
The Humanities as an Essential Element of a Balanced and Broadly Based Primary Curriculum

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ABSTRACT This article explores why the humanities are an essential element of a balanced and broadly based primary curriculum. While history, geography and religious education make important contributions, the humanities should be seen more broadly as the study of one's own and other cultures, and so including areas such as literature, philosophy and drama. Active ways of working, such as fieldwork, observation, interpretation and discussion, as vital elements of the education of the whole child as a critical global citizen, are emphasised. The need for young children to learn many different types of knowledge in enabling learning environments and for teachers to develop a range of pedagogical content knowledge is highlighted. The benefits of single-subject and interdisciplinary approaches are considered.

Introduction

The Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2010), which critiqued primary education in England and provided a coherent vision for the future, presented a cogent analysis which remains very relevant today. In particular, in relation to the curriculum, it highlighted that Curriculum 1 – 'the basics', usually associated with those aspects of English and mathematics most easily tested – has always tended to dominate the primary curriculum at the expense of Curriculum 2 – 'the rest', including the humanities and the arts. The current narrow emphasis on Curriculum 1 was shown to be unsuitable, especially for young children. In Eaude (2015), I argued that English primary education has never escaped from the legacy of elementary education, with a narrow, unbalanced and somewhat impoverished curriculum, often exacerbating existing disadvantage.

This article considers the role of the humanities in the education of the ‘whole child’ (see Eaude, 2018a), arguing that these are an essential element of the primary curriculum, and explores some implications for pedagogy, without being prescriptive. This discussion takes place in a context where the primary curriculum in England in recent years has become even more unbalanced, with the emphasis on decontextualised literacy and numeracy skills and measurable outcomes, so that the humanities and the arts are often marginalised. While the recent changes in the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills’ (Ofsted, 2019) Inspection Framework in England to expect a balanced and broadly based primary curriculum are welcome, it is too early to say whether this will result in a greater emphasis on the humanities – and, if so, what types of activity, experience and pedagogy this involves – both in schools and in inspection teams.

Recognising that, as Richards (2019) suggests, breadth and balance are contested ideas, this article does not suggest that literacy, mathematics and science are unimportant, but argues that the primary curriculum must be better balanced if schools are to engage and enthuse young children and equip them as global citizens for a world of constant change. While there is no agreed definition of global citizenship, UNESCO (2014) describes Global Citizenship Education as aiming to empower learners of all ages to assume active roles, both locally and globally, in building more peaceful, inclusive and secure societies promoting human rights, gender equality, cultural diversity, tolerance and environmental sustainability. Children from a young age need to, and can, learn in ways which lead towards such outcomes. My argument is based on a belief that all people have a wide range of abilities and talents, though young children’s may be not yet discovered or well developed. Therefore, as Reed (2001, p. 122) writes, ‘even the youngest children should be exposed to a broad and ambitious curriculum in the hopes of identifying one or more areas at which each child excels or is motivated to learn’.

The next section considers the humanities as part of a balanced and broadly based curriculum and how they should be understood in relation to young children. I then consider ways of working associated with the humanities, suggesting that these fit well with how young children learn best, especially in terms of active learning, to develop procedural knowledge and critical thinking. I go on to describe a campaign called Humanities 20:20, indicating some of the distinctive concepts and ways of working associated with history, geography, religious education and citizenship. The following two sections consider the implications, first, for pedagogy and, then, for teachers more broadly, avoiding the view that there is any single way to teach the humanities but arguing against didactic approaches focused mainly on propositional knowledge. The importance of environments and relationships which encourage young children’s agency and ability to address complex questions is emphasised. The conclusion summarises the key points and suggests that the aims of education, especially for young children, and the pedagogy to meet these should be reconsidered, providing a greater emphasis on cultural

diversity, global citizenship and social justice. In making this argument, I draw on some academic articles and shorter ones for a teacher audience (for example, Eade & Catling, 2019), trying to draw out key points in an accessible and readable way.

The Humanities as Part of a Balanced and Broadly Based Primary Curriculum

The issue of what constitutes a balanced curriculum will always be a matter of debate. However, a reasonable starting point is that such a curriculum does not overemphasise one or more subject areas or types of knowledge. *All Our Futures*, the Robinson report (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999, p. 59), takes this further in arguing for balance

- between different fields of study and disciplines;
- within all disciplines between tradition and innovation; and
- in the teaching of different values and traditions, reflecting and responding to cultural diversity.

