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Re-energising Subject Knowledge

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ABSTRACT The value of knowledge and the role of subjects in the school curriculum have been widely questioned in recent years, often portrayed as old-fashioned and irrelevant, especially in the face of a fast-changing global economy. This article argues that this is both limited in its view of the potential of knowledge and subjects, and limiting for those pupils denied access to disciplined knowledge, especially in particular schools and subjects. It proposes that the acquisition of knowledge through subjects remains central to pupils' entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum, and to their ability to participate actively in our society, economy and democracy. It suggests the need for a more informed (and disciplined) policy debate founded in a balanced view of the purposes of education.

> Mr Bush, turning his attention to another continent, told reporters, 'We spent a lot of time talking about Africa, and we should. Africa is a nation that suffers from incredible disease.'[1]

George W. Bush was famous for his creative interpretations of the English language, and sometimes-hazy knowledge of geography. Why did we find this entertaining, and rather troubling? Perhaps because we feel the need to be confident that the most powerful man in the world has a basic knowledge and understanding about it: it is one of the marks of an educated person. But in the early twenty-first century, Western culture has become ambivalent about the value of knowledge, and its place in education. In part this may be a rather post-modern scepticism, which views knowledge as provisional and questions its authenticity; in part it may be linked to rapid developments in technology, whereby an explosion of information, reliable or not, is available at the click of a mouse or the touch of a finger.

This is a frequent line of reasoning for knowledge sceptics in education (perhaps confusing information with knowledge); for example, as the General Secretary of the National Union of Headteachers put it:

> It is very important that children have an idea of the chronology of historical events, but we expect them to know the precise dates that

> they happened. Why? ... If children want the date of the Battle of Hastings, they will Google it.[2]

On a similar theme, the deputy head of a secondary school in Merseyside told a reporter in 2007:

> You no longer need to go to school to get knowledge. You can sit on Google and find out anything you want at the touch of a button ... you need to spend less time teaching the knowledge but more time teaching pupils where they can find it out.[3]

Instead, many in education have argued that, faced with a fast-changing present and unknowable future, rather than basing curricula around the development of knowledge and understanding, schools should emphasise the acquisition of generic skills in order to prepare pupils (with no doubt unconscious irony) for flexible employment in a knowledge economy. It is a version of the argument that schools' main purpose is to prepare pupils for the world of work. John Morgan suggests that this approach, based on dubious ideas about the 'new' economic reality, looks a little jaded – if not wholly insubstantial – in the light of the 2008 financial crash, and that, rather than trying to catch this zeitgeist, we should pause (with our disciplined knowledge) to examine it rather critically.[4]

Doubts about the value of knowledge are often linked to a loss of confidence in subjects, or outright scepticism about their value as a way of organising the curriculum. A common critique (or caricature) is that a subject-based curriculum is old-fashioned and out of date. Subjects are often characterised as nineteenth-century inventions, arbitrarily dividing 'traditional' knowledge, a means of cramming eclectic collections of material into pupils' minds (and therefore conflated with a certain pedagogy), and so somehow academic and irrelevant to young people today.[5] These arguments are sometimes used to justify integrated approaches to the curriculum, where child-centred purposes are to the fore, and an emphasis on pedagogy rather than subject knowledge as a way of framing teachers' work.[6]

This 'old-fashioned' argument (and its partner, the uncritical pursuit of innovation) betrays an unsophisticated view of curriculum history. Subjects like geography, history, mathematics and language are of course far older than the nineteenth century, and they are widely used today as a means of organising the curriculum in many other European countries and 'high-performing' education systems [7], suggesting that they represent quite fundamental ways of conceptualising human experience and of teaching it to the young. The set of subjects in the current English National Curriculum (and the proposed future version) looks similar to past curriculum frameworks perhaps because these ways of thinking about the world have great stability, command widespread public understanding and are an important part of cultural capital. The framework of subjects provides access to a set of knowledge and experiences which help assure pupils' entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Moreover, far from being static and arbitrary collections of content, subjects are dynamic. What a pupil studies in physics, geography or history in 2012 may be quite different compared with what their ancestors studied in 1912, due to new discoveries, new thinking in the discipline, and changed purposes in learning. As society learns and develops, they change again as the world changes and new knowledge is created. Curriculum conservatives as well as knowledge-sceptics often forget this, the former believing that authorised or given knowledge, 'the best that has been thought and said' [8], is sufficient.

