
Towards a New ABC of Curriculum-making: a reply to John Hopkin

JOHN WHITE

ABSTRACT This is a reply to John Hopkin's article in this number of *FORUM* on 'Re-energising subject knowledge' (Volume 54, Number 2, 2012). It argues that Hopkin does not provide sufficiently cogent reasons for continuing the tradition of a subject-based curriculum. It favours starting from defensible general aims of school education and seeing what these require in the shape of more specific aims. How far the result coincides with or diverges from a subject-based curriculum cannot be prejudged. This article also questions Hopkin's almost exclusive emphasis on knowledge aims and provides a historical perspective on this way of thinking about education and on its shortfalls.

John Hopkin has been invited to continue the debate if he so wishes.

Most readers do not associate *FORUM* with defences of the status quo, but John Hopkin's (2012) piece on 'Re-energising Subject Knowledge' in this number seems to provide one. Here I present a sceptical counter-argument.

Hopkin makes a case for continuing the tradition of a subject-based curriculum. He is not arguing for just *any* subject-based curriculum, for he objects to the prioritising of English, mathematics and science at the expense of humanities subjects like history and geography. He wants a 'broad and balanced' curriculum based around every branch of subject knowledge.

How does he support his case? His first target is scepticism in contemporary western culture about the value of knowledge, as this is, in his view, linked to more specific doubts about the value of organising the curriculum around subject knowledge. His main evidence for the scepticism about the value of knowledge is the widespread view that if they want to know something, children these days only have to Google it.

But how does this bear on his conclusion? I cannot see that it shows that knowledge is not valued. On the contrary: if children want to find out things by

Googling them, they surely see acquiring this knowledge as worthwhile. I see no evidence here or elsewhere that knowledge is not prized. The Google revolution may well show that people are adopting new *methods* of acquiring knowledge, but that is a different matter.

Hopkin's second target is the view that a subject-based curriculum is old-fashioned and out-of-date, subjects being nineteenth-century inventions and irrelevant to young people today. His riposte is that 'subjects like geography, history, mathematics and language are far older than the nineteenth century', and that the fact that they are deeply rooted historically, as well as widely used geographically in organising the curriculum, shows how fundamental they are in this enterprise. They have 'great stability, command widespread public understanding and are an important part of our cultural capital.'

But the fact that an institution has deep roots, is stable, well regarded, and part of the culture is not an argument for its continuance. As it stands, it is simply a description of what is, or is claimed to be, the case. We are still lacking reasons why we should persist with it. Compare the pre-1960s view that woman's place is in the home. At that time this was a stable, centuries-old belief, deeply embedded in the culture, and widely embraced. None of that made it *right*, and its erosion over the last half century shows how quickly old institutions can crumble once their credentials have been undermined.

I am writing this paragraph on the weekend of the Royal Jubilee. The British monarchy is another pillar of our culture that fits Hopkin's quotation. But, here too, tradition is no argument. Whether or not it should be replaced by some other kind of presidency cannot be decided by appeal to its venerability.

If a subject-based curriculum is a good thing, we need good reasons in its favour. It is hard to see what those could be. The issue is not whether children should be taught geographical, historical or scientific knowledge. I cannot think of anyone who would wish to deny this. The issue is whether, in thinking how to organise a school curriculum, we should structure this around traditional subjects – or, indeed, any kind of subject.

This cannot be where planning should *start*. A curriculum presumably exists to serve certain purposes. It is with a defensible account of what these should be that we should begin. Whether these aims are best served by a curriculum carved up into subjects, or by some other kind of organisation, is a secondary question. This is not to rule out a subject-centred curriculum. There may be good reasons for it. But, equally, there may be good reasons for pursuing the aims by other kinds of vehicle – by projects, themes and whole school processes, or by a combination of these and discrete subject teaching where appropriate. The plea here is for intelligent, flexible thought about what ways of realising the aims best fit the circumstances and constraints within which the planning takes place. This beats a rigid insistence on a single, subject-centred, pattern – not least because, as yet, we have been given no good reason to favour this.

Where justifications are lacking, it is natural to look for explanations. At least a historical account of how the subject-based curriculum has come into

existence should help us to make some kind of sense of it, even if this falls short of legitimating it. And Hopkin is quite right in tracing back the story of school subjects like history, geography, maths and languages to before the nineteenth century. As claimed elsewhere, a curriculum organised around subjects like these was a staple part of the nonconformist, largely middle-class, tradition of British education, that itself sprang out of Puritan ideas and practices of the seventeenth century, and, more broadly than within a British context, out of Calvinist approaches to education in Europe and North America.[1]

Three related features of this tradition throw light on the stance that Hopkin and fellow-thinkers take towards the curriculum. First, it was centred on knowledge alone. The latter was at the heart of early Protestant thinking about education, with its insistence, in opposition to Catholic doctrine, that believers should have access unmediated by ecclesiastical authority to an understanding of the wonders of God's creation. Other aspects of our mental life – the imagination, for instance, and the emotions – were pedagogically suspect as they tempted us to deviate from the path of truth.