The first of these points highlights the need for a broader focus than one based on only a few subjects or skills. The second emphasises an inherent tension between trying to pass on the canon of knowledge and enabling children to explore and experiment. The third indicates the need to introduce children to a wide range of cultures, traditions and values, especially if children are to build up what Putnam (2000) calls 'bridging capital' – the ability to relate to those who are different from oneself – which involves respecting the differences and recognising the similarities between people, and empathising, at least to some extent, with those who are different. Such a curriculum can help to challenge stereotypes and counter corrosive types of discrimination, such as sexism, racism and homophobia, by enabling children to welcome, rather than fear, diversity and difference.

In Eade (2017), I considered how 'the humanities' have traditionally been understood in higher and secondary education. In the former, the term is used loosely to include the study of many disciplines such as literature, history, languages and philosophy. In secondary education, the humanities have generally been thought of more in terms of subjects, especially history, geography and religious education. Such a view has tended to permeate the thinking of teachers in primary schools, but Eade (2017) argued that the humanities, especially for young children, should be seen more in terms of ways of working and outcomes related mainly to qualities and attitudes. These are explained in more detail below, but, in brief, include skills and dispositions such as observation, interpretation and critical thinking, and qualities such as empathy, compassion and respect for other people. As such, the humanities can be thought of as what enables children to explore and understand more about the human aspects of themselves and their own culture, other people and cultures, and the world. In terms of the formal curriculum, this implies seeing

the humanities as having fairly porous boundaries, as in higher education, to include literature, drama and foreign languages, and aspects such as citizenship and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, as well as history, geography and religious education.

The humanities, like the arts, are concerned with feelings, beliefs and values, as well as facts. As Nussbaum (2010) argues, the humanities are essential to democratic citizenship, as, when well taught, they enable children to become more empathetic, compassionate and humane. For instance, as Morpurgo (2011) suggests, 'it is through literature, not simply literacy, that we learn to understand and empathise'. Understood in this way, the humanities make a considerable contribution to children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Moreover, young children find thinking and learning more about other people and how they live (and have lived) enjoyable and engaging, and this can help to sow the seeds of lifelong interests beyond the school curriculum. This is the case especially for many children who are less engaged with the drier 'academic' learning which often results from an overemphasis on decontextualised skills in literacy and numeracy if such an approach expects them, whether deliberately or otherwise, to be passive listeners rather than active enquirers.

Reflecting on the role of the humanities in 'troubled times', Eaude et al (2017, p. 390) concluded that

there is a pressing need for humanities education in an increasingly complex world; and to argue the case for humanities on the grounds of the development of the 'whole child'. In particular we would advocate for children:

- understanding concepts related to human culture such as time, space and belief in how human beings can understand themselves and their relationship with the natural world, places and with each other;
- developing skills and habits associated with critical thinking such as assessing and interpreting information;
- exploring their own identities, values and beliefs and enabling them to be interested in those of other peoples;
- learning to understand, and empathise, with people who are different, as well as those who are similar, challenging stereotypes and becoming more humane and compassionate individuals.

There is an urgent need to 'humanise' the curriculum in terms not just of teaching content, skills and concepts associated with history, geography and religious education, to which I return below, but also of enabling young children to engage with, and debate, issues such as how human beings have treated each other and the world around them, do so now and should do in the future. As such, the humanities deal with many issues with ethical implications, and learning to address such issues thoughtfully and critically requires children

to gain experience, both on an individual basis and through working in groups, of the ways of working and learning discussed in the next section.

The Ways of Working and Learning Associated with the Humanities

In thinking about the role of the humanities in the curriculum, one must not equate 'knowledge' with 'information' and should recognise that there are different types of knowledge, which can be categorised as follows:

- propositional – 'know that' or factual knowledge or information;
- procedural – 'know how' or being able to carry out tasks; and
- personal/interpersonal – knowledge of oneself and other people.

Children need some level of propositional knowledge, but much more than this. For instance, if they are to make sense of complex and puzzling questions, they must learn to investigate and respond to their experience in different ways, such as how a historian, scientist, detective or philosopher would do.

The ways of working associated with the humanities, such as fieldwork, observation, interpretation and analysis, help to stimulate children's questioning and strengthen their ability to think deeply and critically. This implies children being enabled to learn from direct experience, often at first hand, in open-minded and creative ways, and being encouraged, and able, to use various modes of representation, including kinaesthetic, iconic and symbolic ones – that is, through doing, making and drawing rather than just through language – both individually and working cooperatively in groups. Such approaches are likely to enable children to be, and become, active and thoughtful citizens, and help counter stereotyping by encourage critical-thinking skills, which Bailin et al (1999, p. 281) see as involving 'the kinds of habits of mind, commitments or sensitivities [that] include such things as open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, the desire for truth and an inquiring attitude'. This definition of critical-thinking skills highlights qualities and dispositions, as well as skills, so that children (and adults) consider moral and ethical issues, which are an important aspect of global citizenship and too often downplayed when teaching decontextualised skills. Such skills and dispositions are essential in a world where information can be accessed easily, but where children, and adults, cannot be sure who, and which information, to trust.

