacher is the fount of all knowledge, I'm going to relay that knowledge to the children, and you're expected to remember it and then show me back that you've remembered it, which, yes, I understand that's what teaching is, but I feel like as a teacher you've got a relationship with the children*

*that's a little bit more than passing on knowledge. So, there's a little bit more to... wanting children to discover things for themselves a little bit more, not all the time, but opportunities for speaking and listening, teamwork. And I think sometimes some of that element is missing from Oak. For me, I find Oak a little bit dull sometimes. (Interviewee 11, primary)*

At this point it is important to recognise that curriculum design and lesson planning are skills that teachers reported enjoying. They contribute to teachers' sense of self-efficacy and, in turn, job satisfaction – and in the view of interviewees are not facilitated by Oak's resources. As one teacher stated: "It definitely takes some of the kind of fun out of designing what they're going to learn and then how I'm going to actually put that across to the students."

Sixteen participants (eight per cent) mentioned Oak's videos as an advantage, and the same number identified them as a disadvantage. Those who liked the videos wrote that they could be a novelty or engaging, whereas those who disliked them reported slow audio, technical errors and students dislike of being taught by an unknown (on-screen) teacher.

Three per cent of teachers also identified that Oak lessons/curricula often required access to equipment/resources that was not necessarily easy to gain, eg a printer and InDesign software.

One teacher wrote: "I don't like them – I only use them because my HoS [head of subject] wants to."

In this assessment of advantages and disadvantages of Oak materials we have focused on issues identified by teachers specifically in relation to Oak, and not to matters relating to the more general use of standardised curricula. Clearly there are overlapping issues, and these are clear from

the survey, but here we have highlighted key issues as they pertain to Oak National Academy. On this basis we offer the following overview of key points.

### Summary of key issues

In this section we summarise some of the key issues that emerge from our focus on Oak National Academy. Our aim is to highlight data that relates specifically to Oak, although some of the issues raised can be considered to apply more widely to this project.

- Use of Oak National Academy resources is not widespread. The survey indicated only a very small proportion of respondents had any engagement with Oak resources in the previous 12 months.
- The most common use of Oak resources is to 'in-fill' where additional provision or support is required. This may be to support staff who are teaching outside of their subject specialism or where teachers have less experience (for example, early career teachers). The most common form of regular use appeared to be to ensure there was work set in the event of teacher or student absence.
- Data relating to workload impacts remains mixed. Our data, based on the very limited number of Oak users that were revealed in the survey (the number of Oak users identified was very small), does not allow us to make definitive claims about the benefits of using Oak on workload. What we speculate is that if Oak's claims were accurate, one might reasonably expect to see much higher usage of Oak resources.
- Teachers are not using Oak materials in the way originally envisaged by the DfE in its business case, to invest in and expand Oak National Academy. Teachers primarily use Oak materials on a pick and mix basis, using the resources to supplement gaps in lesson planning. There is very little evidence that Oak curriculum programmes are being used

as a comprehensive, coherent, sequenced curriculum. This is significant because it stands at odds with the justification for Oak presented in the DfE's business case.

- Teacher buy-in remains limited. Scepticism is based on several factors including a pragmatic assessment of the quality of materials, a personal cost-benefit analysis in relation to workload and in many cases an antipathy to the underlying pedagogical approach (linked to the national curriculum) that encourages approaches to teaching that many research participants considered inappropriate.

# Section 7

## Findings and recommendations

In this report we sought to develop a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of teachers' experience and use of standardised curricula. By standardised curricula, we mean units/schemes of work, programmes or packages that are ready for teachers to follow in teaching. Within this broad heading, a wide range of practices are included. For example, a useful distinction can be made between materials developed in-house (in an individual school or across a group of schools) and content that is provided by external third parties (such as educational publishers). There is also significant variability in use in practice, with some curricula being applied in a loose and flexible manner, while in other contexts teachers are expected to adhere very closely to the standardised curriculum design. In this report, we have been able to capture some of this variability and understand its implications. Interest in this work derived from a widely recognised understanding that standardised curricula are now commonly used in the English school system. However, despite these developments and claims that policy and practice in schools is evidence-informed, we would assert that the experience and impact of using standardised curricula in schools is an area that has not been widely researched.

