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## Decentralisation for Schools, but Not for Knowledge: the RSA Area Based Curriculum and the limits of localism in Coalition education policy

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**ABSTRACT** Use of local environments and stakeholders to illuminate the school curriculum, and increase ownership of it, has been demonstrated by international research as an effective means by which to make the curriculum more relevant and engaging to students. Localism is a key tenet of the Government's policy platform, and in education policy the extension of structural freedoms for schools has been a key priority. However, a parallel process of democratisation of knowledge is unlikely to follow. The inadequacy of government thinking about the nature of knowledge, and weaknesses in the system that will not be addressed by current policy, mean that schools are unlikely to be in a position to take full advantage of their new freedoms with regard to curriculum. The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce's (RSA's) Area Based Curriculum is contributing to the debate and practice about how localism might apply to knowledge. The author argues that in a world where local, national and global knowledges are increasingly in conflict, localism must extend to knowledge as well as to the structures of schooling. Curriculum developed in partnership between students, local communities and teachers would better equip students to navigate ideas of what is important and what it is important to know.

### **Why a Sophisticated Approach to Knowledge is Required**

Head teachers and academics have long been calling for more freedom so that they can provide an education that meets the needs of their students. This has

been the case with regard to the curriculum, among other issues: teachers have often found the National Curriculum constraining, deprofessionalising, and too content-heavy to be able to tailor to the specific needs of their students. It became increasingly apparent during the later years of the New Labour government that one size fits all approaches to school organisation, curriculum, teaching methods and a variety of other programmes were inadequate for an increasingly diverse and disengaged student population.

The election of the Coalition government in May 2010, with its reforming Secretary of State for Education, promised radical devolution of power to schools over budgets, governance and curriculum through the Free Schools and Academies programme, but also through changes to funding and the abolition of several education quangos. The Government has convened an expert body of educationalists to review the National Curriculum, claiming to be slimming it down, reducing prescription and giving freedom to schools.

However, we live in a world where local, national and global knowledges are increasingly in conflict. Young people are negotiating competing ideas of what is important and what it is important to know. In her review of the literature on conceptions of area-based curricula that draw on the knowledge contained in a local area, Keri Facer (2009) lists just some of the types of knowledge which schools might consider to be important. These included: the 'new basics' of a globalised knowledge economy, the subject-based canon of academic knowledge; the 'citizen knowledge' of a democratic society; the popular, unofficial and unregulated knowledge of media and culture; and the indigenous knowledge of localised cultures, economies and homes.

In this context we require schools that have a sophisticated and critical approach to knowledge, and for teachers to be skilled at mediating the multiple knowledges young people are exposed to inside and outside school. Working-class young people have been shown by sociological studies since the 1960s to be commonly disengaged and alienated by schools, which represent a distinct (middle-class) cultural value set and assumptions. Further, in many areas of the United Kingdom school populations are increasingly diverse, and young people are exposed to different knowledges and learning via the internet and social media. Control over what is taught, and why, can no longer be mediated at national level for all students. What it is important to know needs – at least in part – to be localised so that schools can draw on, value and sustain the knowledges of the diverse communities they serve.

### **Contradictions in the Government's Approach to Curriculum**

However, the idea that localism could be extended to curriculum content is not, it seems, on the table, despite rhetoric that claims that schools are to be freed up in terms of curriculum. The terms of the Curriculum Review, the introduction of the English Baccalaureate and the rhetoric of Michael Gove make it clear that fundamental questions about how we value knowledge are not even recognised

as questions: what counts as knowledge is simply taken for granted. The government approach to the curriculum is inadequate in a number of ways, but we address two of these in detail here.

### *Failure to Understand Multiplicity and Contestability of Knowledge*

Firstly, government policy fails to acknowledge that knowledges are multiple, can be contested and created, and replicate power structures in society. The questions addressed by the Curriculum Review are not ‘whose knowledge is of value and why, how should we decide, and what impact might those decisions have on different groups?’, but instead, what is ‘the essential knowledge (e.g. facts, concepts, principles and fundamental operations) that children need to be taught in order to progress and develop their understanding in English, mathematics, science, physical education and any other subjects which it is decided should be part of the National Curriculum?’ (Department for Education, 2010).