Second, thanks to a scheme of education introduced by Peter Ramus in the mid-sixteenth century in opposition to the scholastic immersion in classical texts that then prevailed, this knowledge was parcelled up for pedagogical reasons into discrete, logically arranged, subjects, each of which was internally organised according to a similar logic, moving from the most general and abstract categories to ones more specific and particular.

Third, the knowledge into which students were initiated formed a comprehensive whole. This encyclopaedic ideal, developed by Ramus's successors, Alsted and Comenius, derived from the important belief among radical Protestants that human beings were made in the image of God, specifically, in this case, in the image of his omniscience.

I am not suggesting that Hopkin must be attached to the theological doctrines behind these ancient beliefs; but the tenacity of these three features in our culture down to the present day is reflected in his article and more widely. As in the tradition, Hopkin's focus is on knowledge alone. His essay begins with his title, 'Re-energising subject knowledge', and the same concern runs throughout the text. Although his theme is 'the value of subjects as a way of organising the curriculum', there is no reminder that the subject-based curriculum we have goes beyond geography and the other knowledge-generating subjects on which he dwells, and covers, besides PE, aesthetic subjects like art and music, practical subjects like design and technology and Citizenship, and emotion-exploring subjects like PSHE.

Hopkin also clearly wants discreteness among the knowledge-based subjects he favours. He seems to object to 'integrated approaches to the curriculum, where child-centred purposes are to the fore', but without saying why these approaches will not do. He is in favour of curriculum decentralisation, but while this is usually understood as leaving *schools* greater scope to fill out the details, his own plea is for '*specialist subject communities*' to take on this role. This has an echo of the Protestant approach to curriculum-

making, with its creation first of a framework of subjects, and then a logical breakdown of detailed objectives within each domain, providing a pedagogically efficient way of mastering its specialist demands.

There is also even a hint in Hopkin, as in many like thinkers, of the older encyclopaedic ideal. It is not right, in his view, to highlight the core subjects and downplay history and geography. Students need 'a broad and balanced curriculum', one that emphasises induction into *all* the major branches of knowledge, not just some. From one point of view this is unexceptionable. Most of us would say that, as preparation for personal, civic and vocational ends, all students would benefit by having *some* understanding of history, economics, finance, human psychology, statistics, engineering ... and so on through the whole gamut of knowledge. But this can be attained in more flexible ways than the one way that the encyclopaedic tradition has bequeathed to us: a comprehensive system of separate subjects.

This third feature, encyclopaedism, is worth dwelling on further. Its seductiveness attracts us all. We think of the 15,000 hours of compulsory schooling as time to be filled in the most efficient way so as to provide all the basic mental equipment that young people need for a good start in life. When knowledge was indeed schools' sole *raison d'être*, up to, say, the early twentieth century, timetabling was still compatible with comprehensiveness. These days, with other demands than knowledge-transmission on schools, curriculum policy makers find it hard to make space for them all. Used to thinking only within a subject framework, they add, or are pressed to add, further subjects to a timetable already beginning to burst apart: personal and social education, D&T, ICT, citizenship, cookery, economic well-being, philosophy for children, happiness lessons, sustainability ...

The result of packing so much into a limited space is intensified competition among subjects to keep or expand what they have. Proponents of civic and personal education extol their relevance to children's well-being and claim a bigger slice of curricular action. Hopkin's own essay is in large part a plea for maintaining the place that geography and history used to have on the timetable. Science, English and maths can afford to be more relaxed among all this inter-subject strife, since they are sure that *their* trajectory will never dip.

This all seems to me to be a crazy way of organising an educational system. If we were not so attached to subjects as our one type of building block, or to the legacy from encyclopaedism that school education must be as comprehensive as possible, we could get so much further. Religious origins of the curriculum aside, there is an obvious reason why, until very recently, people felt that school education, topped for a few by university, should be packed tight with what was held to be essential intellectual provisioning for life's journey. For most, that journey was likely to be short. If they did not get when young everything they might need for life, when would they get it? Today, with centenarians two a penny, we have space to loosen up. We can shift the priority from a comprehensive grounding by 16 or 18 to something better fitting our age. Children will still need a good foundation, of course, but there

is no need for this to try to cover all bases. More important is that the grounding spring from appropriate aims, rather than paying homage to tradition. Salient among these aims is that students enjoy learning and remain eager to continue learning once they have left school and throughout their lives. This is not a priority in a culture like our own that leaves too many young people either switched off or glad to have exam cramming behind them. We need, badly, to rethink things from fundamentals.