The broad aim of this research was to illuminate the ways in which standardised curricula have been experienced by teachers in primary and secondary schools in England. In particular, our research aimed to:

- establish the extent of the use of standardised curricula across primary and secondary schools
- understand the ways in which teachers experience and evaluate standardised curricula
- understand the relationship between the use of standardised curricula and the quality of teachers' working lives and in particular their perceptions of autonomy, self-efficacy and workload
- within this broader framework, to gain an understanding of teachers' responses to the use of curriculum resources provided by the Oak National Academy.

### Summary of key findings from the survey and interviews:

The summary below represents findings from the project survey (completed by 1,655 classroom teachers), individual and focus group interviews involving 40 teachers, and an analysis of a range of documents including policy documents and curriculum materials.

The survey data provided strong evidence about the negative effects of standardised curricula on teacher autonomy and self-efficacy. They also indicated that users of standardised curricula did not perceive an overall reduction in their workload. The interviews and focus groups provided us with further insight into teacher experience. We do not claim that the views we collected amount to a comprehensive account of how teachers use and evaluate standardised curricula. We are confident, however, that they are compatible with the survey results and that they provide a rich yield of insights into processes and experiences that we think should be researched further.

## Extent of standardised curricula usage

- Standardised curricula, broadly defined, are widely used in some form by teachers. Usage is more common among primary sector teachers (90 per cent). At secondary school 54 per cent of teachers reported their use. In the primary sector the most common usage is in relation to maths and English, but there is also higher usage in subjects such as languages and music. In relation to maths and English, interview data indicated that high stakes accountabilities are driving these trends, while in other subjects a lack of confidence in the subject content has an influence.
- There is a wide range of providers of standardised curricula. Curricula generated in-house across MATs were the most cited standardised curricula at secondary level (76 per cent of respondents) and the third most common type of such curricula at primary level (27 per cent of teachers).
- Oak National Academy usage was identified as low when compared to other third-party providers. Only three per cent of teachers reported following Oak curricula systematically – 24 in primary schools, 30 in secondary (and one in a mixed age setting).

## Standardised curricula and teacher professional autonomy

- Teachers who use standardised curricula reported a reduced sense of professional autonomy. In the areas of teacher decision-making and exercising professional judgement, both primary and secondary teachers reported reduced autonomy in relation to all the indicators assessed. In relation to control over content of individual lessons, more than a third of primary school teachers (34 per cent) said that they had little or no influence.
- The influence of external assessments on lesson content was seen as significant in both secondary and primary sectors –

67 per cent of secondary and 52 per cent of primary teachers said that external assessment had a lot of influence on the content of their lessons.

- Within institutions, the different organisational structures and cultures accounted for the different influence of key individuals. Teachers in the primary sector reported that senior leaders were the principal influence on curriculum content (significantly more influence than classroom teachers), while in the secondary sector middle leaders were the key figures (again, with significantly more influence than classroom teachers).
- These results suggest a significant centralisation of authority within schools as those with leadership responsibility assert significant control over the practices of classroom teachers. These trends were reflected in some detail in the interview evidence.

## Standardised curricula and teacher self-efficacy

- Across all survey respondents teachers who do not use standardised curricula report significantly higher levels of self-efficacy than those who do use standardised curricula.
- Teachers of non-standardised curricula reported higher levels of self-efficacy in relation to both instructional and engagement self-efficacy, ie these teachers were more confident of their ability to both teach effectively and interest and motivate students.
- When examined by phase, differences between standardised curricula and non-standardised curricula were only significant at the secondary level for both instructional and engagement self-efficacy, ie these teachers were more confident of their ability to both teach effectively and interest and motivate students.