It is possible to imagine a past era when schools could be free to determine curriculum without straying too far from a nationally recognised canon of knowledge because there was arguably a sufficiently shared sense of what was important, and a sufficiently delineated stock of knowledge to be learned. This is no longer the case, if ever it was, and the choice of what – out of the ever expanding and ever more interconnected mass of human knowledge – to include in the school curriculum is a political choice. Whose knowledge, culture and assumptions get to be reflected in every child’s experience, and whose are excluded? And who gets to decide?

The result of ignoring this question is that the government’s *a priori* assumptions about knowledge represent and reinforce the dominance of a certain kind of elite knowledge which is accessed, owned and replicated more by certain groups than others. This works not only against a true localism in education, but also against the democratisation and equality of entitlement in education that the government claims to seek.

### *Equation of Academic Knowledge with Value and Rigour*

The government also makes another *a priori* assumption: that rigour, difficulty and importance are exclusively and necessarily represented by traditional academic subjects. Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove equates his view of the right kinds of knowledge with ‘elevating our sights, raising aspiration, daring to imagine what heights our children might scale’ (Gove, 2010), without providing an explanation of the link between such aspirations and particular (‘traditional’) subject areas. However, he presents an important argument for equality of entitlement, arguing that children from poorer backgrounds should not be restricted to vocational qualification routes and that all children, regardless of background, should be offered an academic ‘core’ as a means of promoting equality of access, and hence, social mobility.

In his critique of how certain kinds of knowledge are typically made available, or restricted, to different social groups, and the impact that this has on their life chances, Gove might have drawn on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argues that certain forms of knowledge comprise 'cultural capital', possession of which exercises enormous influence over how people access different domains of power, attainment or influence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Antonio Gramsci also argued that the working classes needed access to elite knowledge in order to gain agency and power to critique the existing system. More recently, Michael Young (2007) has argued that some knowledges are more powerful than others, and to deny children from less powerful backgrounds access to powerful knowledge further disadvantages them in relation to their more advantaged peers.

However, Gove does not draw on these radical theorists, and for good reason. Whereas Bourdieu, Gramsci and Young focus on the structures of power and knowledge, rendering these structures open to analysis and challenge, Gove's analysis does not question the power structures as they are but focuses instead on the mechanisms by which different people get access. Academic knowledge, in his view, is simply – and obviously – better. If we do not ensure that all children have access to such knowledge we will be taking 'a step backwards – to a past when we rationed access to knowledge and assumed there had to be a limit on how much poorer children could achieve' (Gove, 2010). There is, in this view, no alternative to high-status, powerful knowledge for a few, or high-status, powerful knowledge for all. There is no question that we might challenge the esteem in which traditional academic knowledge is held and that a more localised approach to knowledge might have a role to play in democratising and diversifying how we value different kinds of knowledge.

### **Why New Curriculum Freedoms Will Not Result in a Profound Shift in How Schools Approach Knowledge**

Despite the unwillingness to challenge received ideas about which kinds of knowledge are important, the Government is promising to reduce the proportion of learning time accounted for by the National Curriculum. This could potentially leave more room for schools and communities to develop their own curriculum, determine what knowledge is important to them and for their children to thrive. In particular, increased freedoms for Academies and Free Schools over curriculum further reduce the import of what the review panel decides about the National Curriculum (which rather begs the question, why is it so important to prescribe knowledge for some students but not others?)

However, there are three reasons to doubt whether the rhetoric around curriculum freedom will result in a profound shift in how schools think about knowledge.

Firstly, there is the impoverishment of debate on education in the United Kingdom. Whilst many academics and practitioners have continued to develop sophisticated, historically informed accounts of where education could and

should be headed, the debate among the wider public – including many students, parents and teachers – remains mired in reactionary arguments about standards and discipline. Recent research by Keri Facer has identified issues with our confused understanding of the future as it relates to education (Facer, 2011), which questions how well school leaders are equipped to make such judgements.