For teachers, subject disciplines remain a key part of their professional expertise and identity, particularly in secondary schools. They are important intellectual resources enabling teachers to decide on learning goals and plan progression, as well as to keep up to date in their own knowledge and understanding. Subject specialists are more likely to be familiar with the key principles and methods of enquiry in their disciplines, and be supported in their judgements by a history of disciplinary thinking and debate; they are also more likely to be a member of a wider subject community. So they are better able to promote deep understanding – rather than superficial knowledge acquisition, for example by asking (and answering) better questions. The result is teachers who really know what they are talking about and so are well placed to interest and motivate their pupils. For many it is simply harder to achieve the best learning for their pupils when teaching outside their discipline. TDA research supports this view: 'Pupils across all ages agreed that 'having an excellent knowledge of the subject they are teaching' was the most important quality for an effective teacher'.[9]

The impact of a retreat from subjects has been felt disproportionately within the curriculum, reflecting, to a great extent, existing curriculum hierarchies. Compared with English, mathematics or science, it is in subjects such as history and geography where pupils are most likely to experience reductions in teaching time, be taught by a non-specialist or within an integrated course, with a direct impact on the quality of provision.[10] There is evidence too that pupils have differential access to GCSE geography and history courses, depending on the type and location of their school. Significantly more pupils take these subjects within selective and independent schools than comprehensives and secondary moderns [11], and within comprehensive schools geography entries are larger in high-performing rural and suburban schools and smaller or sometimes non-existent in lower-performing, mainly urban schools.[12] Pupils educated in the first phase Academies seem to be most at risk of becoming detached from these subjects, and so from an important source of cultural capital. The opportunity to study geography and history has developed a particular geographical and social dimension.

Pioneers of the working-class movements of the nineteenth century would be surprised by this outcome. Poor educational opportunities blocked their participation from full economic, cultural and political participation in society; they knew that Knowledge was Power: the key to taking their place in the world and to challenge it. Today, by downgrading subject disciplines and

limiting access to the humanities, there is a danger of cutting off some pupils from their full opportunities to participate in society, economy and democracy. This is surely a matter of justice [13]; an education system should enable all pupils to acquire knowledge that enables them to 'move beyond their experience and gain understanding of the social and natural worlds of which they are part'.[14]

The current review of the National Curriculum proposes a significant re-emphasis on a subject-based curriculum, and a welcome opportunity to emphasise specialist subject teaching. However, in preparing for a new curriculum, pupils surely also deserve a better policy discussion than we have had recently, including about the merits (and limitations) of subjects:

> Curriculum debate, and thus curriculum practice, are weakened by a muddled and reductive discourse about subjects, knowledge and skills. Discussion of the place of subjects is needlessly polarised; knowledge is grossly parodied as grubbing for obsolete facts and the undeniably important notion of skill is inflated to cover aspects of learning for which it is not appropriate.[15]

Debates about the curriculum are of course linked to differing views on what school is for, 'what counts as an educated (young person) in this day and age'[16], and the standards expected from schools and young people, a discussion which the original version of the National Curriculum attempted but failed to settle. One symptom has been to over-emphasise competing narrow definitions of the purpose of education, rather than seeking a balance between, for example, preparing young people for the world of work, personal and moral development, and inducting them into the culture. The current National Curriculum review should resist the temptation to pin its colours too exclusively to the mast of the latter.

By contrast, a broad and balanced curriculum (itself the best guarantee of broad and balanced opportunities in life) suggests a balance between educational objectives, within a stable entitlement framework of subjects. This promises a better and more durable policy settlement which just might avoid the familiar lurch from one educational enthusiasm to another – a distracting boom and bust in ideas which seems to have plagued English policy and practice at national and local scale since 1988. Within the curriculum framework, one way to avoid the distractions and mistakes of the past could be to decentralise the construction and development of the curriculum detail, and even oversight of standards, to specialist subject communities; what the Geographical Association calls 'curriculum making'.[17] That really would energise subject teaching and restore confidence to the profession. But can the policy live up to the Government's own decentralising rhetoric?

Notes

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[14] Young, M. (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back In: from social constructivism to social realism in the sociology of education*, p. 164. London: Routledge.

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[17] Geographical Association (2009) *The GA Manifesto: a different view.* http://www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview

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