## Standardised curricula and teacher workload

- There are no significant differences between the workload perceptions of non-standardised curriculum users and standardised curriculum users. This applied both to primary and secondary teachers, and to full- and part-time teachers.
- A poor perception of workload was a common issue across all respondents and was not determined by use or non-use of standardised curricula.
- In the open questions in the survey, respondents did identify 'helps with workload' as the principal advantage of standardised curricula (40 per cent), and this appears to be in tension with the finding above that there are no significant differences in perceptions of workload between standardised curriculum users and non-standardised curriculum users. This tension points to the complexity of workload as an issue. Intuitively, one might expect standardised curricula to help reduce workload – this is a commonly cited assertion in many contexts (see Green 2021). Hence teachers responded to the survey as they did. However, in interviews many teachers commented that resources from standardised packages required considerable adaptation, and so work did not diminish, it simply assumed a different form. Similarly, many teachers reported that removing the need to plan lessons was not the type of task that teachers wanted to be relieved of. Lesson planning and curriculum design were seen as creative and skilled activities that teachers wanted to be able to undertake to ensure lessons were aligned to the needs of their students. Workload that was considered unhelpful was that which was considered unnecessary (often related to accountability demands), but which served to crowd out time that could be devoted to planning high quality lessons.

The interviews suggested that teachers saw standardised curricula as having positive uses that were limited and precise: to cover for absence, to compensate for a lack of specialist knowledge, to reduce aspects of workload or to mitigate the problems of high teacher turnover. Beyond discussion of these uses, concerns were repeatedly expressed about a range of issues related to autonomy, self-efficacy and workload. Teachers concerns included:

- that standardised curricula embodied a lack of trust in teacher expertise
- that teachers lacked the freedom to adapt standardised curricula to meet the particular needs of their pupils
- that standardised curricula functioned as a control mechanism to monitor teachers' work
- that practices of collaborative and flexible planning were being replaced by standardised commercial or in-house curriculum packages 'imposed from above'.

On the basis of teachers' comments it is also possible to identify risks that standardised curricula pose to the quality of students' school experiences: such curricula do not sufficiently engage or challenge students and do not work with children with SEND.

The data leads us to conclude that there is a significant difference between, on the one hand, the justifications for standardised curricula offered by national policymakers and the managements of some MATs, and on the other, the experiences and perceptions of teachers. This is a gap which can only be closed by encouraging open professional discussion and independent research – and by making the views of teachers more central to curriculum policy-making.

## Summary of key issues relating to Oak National Academy

This study identified Oak National Academy as a case study of a standardised curriculum. It was in part chosen because Oak is unique in receiving significant government sponsorship, and so there is a public interest case for deepening our understanding of this initiative that goes beyond its general interest as an example of a standardised curriculum.

- Our research indicates that teacher take-up of Oak National Academy is low. In the survey only a small number of respondents indicated they followed Oak as a curriculum plan (three per cent). Most use was occasional and infrequent (most commonly once per term). It would appear that the most common uses were to provide material for cover lessons (when a teacher is absent), to support students with attendance issues and to support colleagues teaching outside of their subject area. In this sense, there is a limited claim that Oak contributes to building system resilience, as per the DfE's business case that was used to justify investment in Oak National Academy.
- Oak materials are not being used in the way that was presented in the DfE's business case, which provided the original justification for the substantial investment of public funds. The business case expressly criticised teachers for adopting a 'pick and mix' approach to resource selection and argued teachers needed a coherent, appropriately sequenced curriculum plan. We question the evidential basis for this assertion; however this research demonstrates that where teachers use Oak materials at all, they use them in precisely the way the DfE business case criticises – that is, on a pick and mix basis. We identified almost no use of Oak resources in the way presented in the DfE's business case, that is as a whole, sequenced curriculum plan.