Secondly, there have been the well-documented decades of teacher deskilling as the National Curriculum removed the need for teachers to be trained in or practice curriculum design (Hargreaves, 2008, Children Schools and Families Parliamentary Committee, 2009). Thus teachers are rarely asked to think about what they teach and why; and consequently many will be ill prepared to engage with, let alone lead, discussions about what young people should learn.

We have little reason to think that this will change a great deal, despite the emphasis on the quality of teaching highlighted in the Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (Department for Education [DfE], 2011). Gove talks in his speech launching the review of the National Curriculum, and it is reiterated in the schools White Paper, about how teachers are patronised by the current National Curriculum because it tells them how to teach. However, he then goes on to criticise the same document by stating, ‘we have a compulsory history curriculum in secondary schools that doesn’t mention any historical figures...’

If teachers are patronised by being told how to teach, might they not equally be patronised by the assumption that they are unable to make judgements about what to teach? Yet this reaches to the heart of tensions in current curriculum policy in England, which lurches between autonomy and prescription. Perhaps teachers would judge it more appropriate *not* to propagate a view of history dominated by rich and powerful ‘historical figures’, preferring a subalternist view of history dominated by what happens to ordinary people (an approach, by the way, emphasised to undergraduate historians at Oxford). Again, there is an *a priori* assumption that what it is important to teach is already known, agreed upon and blindingly obvious, when I would argue that increasingly, it is anything but.

The speech goes on to claim that ‘the absence of such rigour leaves our children falling further and further behind’, implying that teaching is not rigorous because the curriculum does not specify which historical figures to teach children about. The slightly strange implication of this is that teachers are perfectly capable of determining everything about how to teach, but that they are entirely incapable of using their discretion to judge what to teach, as if these two processes were entirely separate. This smacks of a technician and limited view of teaching that Gove purports to criticise in the White Paper. It also means that debates about what role the teacher plays in mediating knowledge, whether knowledge is transferred or created, whether it is held in common or individually, and what role it plays in constructing and changing culture and society are simply dismissed.

In other words, the basis for the Government's approach to curriculum is based on an inadequate understanding of knowledge. It takes for granted that traditionally constituted academic subjects are the only sensible, rigorous and proper way to organise education. Anything else is simply substandard. And it fails to recognise or support the role of the teaching profession in mediating knowledge, thus missing an opportunity to develop a cohort of professionals that is equipped and supported to help children negotiate the complexities of the modern world.

The third reason why new curriculum freedoms are unlikely to mean a true localisation of knowledge in education is because the introduction of the English Baccalaureate ended the debate before it was begun. By manipulating the power of league tables to pressure schools to concentrate on a few 'core' academic GCSEs, the so-called 'E Bacc' sends a clear signal about what kinds of knowledge are most important, restricting any forthcoming debate and the findings of the Curriculum Review within a narrow, traditionally academic framework before it has even started.

As a result of the weak public debate, teacher deskilling and the pressures of the English Baccalaureate, schools that are increasingly set free to create their own curriculum are likely to rely on commercial 'solutions', off the shelf packages from a range of providers, or simply stick to a version of what has always been done (Ball, 2007).

### **An Alternative Approach: the Area Based Curriculum<sup>[1]</sup>**

The RSA has worked in education for 150 years, and in recent decades has focused especial attention on curriculum reform. For example, the RSA's Opening Minds curriculum, initiated in 2000, is a competence-based curriculum framework that offers schools a framework within which to think about what children need to be able to do as well as what they need to be able to know.

Since 2008 the RSA has drawn on a raft of international work on local curricula, legitimisation of diverse students' knowledges, and democratic curricula [2] to develop the concept of an Area Based Curriculum. The idea is to increase student engagement and participation by using the local area to illustrate curriculum content, and by using diverse local stakeholders (including students) to co-design the curriculum. Hence the work involves supporting schools to partner with organisations or groups from the local area to design aspects of the curriculum utilising the local area as a resource.

