

Findings from the curriculum programme of research



Purpose of the curriculum study

Influence **wider thinking** on the role and importance of the curriculum in education by:

- developing a rigorous evidence base on the relative importance of the curriculum in outcomes
- identifying linkages between the curriculum and increased social mobility

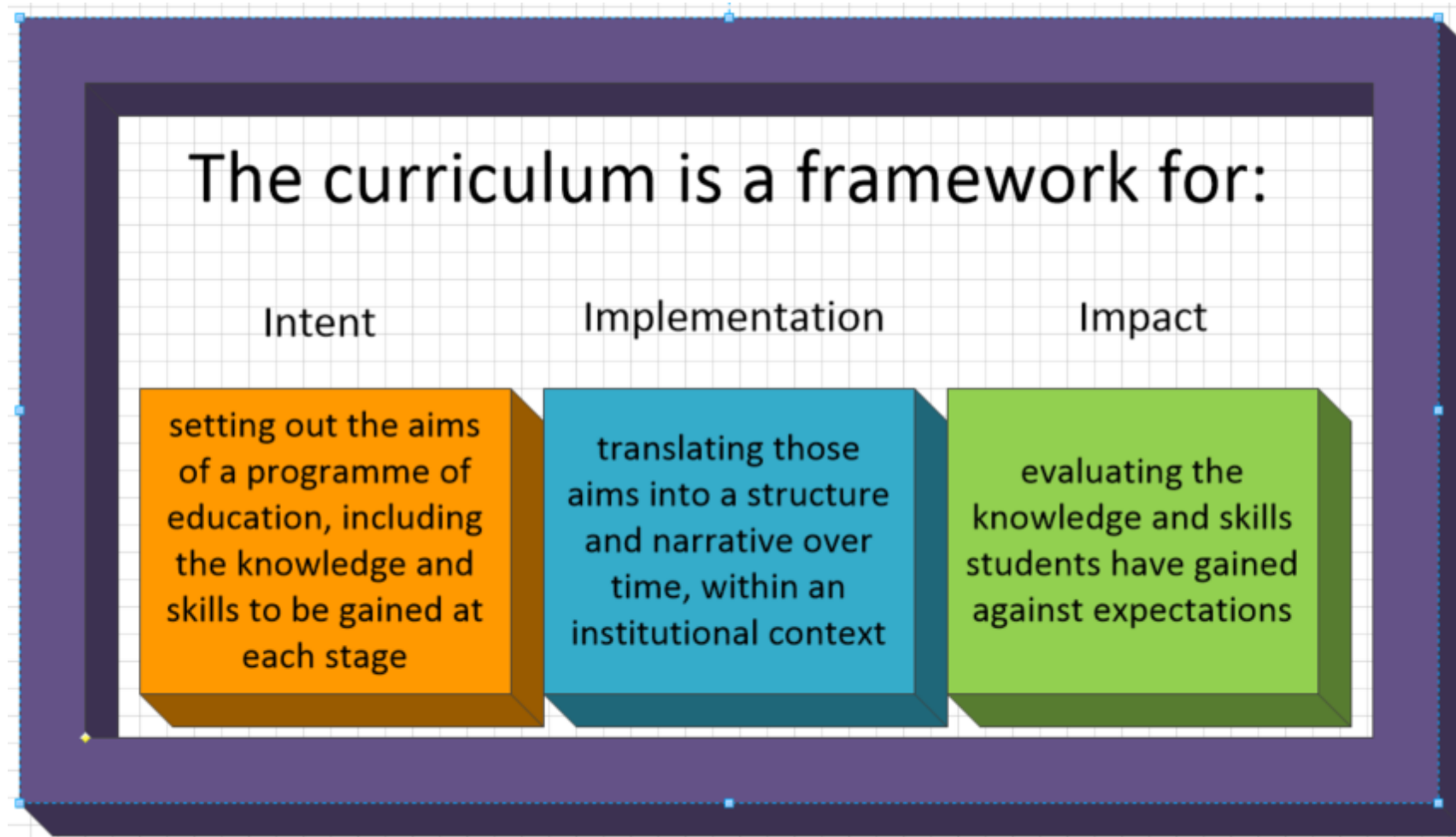
Inform **inspection policy** by:

