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Why are School Subjects Important?

DAVID LAMBERT

ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to contribute to the contemporary debate by supporting school subjects. The article explores the technicist manner in which teachers' work is now configured and highlights ways in which competitive, output-led models and tick-list approaches have reified schools as qualification factories. Arguing for a deeper understanding of subject disciplines in the school curriculum, the author critiques contemporary approaches to the secondary curriculum planning and organisation and shows ways in which important debates about *what* is taught are being marginalised. The article points to the intellectual vacuum that can lie at the heart of practical curriculum making when subjects no longer take a leading part. It concludes that teachers' capacity to think synoptically about a subject is essential for the effective teaching of integrated themes or topics and that excellent, innovative teaching of subject disciplines is vital in twenty-first century schools.

Subjects are one of those enduring matters of debate in education (see Pring, 2005). Despite a fairly widespread and long-standing scepticism about the appropriateness of school subjects for young learners, they nevertheless appear to be remarkably resilient. Whenever we ask ourselves what education (or school) is for, we inevitably get into curriculum debates about what we select, or elect, to teach young people. These are of course deeply complex matters requiring the most judicious mix of idealism (concerning what we want, in the form of our aims, values and purposes) and practicality (addressing implementation, but in so doing taking on some weighty social, economic and political issues and other significant matters such as teacher identity).

This short article seeks to contribute to the contemporary debate by showing support for school subjects. This is not to be taken as a traditionalist position, or an attempt to defend a golden past. To attack subjects as old fashioned is no more serious an argument (though it is sometimes heard) than that which urges schools to embrace radical innovation because it will bring real change (which is frequently heard). To be sure, innovation can bring change, and subject teaching can be dull, but let us leave that to one side and

focus on excellent, innovative subject teaching. The argument is made that subject disciplines are vital in twenty-first century schools, ensuring not only excitement and motivation to learners, but challenge, focus and purpose.

There is definitely an anti-subject wind blowing in the system, and I find this troubling. This is not because I worry about the loss of a subject-knowledge canon, and although I do see evidence of curriculum 'corruption' (Whelan, 2007) in the way policy makers and others see the school curriculum as a device to be used for their own purposes (teaching financial management, climate change, healthy living, five hours of 'culture' – the list is possibly endless), it is not this that concerns me most. What I am concerned about is the intellectual vacuum that can lie at the heart of practical curriculum making when subjects no longer play a leading part. We have a crisis in schools, and it is to do with the curriculum. It has been caused by the way we treat teachers – or more precisely the way teachers' work has been configured, in a highly technicist manner with low risk, compliance and very high stakes. We are told we have the best trained teachers ever, and in many ways this may be so – but there is a gap emerging, something missing, which is akin to a lack of moral heart.

It is hard to put one's finger on any one explanation for this state of affairs, and it is not the purpose of this article to do so. It is important simply to note that much of the educational infrastructure is now implicated. So, for example, the Awarding Bodies cannot be blamed in themselves. But they work in a competitive environment that has reduced examination specifications almost to 'things to do' lists accompanied by specially commissioned textbooks and teacher-training days. This is like reducing painting to painting-by-numbers. And the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is, with its independent voice, surely worthwhile in itself. But it has adopted such an output-led model, it is almost blind to matters of quality at the level of the classroom. The use of value-added data is encouraging head teachers to make precisely judged curriculum decisions, not for educational reasons, nor necessarily in the interest of the children, but to maximise the score. The National Strategies have created a new professional language of pedagogy – quite an achievement – but in an environment dominated by the tick list and distorted by output targets which have perverted the curriculum experienced by young people. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the growing number of schools choosing to make key stage 3 a two-year period and fast-track students through GCSE. What this does is to narrow the curriculum base (the end of key stage 3 is when the foundation subjects, in the humanities for example, cease to be mandatory) and reify schools as, fundamentally, qualifications factories.

In attempting to address the curriculum crisis in secondary schools, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has come up with a 'big picture' which tries to incorporate, under a set of clear aims, all the competing claims to school curriculum space. This makes for a highly complicated diagram, although deceptively simple in its layout. It is in effect a 'talking point' for all teachers, a kind of *post hoc* rationalisation of various initiatives introduced

to try to make up for the deficiencies of the original National Curriculum. But it is no curriculum planning tool. On the other hand, it seems that many schools have taken the big picture as an invitation and encouragement to think radically about the key stage 3 curriculum – themes, topics and integrated days and weeks are all being tried, along with the shortened key stage 3 as we have noted. In some schools competence or skills based curricula are being introduced. Indeed, 'skills' have become the new orthodoxy, buoyed up with the beguiling rhetoric of 'learning to learn' and 'personalisation', but impoverishing the language of education to such a degree that I fear we may have lost track of its moral purpose. Don't we care *what* young people are taught? Aren't we interested in *what* they are learning? (Perhaps not, so long as they are 'successful', 'confident' and 'responsible' according to the curriculum's official aims.)