- Given the very limited number of Oak users that were revealed in the survey, our data does not allow us to make definitive claims about the benefits of using Oak on workload. The sample of survey respondents who identified as Oak users was too small. Workload advantages were identified among some survey respondents, but it is not possible to claim these are specific to Oak (workload benefits may pertain to other standardised curricula or more general benefits deriving from increased collaboration in relation to curriculum planning). We identified no evidence to support the quite significant claims Oak makes in relation to workload gains (Budai 2023).

## Standardised curricula: immediate causes for concern

This research indicates that standardised curricula have become a common feature of the English school system. Our interview data suggests that within this trend there is considerable use of prescriptive curriculum models in which teachers have low task discretion.

This research provides a detailed insight into teachers' experience of this growing phenomenon. It also draws attention to an absence of research findings which would validate decisions to extend the use of standardised curricula. These gaps in research, despite all the claims that policy is evidence-based, need to be addressed because, as this study demonstrates, the reality of teachers' experiences of standardised curricula often stand at odds with the benefits claimed by those who advocate for such approaches.

For example, it is argued that standardised curricula will tackle one of the most fundamental issues that contribute to teacher retention problems, by reducing teacher workload. Our research casts considerable doubt over claims that standardised curricula significantly reduce workload. It suggests



that even when workload is looked at in quite narrow terms (as the number of hours worked), there is no evidence from the survey and interviews that the use of standardised curricula reduces workload to any discernible extent.

Moreover, the focus only on workload in terms of hours worked fails to capture the totality of teachers' work and the wider links to quality of working life. In this report we have drawn on the work of Francis Green and colleagues (2021) whose studies of quality of working lives across occupational groups and over time highlight the importance of work strain as a combination of work intensity and task discretion. Our research shows that the use of standardised curricula compounds these problems by limiting teacher autonomy and self-efficacy. Many teachers in our study reported a feeling of being de-professionalised as they felt their skill and expertise was at best undervalued, but often denied.

One obvious consequence for many teachers using standardised curricula was that they felt unable to provide their students with the classroom experience that they thought would be most beneficial. In some cases, standardised curricula acted as a barrier to addressing the diverse needs of all the students in the class; in other cases, they inhibited teachers' capacity to motivate and engage pupils across the whole class. Several teachers interviewed indicated they were unable to respond flexibly to particular issues or interests that might emerge during the course of a class or programme of study.

A failure to address workload problems, combined with practices that diminish teachers' sense of professional autonomy and their self-efficacy will inevitably impact levels of job satisfaction, as these factors have a proven link to quality of working life (see Section 2). They are also likely to affect teacher retention.

Research has previously indicated that teachers experience a high-stakes accountability environment, combined with increased managerialism, in such a way that has contributed to low retention rates across the profession (Perryman and Calvert 2020, Cooper Gibson 2018). Research presented in this report indicates that these problems are being exacerbated by the tendency to rely on standardised curricula. In many cases the use of standardised curricula was associated with increased scrutiny and monitoring of teachers' work to ensure progress was being maintained at some pre-determined level. Failure to follow pre-determined plans was then perceived by managers as problematic.

### **Standardised curricula: wider issues for discussion**

In undertaking this research three issues emerged that we believe need to be discussed much more widely, within and beyond the education community. The first of these issues relates very directly to the focus of the study of standardised curricula. The second and third issues emerge more indirectly, but nevertheless emerge as very important aspects of this study. We present them here because we believe these issues need to be debated more extensively, but also because many of the issues we highlight in this report cannot be changed without recognising some of the wider issues that frame the context in which change must take place. We also assert that there are risks that arise from a failure to address the developments we highlight.