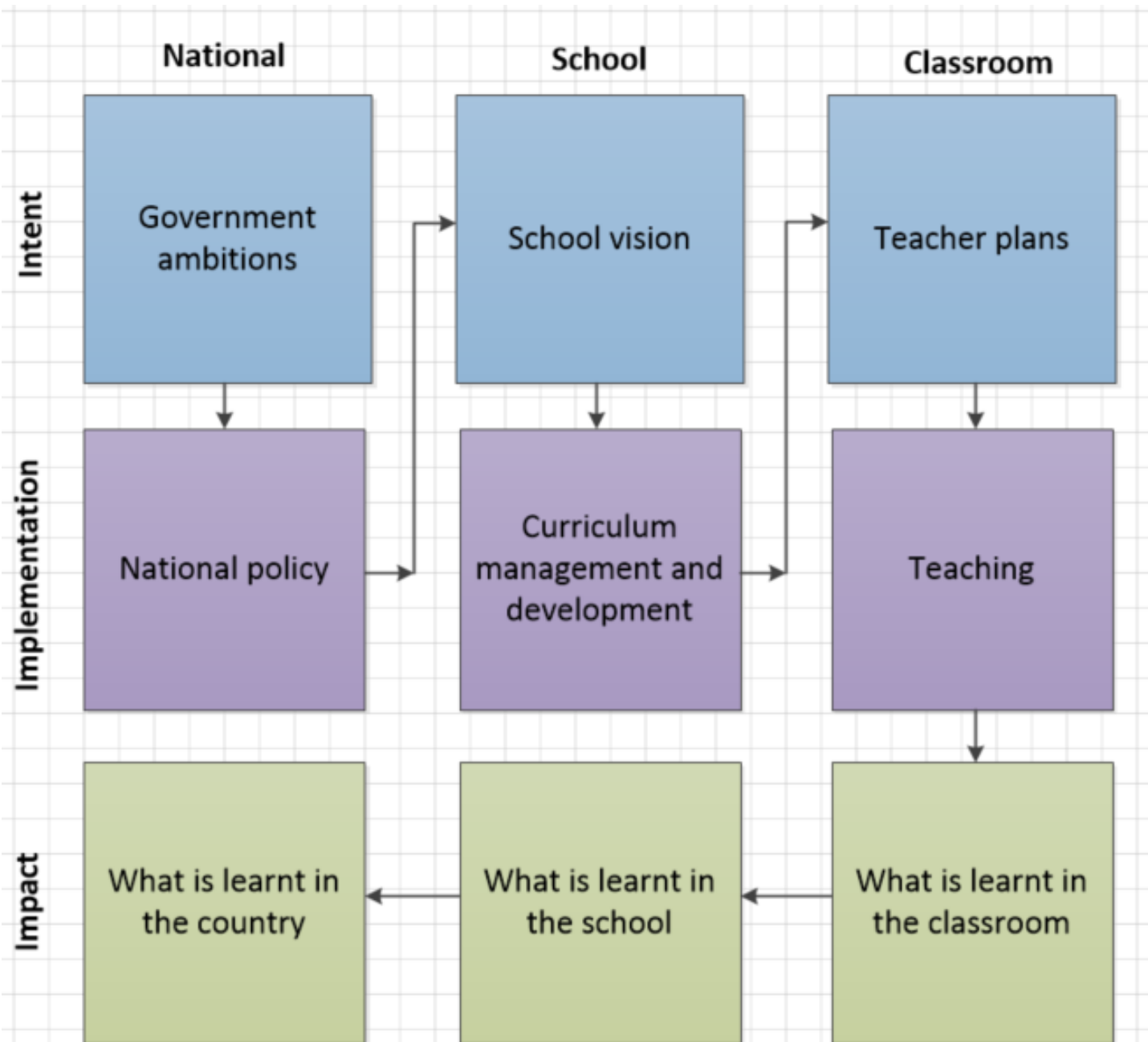
- understanding the current impact of inspection policy and practice on the curriculum in schools
- understanding the drivers of strategic decision making in schools and how to deploy inspection effectively in this context
- identifying the characteristics of an outstanding curriculum that is underpinned by evidence of successful outcomes for pupils

Inform **policy making** in the DfE by:

- testing the extent to which the curriculum at school and classroom level is influenced by national policy levers or other factors

Working definition





Research approach

- We deliberately approached phase 1 of the study in an open-ended and exploratory way rather than use a deductive approach.
- This ensured we could build a broader picture of what is happening in the curriculum across different school types, using a range of data sources.
- For the research visits, inspectors were under clear instruction not to make evaluative judgements about what they were finding, but only to record the evidence descriptively.
- The question design of the evidence collection tools focused on the curriculum intent, implementation and impact at different layers of the school hierarchy.