As noted above, the key stage 3 curriculum reforms offer the opportunity to think anew. This is true not only at the whole school level, but at the level of the classroom. Indeed, perhaps the only *statutory* part of QCA's 'big picture' diagram is the line of subjects that lie near its base. As was always the case, they do not have to be taught separately, but they do each have a programme of study. In my subject, geography, the biggest change has been in the radical way the programme of study has been reformulated. There is now, for the first time in a generation, opportunity and encouragement for teachers of geography to think about what they are doing in conceptual terms. What this means is to think about geography and its contribution to the curriculum in terms of how young people develop their *understanding* in relation to a small number of complex and multidimensional big ideas such as 'place' and 'interdependence', or 'space' and 'sustainable development' rather than in the rather more prosaic terms of 'getting through' the subject content. QCA's reforms have recognised the implications of this, urging us to 'delve deeper' and 'linger longer' with students. In my subject, we would say that an outcome of such a deeper approach to teaching and learning would be an increased *capability* in young people to 'think geographically' about societies and environments, and the worlds they encounter directly and through the various digital media.

Without a substantial geographical component, it is possible to argue that young people will be restricted in their capacity to make sense of the complex, unequal, fast-changing and often dangerous world in which they live, to the detriment of the quality of their lives and of the society to which they belong. It is of course possible to make similar claims from other subject specialist positions, and no doubt the curriculum managers of schools have some tricky decisions to make guided by the particular aims of the school. My point is not necessarily to promote or make the case for geography, which may vary in strength and prominence from school to school (indeed it does, despite central 'orders' of the National Curriculum), but to advocate the role of subject specialist teachers. Put differently, *if* we think geography – or more precisely, learning to 'think geographically' (Jackson, 2006) – is a significant element of a worthwhile, relevant and enjoyable curriculum, designed to educate young

people, then we need teachers who are not only well trained but also ready and equipped to engage with the subject as a discipline.

At no time since the National Curriculum was first introduced in England in 1988 has subject specialist expertise been more important in schools. As indicated above, by subject expertise I refer to something a little more complicated than a 'working knowledge' of, say, rivers or transport (significant topics though these are in the contemporary world). It is more the capacity to think 'synoptically' about the subject; that is, to know about the topics, themes and issues in a way that can enthuse and encourage learners (sometimes noted as one's 'passion' for the subject), but also to have a clear idea about how the topics link and progress: a clear sense of the big narrative that the subject can offer. This is about taking matters of 'subject' to the realms of educational aims and purposes, precisely the kind of thinking that has been steadily leached out of teacher training and indeed the wider professional discourse in recent years. Although I would not wish to confuse 'subject knowledge' with 'curriculum organisation' – in other words, arguing for the importance of subject specialists does not in itself necessarily make the case for single-subject lessons – it is worth noting that curriculum arrangements that seek to break down 'subject barriers' are simply harder to pull off successfully, if we take the significance of the 'synoptic capacity' of teachers seriously. To put this more directly: if secondary teachers are asked to teach integrated themes or topics, and in doing so provide a range of specialist perspectives, how is support and leadership provided to ensure that not only the teaching is confident, informed and responsive, but is also challenging and progressive? Teaching outside an area of subject expertise risks banality: banal, because it may lack the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that can support critical engagement leading to deeper understanding.

David Carr has recently re-opened a discussion on knowledge integration (Carr, 2007), making two important distinctions. Following Dewey, he distinguishes subjects ('as bodies of reported fact or information') from disciplines ('as tools or sets of tools for managing or negotiating experience'). Subjects, he says, 'are also misleadingly suggestive of rational closure and finality than of the openness and provisionality of genuine enquiry' (p. 9). This is useful as it draws attention to the way a fairly restricted understanding of subjects can easily take hold. If this kind of view prevails in schools, then the teaching, under any number of innovative curriculum arrangements, is likely to be limited. In geography this could translate to emphasising descriptive *place knowledge* for example, and missing out on the exploration of *principles and ideas* that can be developed through the subject in order to deepen our capacity to think geographically and deepen our understanding of how the world works.