### **The future of teachers: the Taylorisation of teaching?**

Several teachers, when interviewed, described having to follow standardised curricula in precise detail. In many cases teachers had not been involved in developing these materials, and in several instances they referred to being reprimanded if they deviated from the prescribed content. This can be considered a form of modern-day scientific management

(or Taylorism) as teachers are stripped of any task discretion, and instead teaching is reduced to a set of instructions to be followed. The tasks of curriculum design and lesson planning are removed from teachers who are restricted to delivering pre-packaged content, described in Braverman's (1974) classic study of Taylorism as "the separation of conception from execution". Teachers experienced this as a form of deskilling that they believed diminished their impact as a teacher and limited their job satisfaction. Several interviewees expressed the view that these developments were intentional, allowing qualified teachers with subject expertise to be more easily replaced by non-specialist and cheaper labour.

We believe these are significant developments in the English school system that may be becoming more common. In the future, some of these trends we have identified may be accelerated by new technologies, in particular the use of artificial intelligence. Given the importance of these developments, and their potential impacts, we believe there needs to be more discussion about the most effective way to develop a highly skilled, appropriately qualified teacher workforce. The attendant risk is that continued financial pressures in schools and ongoing teacher supply problems may drive responses that have a damaging impact on the quality of provision.

### **Curriculum control: what is the role of the state?**

For much of the 20th century there was a consensus view that an important democratic safeguard was provided by ensuring that government ministers had no significant role in determining curriculum content in schools. For example, the 1944 Education Act referred only to religious education and included no other clauses relating to the curriculum. However, ever since the introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act, the role of the central state in the school curriculum has progressively expanded. This report highlights the qualitative shift experienced since 2014

when government ministers advocated, and implemented, a national curriculum that reflected a very particular set of values and political priorities (Gove 2014, Gibb 2015).

These are quite profound changes in the education system, but they also represent a much-changed relationship between the central state and the school system. Indeed, and ironically, governments that have consistently claimed a desire to decentralise power have, in reality, acted in ways that have had the contrary result. Nowhere is this more important than in relation to the curriculum, and yet much of this change has happened with minimal debate.

Government influence over curriculum content is an issue that has profound democratic consequences, with obvious risks when power is centralised. There is now a pressing need for a proper debate about the curriculum and about what is, and is not, the appropriate role of the central state.

### **System governance: a self-reproducing school system?**

In academic and policy circles some commentators have referred to a 'self-improving school system' in which networks of autonomous schools would act as the drivers of change and improvement. Much of this work was developed by David H Hargreaves and several of his papers were hosted and published on the Department for Education website through 2010 to 2014. As indicated, this discussion has often gone hand in hand with wider policy discourses about system devolution.

Our concern is that much of this discourse at a rhetorical level does not match the reality, in which power has actually become more centralised. Moreover, much of the new system of governance is dominated by powerful organisations that are nominally independent of government, but in reality, are heavily dependent on government. Bodies, such as local education authorities,

that worked on principles of community control and local accountability, now have little influence in the English school system. At the same time, a network of trusts, private foundations and arms-length bodies have emerged. These are often characterised by governance structures that are remote and opaque. These developments have been described by Ball and Junemann (2012) as a form of 'network governance', in which organisations experience accountability upwards (to the DfE for example), but not downwards (to service users, workers and the community).

Nowhere are these tendencies clearer than in relation to teacher education, which is an issue that has obvious links to the focus of this report. In recent years, a new government approved curriculum for training teachers (the core competence framework) has been introduced and is delivered by a diverse raft of DfE approved institutions. The whole system is overseen by the national inspectorate, Ofsted. Within this system power has become highly centralised and those providing teacher education can only do so if they comply with central government expectations about delivery and performance.

The outcome is a self-reproducing school system in which organisational success is judged in relation to compliance with centralised policy agendas and initiatives. The risk is that each element of this system reinforces every other element. There are few genuinely democratic spaces and little opportunity for a plurality of voices. Independent voices are typically scarce and critical voices are marginalised. Without adequate critical scrutiny the system can be resistant to change, even though change may be necessary and urgent.

## Recommendations

Based on the research offered in this report we set out the following recommendations. All our recommendations are rooted in the conviction that teachers have curriculum

design and planning expertise, and these skills need to be valued and nurtured. Dismissing, diminishing and sometimes denying such skills has a negative impact on teachers' professional autonomy and the quality of their working lives.