Some reflections on researching as Ofsted



- We co-produce our research: inspector and researcher
- Our observation is never neutral, a question asked or observation made by Ofsted in any context is within the effect of the accountability relationship
- Pro: unparalleled access
- Con: potential for exaggerated observer effect
- The impact of findings can be very significant, but also sometimes unpredictable. One of our strategic aims is to better understand the unintended consequences of our work.

Research in schools

- Research visits to 40 primary and secondary schools
- Review of routine school inspection reports
- Focus group discussions in five regions with headteachers of good and outstanding schools
- Questionnaire responses from Ofsted's Parents Panel
- Desk-based retrieval from school websites.
- We also conducted ~40 visits specifically to reception classes

Knowledge and expertise

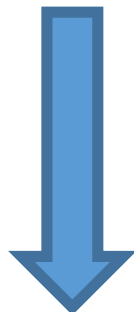
- 1) Some of the language inspectors and teachers were using was very ambiguous. Everyone was talking about skills, for example, but digging down, they often meant very different things.
- 2) All the questions asked on the visits were about the curriculum, but very little of the evidence was about the knowledge and skills pupils were acquiring. There was little articulated that was concrete and specifically related to the business of curriculum management and development.
- 3) Headteachers in focus groups were talking about staff curriculum capability: “you can draw a line in the workforce before and after the national strategies”.

What did we find?

Lack of curriculum knowledge and expertise



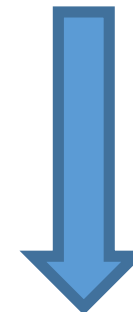
Curriculum being confused with assessment and qualifications



Curriculum narrowing



Teaching to the test



Social justice issues

Qualifications as curriculum

There appears to be a widespread – probably unintentional – view that qualifications, and/or the timetable, is the curriculum. We identified the consequences of this from the evidence:

- 1) Preparation for Key Stage 2 tests is occupying a considerable proportion of year six curriculum time.
- 2) Key Stage 3 is being reduced without evidence of full consideration of what the impact of this might be on pupils who study fewer subjects in their GCSEs.
- 3) Lower attaining pupils are being excluded from studying some subjects in order to prioritise English and maths catch up.

Curriculum and social justice

- Research evidence shows that subject choice has an economic impact on individuals that lasts longer than the effect of the school that you went to.¹
- The majority of pupils in this country don't study subjects like languages, history, geography, art and music at Key Stage 4. Key Stage 3 is being reduced.
- We found a number of schools who were excluding lower attaining pupils from the study of particular subjects, particularly languages – these pupils are disproportionately disadvantaged.
- There are serious social justice implications for pupils whose last opportunity to study knowledge they are entitled to acquire is potentially at age 12.

1. (Edinburgh University, British Journal of the Sociology of Education, 2013)

Our focus on meta-language

- How you talk about something shapes how you think about it
- Some of the language we are using in education is very unclear: for example, no one can agree what is meant by 'skills'
- Some words have become very loaded, like 'facts' and 'knowledge'
- If we are going to be able to talk about curriculum, inspector with practitioner, we are going to need to agree some rules of the game
- An interesting question we have been asking is how schools talk about breaking down knowledge and skill

What does this mean for me?

- We are sharing our thinking as we go so that our shift in direction does not take anyone by surprise
- Whatever the new framework looks like, it is always a good idea to think about:
 - What you want pupils to learn
 - How what you are doing is going to get them there
 - How you will know they have learnt it
- Isn't that just the basics of good education?

2019 Framework

- Our curriculum research, including findings from the obesity project, are intended to inform the new framework for inspecting education from 2019

Next steps:

- A full report on our findings from primary and secondary schools, with more detail on individual subjects
- A new project on the dimensions of curriculum and methods of evidence collection

A final thought...

Hurrah for Computing!

- Computing is valuable, not just for what you can do with it, but for its own sake
- Everyone should have digital knowledge and skill
- All subjects have characteristics that make them distinctive and different from other subjects
- We want to refine our understanding of what that distinctiveness looks like
- I fully expect there to be more discussion in Ofsted of what is rich, deep, peculiar and exciting about Computing and digital education in the next year than in the past ten years combined

ICT curricular elements from the last subject visits (2012/13)

- Computing and data concepts: data logging, use of sensors, control and data handling
- Use and understanding of programming
- E-safety