That is why I come back to an aims-based curriculum. We need to start from defensible general aims (e.g. preparation for citizenship), and then see what these require in the shape of more specific ones (e.g. an understanding of one's society), and more specific ones still (e.g. some understanding of the science and technology underpinning that society's economy). Michael Reiss and I explore this in much more detail in our *An Aims-based Curriculum* (Reiss & White, 2013). We cast our net wider than knowledge and understanding to include the personal qualities that young people need for their own and others' well-being, personally, morally, civically and vocationally. Much of the knowledge content of the traditional curriculum finds a place in our scheme, but it emanates from general aims, not from the requirements of subject specialism.

The aims-based curriculum (ABC) approach avoids the territoriality of the status quo. In the latter, there is a battle for curriculum space among an ever-growing number of subjects (and subject associations ranged behind them, like Hopkin's own Geographical Association). National curriculum policy increasingly becomes a matter of holding the ring among all the contestants, deciding how much of the terrain to allot to the big hitters at the core, endangered traditional subjects like geography a bit further out, and greenhorns on the periphery like PSHE. (A good example of this in practice is the recent Expert Panel's Report for the National Curriculum Review [DfE, 2011]). Once the allocations are made, each subject knows the block of years guaranteed to it on the timetable – eleven for science, nine for music, seven for modern foreign languages (MFL) (as in the EP Report), or whatever. And once they all have their block of territory, it is largely up to each to decide how best to fill it – and in Hopkin's version of decentralisation, with even more autonomy than now.

But this is a dotty way to proceed. What is the sense in deciding from the start, as the EP Report does, that music is one-eighth more space-worthy than MFL and then leaving it to each of these to use its allotment as it will? In an ABC approach, conflicts among competitors still have to be resolved, but the competitors are aims, not subject associations rooting for their subject. And resolutions are made not by allocating each aim a block of time over the years, but more intelligently and appositely, by considering the strength of cases made from different sides and leaving schools plenty of room to interpret a nationally laid down framework in their own way.

Hopkin is far from dismissing general aims. He is in favour of a balance between 'preparing young people for the world of work, personal and moral development, and inducting them into the culture'. But he does not go so far as an aims-based curriculum, where sub-aims are generated from these more

general ones. Instead, he argues for ‘a balance between educational objectives, *within* a stable entitlement of subjects’ (my italics). It is still a subject structure that lies at the heart of Hopkin’s curriculum planning, with aims fitting into this where they can. This gets things the wrong way round, with aims subordinate to subjects rather than vice versa.

Knowledge-aims must have an important place in any defensible form of school education; and pursuing them within subject frameworks may well be the best way forward on many occasions. But we need a more nuanced approach to this than a blanket attachment to a subject-based curriculum. This comes with the aims-based alternative. Only thereby will we be able to see what kinds of knowledge are important and why, what competition knowledge-aims face from other kinds of aim, and what the consequent prioritising among aims suggests about likely time-allocations for different kinds of knowledge-aims. It will be up to schools, not government or subject associations, to decide in the light of their own circumstances how far these knowledge-aims may best be taught – within discrete subjects, or in other ways. There is no place for dogmatic answers here.

It may be that Hopkin’s predilection for subjects and a subject-based curriculum has more to be said for it than I have said here. Certainly, he is not alone in urging us in this direction. The sociologist Michael Young is by his side, waving the flag for ‘powerful knowledge’ as the key to curriculum reform. His cause has been taken up by the Expert Panel, who have used his ideas to demote Citizenship and Design and Technology from the National Curriculum and confirm the place of MFL within it. Yet there are reasons to think that ‘powerful knowledge’ is far from the magic bullet for which some take it.[2]

Other, more convincing, arguments than Hopkin’s or Young’s may come to prominence. I do not want to rule them out. But I do wonder whether the recent surge in support for a subject-based curriculum – whether from Hopkin, Young, Gove, Gibb or the Expert Panel – has something of a parallel in a resurgence of popular support for the monarchy, or in the louder voices we hear these days in favour of religion and against the so-called ‘militant atheism’ of the humanists. Are these to be interpreted as three kinds of swan-song, each signalling the dying days of a no-longer-defensible ancient institution? Or do they have more substance?

Notes

[1] See White, J. (2011) *The Invention of the Secondary Curriculum*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

[2] See the series of 2012 critiques and rejoinders available at <http://www.newvisionsforeducation.org.uk/publications>:

(a) Brown, M. & White, J. ‘An Unstable Framework – Critical Perspectives on The Framework for the National Curriculum’.

(b) Young, M. ‘The Curriculum – “An Entitlement to Powerful Knowledge”’: a response to John White’.

(c) White, J. 'Powerful Knowledge: too weak a prop for the traditional curriculum?'

References

- DfE (2011) *The Framework for the National Curriculum*. Report by the Expert Panel. London: Department for Education.
- Hopkin, J. (2012) Re-energising Subject Knowledge, *FORUM*, 54(2), 295-300.
- Reiss, M. & White, J. (2013) *An Aims-based Curriculum*. London: Institute of Education Press.

JOHN WHITE is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom. *Correspondence:* j.white@ioe.ac.uk

