

Leave some room at schools for the love of the dance

LES WALTON says the national curriculum cannot be allowed to stifle innovation and creativity

ONE of my favourite films of the early 1990s is 'Strictly Ballroom' which tells the story of a truly original dancer who wishes to express himself and be more creative whilst taking part in an Australian ballroom dancing competition.

The judges want to apply the rules and 'standards' using fixed guidelines of 'what makes an outstanding dancer' based on a view of dancing that held sway in their childhood.

The judges were more concerned about ensuring that judgements could be made about the comparative merits of the dancers, rather than developing a love of dancing. The creativity and innovation exemplified by the young dancer was to be crushed.

In 1988 when the National Curriculum was introduced into England, Wales and Northern Ireland the discussion with regard to state control over curriculum design and professional autonomy and creativity was very intense.

There were two principal aims set out in the 1998 National Curriculum.

The first aim stated "the school curriculum should aim to provide opportunities for all pupils to learn and to achieve."

Core and foundation subjects, attainment targets, programmes of study and arrangements for assessing pupil's knowledge, skills and understanding were introduced.

The second aim was "to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life".

Many headteachers and governing bodies had, for a number of years, accepted the need for the school curriculum to be revised, building the 'great debate' called for in 1976 by the Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan and the 15 discussion documents produced by Her Majesty's Inspectors between 1977 and 1982.

We, therefore, welcomed developing a national consensus on what should be taught in schools. We fully supported the argument that, by providing a common curriculum, parents would be able to make better comparisons between schools.

However, most headteachers at the time were proud of our record of being 'curriculum innovators'. We saw our prime role as developing the



Children at Gibside School enjoying themselves hugely at the Gateshead Schools Dance Festival last year. Every child should get the chance to dance

curriculum in our schools in response to the needs of individual children and local and national economic and social changes.

We were now concerned that we were becoming 'curriculum deliverers'. Our concern was that the State was increasingly taking direct control of the curriculum.

I made a speech, at the time, saying that just at the point when we denationalised many of our major industries, we started to nationalise knowledge.

At the point of introduction, as only certain subjects were included, schools and their communities had the flexibility to promote their own curriculum philosophy. Like many school leaders at the time, I considered that 'Aim two' of the national curriculum was very important.

One of my own school's key aims was to enhance children's love of learning, encourage creativity and develop personal and social skills, and of course deliver the nationally prescribed curriculum.

Our school plumped for core community and social education, art, music and drama. All children were involved in community and work experience programmes. We fundamentally believed that the community we served would significantly benefit from this approach and would be an important means by which we could engage young people in the love of learning.

A quarter of a century later a wide-scale review of the National Curriculum by Michael Gove was set against numerous concerns about the actual impact of having a national measurable system which would improve choice and raise standards. Central government control over the subjects being taught in our state schools was

to be extended.

The 2013 Review said that the National Curriculum should have the following aims at heart:

- To embody rigour and high standards and create coherence in what is taught in schools
- To ensure all children have the opportunity to acquire a core of essential knowledge in the key subject disciplines.

The underlying message in the aims of the 2013 Review is that 'essential knowledge' is contained in the 'key subject disciplines'. The 'wider curriculum' received much less focus.

Since 1988 numerous Secretaries of State have often focused on the core curriculum subjects - mathematics, English and science - then 'tampered' with policy regarding the 'wider curriculum'.

When there is an Aids epidemic, we call for increased sex education; a lack of employable young people leads to calls for compulsory careers education; an increasingly expensive health service results in more health education; increasing numbers of obese young people requires timetabled cooking and nutrition; concerns about religious fundamentalism leads to citizenship education etc.

I have no doubt we do need a national strategy regarding what should be taught in our schools and means by which we can make judgements regarding the quality of education.

However I feel the messages within 'Strictly Ballroom' still apply.

Innovation, creativity and love of the dance must not be stifled. Love of the dance is what will keep our young people dancing.

■ Les Walton CBE is chairman of the Northern Education Trust.