The aim is to engage a wide range of people and organisations in a local area in providing young people with a curriculum that is meaningful and challenging; that recognises and values their neighbourhoods, communities, families, cultures and wider locality; and equips them to shape their own futures and that of their local area for the better. The aim is not to reduce learning to the local to the exclusion of the national and global, but rather to diversify the kinds of knowledges that are valued by schools, ensuring that the resources

provided by local areas of all kinds are recognised, valued, and engaged in young people's learning.

As such the Area Based Curriculum directly challenges the idea that we already know what knowledge is valuable and should be taught. As Facer has argued in her 2008 paper on the concept, an Area Based Curriculum requires 'the opening up of curriculum design to include not only educational institutions and professionals but local communities. Both of these moves are necessary to achieve the creation of a truly area-based curriculum' (Facer, 2008). As we have seen, the Government's thinking does not even reach to involving teachers in this process.

The Area Based Curriculum draws intellectually on a range of traditions and existing ideas, including asset-based theories of community development (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993), which encourage a focus on what resource is already held within communities to solve problems; funds of knowledge approaches (Gonzales & Moll, 2005) which encourage building learning in school upon the knowledge already held in students' homes; and some of the ideas underpinning learning outside the classroom in the UK as well as recent policy emphasis on parental engagement, extended schooling and so on.

Drawing on the local area to support and enhance learning implies a number of relatively non-contentious outcomes: better engagement of students with their learning through a connection with the real world; more avenues for parents to get involved; building the social capital of young people; improving their knowledge of their local area; building teachers' skills in curriculum design and partnership working; embedding schools more fully in their local communities. Since the banking collapse and ensuing era of austerity began, there is an additional argument to be made for schools leaning on and making better use of the resources immediately available to them in their local area.

However, a more radical side to this work implies a profound shift in how schools value different kinds of knowledge, and the people that hold these knowledges. By inviting organisations and groups from outside of the formal education sector to participate in designing and owning (not just delivering and servicing) the school curriculum, the Area Based Curriculum exposes a number of questions about the who, where, what and why of curriculum. The criteria used to frame the Area Based Curriculum insist that projects 'must take a critical approach to the relationship between the local, national and global dimensions of learning, focussing on the links between these, and encourage criticality in young people to ensure they are able to access and to shape their multiple identities and worlds'. How to make such exhortations a reality is, of course, the challenge. It is a challenge that the Government doesn't seem to recognise as important, let alone make an attempt at answering.

## **Why the Questions Raised by the Area Based Curriculum are Critical**

Foremost among the questions raised by the Area Based Curriculum work is that of how to balance the knowledge that draws on and values diverse expertise available at local level and in children's communities with what is considered to be important at a national level. This is a crucial question to consider as more schools are being given more freedom over curriculum, and it is not one with an easy answer.

There are many very good reasons why people think it is important to have a national component to the curriculum, and these reasons are themselves revealing about what we consider education to be for and what kind of society we are trying to promote.

One reason for a nationally recognised and determined curriculum is the inculcation of a shared set of values. Who decides what those are and on whose behalf, however, is increasingly unclear, particularly in light of the collapse of moral authority of parliament in the wake of the MPs' expenses crisis and the exposure of the reckless behaviour of the banking class. The values of MPs and the commanding heights of our most profitable industry were found to be misaligned with those of the majority of society. Traditional sources of authority no longer hold sway. To whom should we turn for a definition of what our shared values might be?

Linked to this is the idea of a common cultural understanding of history and our intellectual tradition. Such, it is argued, is necessary for a cohesive society. This is contestable, as surely a full understanding of the nature of world religions and the purpose of the European Union in historical context might do more to promote tolerance and respect in our increasingly diverse society. Yet of the previous National Curriculum humanities subjects, Religious Studies is the only one not to make it into the English Baccalaureate, and the mention of the European Union in the current National Curriculum was derided by Michael Gove (his comment arguably exemplifying 'dog whistle politics' in its blatant appeal to anti-European conservative sensibilities!)