Our recommendations are prefaced by a call for more open debate. Many of the developments described in this report arise from initiatives that are far removed from public discussion, whether within the education sector or beyond. A genuinely public education service requires much more open discussion about policy than is typically experienced in the English school system.

## Recommendations to central government

- Curriculum development has suffered from excessive political intervention and being subject to the personal priorities of particular politicians. Curriculum responsibilities should be transferred to a public body that is independent from government, and that has broader representation from subject associations, university researchers and teachers' organisations.
- In this context, Oak National Academy, as a DfE initiative associated with the previous government, should be reviewed and re-assessed. Set against the original business case, and its current levels of usage as the findings of our research suggest, Oak is a poor return on public funds invested.
- Policy needs to be genuinely evidence-informed. This would involve engaging the teaching profession, its trade unions and subject associations, and the whole research community in discussions about curriculum design and pedagogical approaches. Policy on something as fundamental as the national curriculum should not be based on the selective use of favoured research findings.

- The current Curriculum and Assessment Review should initiate a thorough review of current curriculum practice, drawing on a wide range of research, and undertaken by a diversity of researchers and organisations. The current review should be seen as the first stage in a longer-term project. Change is required, and fear of further change in a system that has already experienced upheaval cannot be a justification for not making essential reforms.
- Our research has identified significant problems with the use of standardised curricula when used as scripts for teachers to follow. They work against teacher autonomy and self-efficacy. In some cases, they do not effectively implement principles of inclusive education. In others, they do not engage and motivate students. In this light the Curriculum and Assessment Review should specifically consider the use, effects and value of standardised curricula.
- Teacher education, and ongoing professional development, need to help teachers develop their curriculum design and lesson planning skills as an essential element in teachers' repertoire of professional skills. In this study several teachers questioned whether current approaches to teacher education adequately prepared new entrants for the complexity of their role. Against this background, recent reforms of teacher education should also be reviewed.
- Performance-based accountability and greater external control of processes of teaching and learning have adverse effects on teacher wellbeing and motivation as well as on the engagement of learners. Reviewing accountability demands in schools, including the very considerable impact of Ofsted, should be a priority.
- Review working arrangements to prioritise activities that add value to quality teaching and learning, and ensure such activities are not crowded out by low value activities that distract from teaching and planning teaching.

### **For consideration by local authorities, multi-academy trusts and individual schools**

- Teachers who do not use standardised curricula feel more autonomous than standardised curricula users and have higher self-efficacy. Local authorities, schools and trusts must recognise this and treat teachers as curriculum makers. They should encourage meaningful collaborative and collegial approaches to curriculum design and planning at subject and department level, in which all relevant staff are confident that they have a stake. They should encourage teacher discretion over the use of curriculum materials.
- Professional development should draw from teachers' experience, professional knowledge and research perspectives. Teachers should be encouraged and funded to engage in professional development as a basis for enhanced professional autonomy and self-efficacy. Teacher-organised activity, school programmes, university courses and those run by training organisations all have the potential to develop teachers' practice. All teachers need to be supported to engage with research from a range of traditions. Teachers need to act as critical participants in a research process, and not be treated as passive and uncritical recipients of research that others have decided as 'what works'.

### **For consideration by the National Education Union**

- Continue to raise issues of workload and task discretion at local authority, MAT and individual school level, and support school representatives to develop the skills and confidence to bargain over these issues at the relevant organisational level.
- Campaign and negotiate for contractual changes that ensure teachers have adequate time to design and plan a high quality curriculum and that they can engage with the research to support these activities.
- Identify, highlight and prioritise professional autonomy and task discretion as foundational elements that develop teacher self-efficacy and autonomy. Continue to campaign for a teaching profession that has the skills and expertise, evidenced by relevant qualifications, that is required to provide a high quality experience for all pupils.

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