Carr's second useful distinction to us here is between epistemological conceptions of integration and 'ideas that apparently focus more on issues or considerations of pedagogy and/or the psychology of the learning process' (2007, p. 10). Thus, whilst it may be true to say that 'learners learn in personally or subjectively diverse ways' (p. 11), which run against the 'formally

pre-determined approaches to enquiry' that are often placed before students in lessons, this does not negate the power of subjects. There are two matters here: knowledge and mind. We can acknowledge that topics and even discovery methods may be better suited to individual meaning making but at the same time recognise that the meaning maker needs to be able to draw from knowledge that has been made by others and be exposed to methods of enquiry that have 'worked' for others. There is no need to start with a blank sheet and constantly reinvent the wheel. Subject specialist school teachers are not there simply to transmit to students a finished end product of enquiry, but they are there for a reason – to use their expertise to induct students into disciplined ways of seeing and knowing.

Thus, subjects (that is, subject disciplines) in school need to be understood carefully, and my argument is that the 'restricted' view of subjects outlined above is inadequate. A fuller understanding of subjects indicates that we do away with them at our peril. The Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) has recently captured school subjects very well:

> There are those who look upon subject teaching as the transmission of slabs of content for no worthier purpose than examination success, and the subject teacher, operating within a highly restricted pedagogical range, as having no loftier ambition than to crowd pupils' heads with facts. Of course, such characterisations represent an absurd caricature of subject teaching. Properly conceived, however they differentiate and coalesce over time, subjects constitute the available ways we have of exploring and interpreting the world of subjective experience, of analysing the social environment and of making sense of the natural world. It is through subject study that learners acquire historical, scientific, mathematical and other forms of understanding; and it is through subject study that learners develop the capacity to engage in the distinctive modes of investigation and analysis through which human experience is differentiated and extensions of human understanding are achieved. That rationale does not by any means imply that knowledge can only be mediated through subject specific teaching; nor does it discount the value for particular purposes of combining knowledge that is drawn from discrete disciplines. Clearly, for many, including early years and primary teachers, that integrated approach is the preferred mode of knowledge engagement.
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> Moreover, subjects are communities of debate and argumentation, of exploration and criticism, of conjecture and refutation; they are pursuits in which knowledge, in due recognition of its provisionality, is open to continuous reconstruction. As such, subjects are educational resources of remarkable power, offering unlimited scope for realising an enormous range of educational purposes for enquiry and reflection, for hypothesising and the interrogation of evidence, for adjudicating between the valuable and

> the meretricious; for the use of the imagination and creativity; for the examination of human motive and the improvability of the social condition; for coming to terms with the responsibilities of citizenship; for promoting personal, social and environmental competence; and much else besides.
> (Kirk & Broadhead, 2007, para. 39)

These words describe the way a subject specialist *teacher* in a secondary school can expect to engage with the subject knowledge 'in due recognition of its provisionality'. Unless the teacher is intellectually involved in these ways, she is limited in her ability to induct young people into such productive and challenging ways to make sense of the world. Without such disciplinary induction the person is, arguably, lacking in opportunities to develop certain *capabilities* (Hinchliffe, 2007), which may restrict their freedoms and autonomy. For example, if students miss out on opportunities to use the 'remarkable power' of subjects, they may lack access to ways to think critically about themselves and their surroundings.

We are a long way from having an education service with such a high regard of teachers that it invests in developing their synoptic capacity for their subjects. Subject identity is important to teachers, not merely in a descriptive sense but in providing a significant element of the intellectual resources on which they can draw. Teachers are not currently encouraged to think in these terms, however, and so long as 'brain gym' and other pedagogic distractions clutter teachers' *think time* I am not optimistic that we will see change any time soon. We are in the thrall of skills and measurable outputs and my worry is that without foregrounding the rich intellectual resources teachers get from their subjects, much of the 'delivery' will be banal. If I am right we will collectively pay the consequences.

But at least the curriculum, as written in the programmes of study, is now no longer an impediment for excellent geography teaching. There is also now talk of an all Master's profession, which is potentially excellent news. However, if the only supported higher degree study opportunities for teachers turns out to be yet more 'teaching and learning' skills and techniques, this will be an opportunity missed. Technique is important, but without moral purpose, which comes through what we decide is worth teaching, it is quickly bankrupt. It is essential in my view that teachers are encouraged to delve deeper and linger longer with their subjects. For many, the opportunity to do so may be the deciding factor in keeping them in the job.

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DAVID LAMBERT is Professor of Geography Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, and Chief Executive of the Geographical Association (http://www.geography.org.uk). *Correspondence*: Professor David Lambert, Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H OAL, United Kingdom (d.lambert@ioe.ac.uk).

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