A less emotive but dominant rationale is the economic: the national government's job is to promote national economic well-being and growth and hence the curriculum must be oriented to the skills the national economy demands. This is very clear in Gove's rhetoric around the need for change due to the United Kingdom falling behind in international league tables – which raises the spectre of, as he puts it, 'millions of Asian students graduating from schools which outpace our own joining the international trade system' (Gove, 2010). The very dominance of economic thinking in determining the curriculum makes it worth re-examining the – again challengeable – assumptions underpinning ideas of national competitiveness through skills, and the myth of the global talent pool (Keep, 2011). However, this debate, too, is not being had.



Finally, as we have seen, there is a powerful argument for the idea of a national entitlement for every child – not to ensure that Britain competes internationally in terms of skills, not to promote a cohesive society well versed in shared values, but because we believe that there is knowledge that every child needs to participate fully in our society as it is. This idea is strongly linked to Young’s concept of ‘powerful knowledge’ but also to ideas based in social inclusion, human rights and a refusal to accept less for some students than others.

There are real challenges, therefore, inherent in freeing up schools to teach what they like, and even greater ones when we open that question up to communities – and excellent reasons for retaining some of what is taught under national, democratically accountable, control. A key question remains: who decides what is valid knowledge to be taught in schools, and best meets the needs of children? Anecdotal accounts of meetings about setting up Free Schools have reported different sets of parents with wildly differing values being unable to believe that the other would be allowed to set up a school, highlighting the need for support for teachers who are best placed to negotiate these tensions.

Two contemporary examples illustrate this dilemma well:

- The creationism debate. Although less critical as an issue in the United Kingdom than in places like the United States, whether schools should be free to teach creationism in science, and whether they also need to teach evolution, is a live issue, largely due to the introduction of Academies (*The Times*, 2009)
- An equally sensationalist but nevertheless revealing example when we talk about involving parents and communities in designing and owning curriculum content is that of sex education in schools. The first question I am asked by teachers in workshops on the Area Based Curriculum is usually from teachers in multicultural inner-city areas who ask about how one might manage the conflict in values between what the school teaches and what the parents would like them to teach. This is particularly with regard to sex education, but also sometimes regarding a preference among parents for a more traditional curriculum than these primary schools offer. I usually tell them that I do not have an answer. That there is such a gulf that teachers seem afraid even to have the conversation, and that there is no support for schools to know how to engage with the communities they serve, *or* for communities to understand what a school is trying to achieve for their children, is telling. Indeed, the dilemma over whether it is schools that serve the parents and communities or the other way around, is exactly my point.

These questions are important, they are difficult, and there are no easy answers.

## Potential for a More Democratic Curriculum

For the first time in 20 years there has been an opening for what one of the primary school head teachers the RSA works with called 'a post-imperialist knowledge base' for schooling to emerge. But it is unlikely that many schools will find themselves in a position to take advantage of the new freedoms they have been offered and really challenge the received wisdom that buoys up an increasingly outdated hierarchy of knowledge in the school curriculum. The public debate is also unlikely to move on while even teaching professionals are excluded from the debate.

We are exploring what diversifying the knowledge base of school curricula might mean by establishing partnerships between schools and local communities. Getting the balance right is not easy. This is the challenge we and the schools with which we are working are facing, and we will be learning as we go. But we are dedicated to maintaining the work, and the wider debate, in order to address crucial issues of democracy, engagement and empowerment in schooling.

### Notes

- [1] The RSA's current Area Based Curriculum work in Peterborough has been funded by Peterborough City Council, and the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation.
- [2] Including work done by Gonzalez & Moll (2005) and Pat Thompson (2008) on Funds of Knowledge approaches, Schmidt (2008), and many others. See our concept note, *The RSA Area Based Curriculum: engaging the local* (2010), for more detail of the research drawn on.

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