An overemphasis on propositional knowledge – for instance, on dates, place names or facts about religion – is not in accord with the view of the humanities set out above, even if this is taught within one of the 'humanities subjects'. However, the knowledge (of all types), skills and concepts associated with history, geography, religious education and citizenship are important, and the next section considers these.

Humanities 20:20

Following the themed issue of *Education 3-13* in which Eaude (2017) and Eaude et al (2017) appear, a group of educators interested in the primary humanities has set up a campaign called Humanities 20:20.[1] The aim is to raise the profile of the humanities in primary schools and to improve the quality of learning and teaching in these areas.

The main focus of Humanities 20:20 is on history, geography, religious education and citizenship. In line with the thinking in the previous section, it sees ways of working such as fieldwork, observation, interpretation and analysis as essential to stimulate children’s questioning and strengthen their ability to think deeply and critically, and suggests that, while subject boundaries should not be rigid, children must be encouraged and enabled to learn and use the skills and concepts associated with those areas of learning. Figure 1, from the Humanities 20:20 manifesto, sets out some distinctive concepts and ways in which history, geography, religious education and citizenship can stimulate children’s interests and enable them to be educated as active citizens in a world of change and diversity.

History	Geography	Religious Education
Identify different historical perspectives	Explore how people and places interconnect and interact	Explore religious beliefs, world views and practices
Explore continuity and change over time	Examine place, space and scale, e.g. by using and making maps	Develop understanding of one’s own and other people’s values
Think about causes and consequences	Consider interdependence and sustainability	Consider issues of meaning and purpose
Citizenship		
Explore diversity and fairness and how decisions are made		
Examine issues which affect communities and how people can have a say and make positive change		
Develop a commitment to active membership of democratic groups		

Figure 1. Key aspects of history, geography, religious education and citizenship.

One difficulty with teaching such ideas to young children is that many of them are abstract and hard to understand cognitively. This is one reason why these subject areas, although potentially fascinating to children, have often been taught in ways which many children find hard to understand, and so become disengaged, especially where they do not see how these ideas relate to their

prior and current experience. Such a danger emphasises the need for children to learn such skills and concepts through direct, first-hand experience and active participation, where possible, and for imaginative ways of teaching which help children to relate the ideas, at least initially, to their own experience and culture, and then increasingly to other people's.

The Implications for Pedagogy

One may reasonably ask whether the view of the humanities set out above is too difficult for young children, and teachers should just provide a foundation of 'basic' propositional knowledge – dates and events, places and features of the landscape, and the types of festivals and practices associated with faith communities, for example. However, this is, in my view, to infantilise young children and to underestimate their capacity to consider complex questions, as long as they are engaged and the lessons are pitched at an appropriate level. Moreover, the humanities provide an excellent context in which children can learn skills associated with literacy, especially, and numeracy, and, in applying such skills, learn them more securely. Such a view highlights the importance of primary teachers' pedagogy – 'how' the curriculum is taught rather than 'what' is in the formal curriculum – and ability to improvise and exercise judgement, often in situations of considerable uncertainty.

Ogier (2019) examines the implications of a broad and balanced primary curriculum in various subject areas and aspects such as creativity and teacher professionalism. This indicates that teaching the humanities is not just about delivering the formal curriculum but requires a subtler approach which takes account of the needs of the whole child, and the whole curriculum, including informal and hidden aspects beyond as well as within the school.

Teachers must arouse children's interest and encourage their agency and ability to engage with complex issues, many of which are difficult and may not have a definite answer. The need to interest and engage children of different backgrounds raises questions such as:

- Whose history(ies) should be considered?
- Which aspects of geography should be studied?
- How should religion(s) be presented?
- What views of citizenship should children be introduced to?

For instance, if the history presented does not reflect the experience of disadvantaged groups such as women, people of colour and the poor, children from such backgrounds are less likely to be engaged. If geography concentrates only on physical rather than human and environmental aspects, it may easily become too abstract for young children. If religion is presented mainly in terms of propositional knowledge about festivals, practices and beliefs, many of which will seem unfamiliar and strange, there is less chance of children understanding the enduring role and importance of religion worldwide than if they experience, at least to some extent, people and practices from different faith traditions. If

children are not introduced to different approaches to citizenship in the past and in other cultures, they are less likely to understand their own rights and responsibilities as citizens. Even more importantly, they are most likely to learn what participation in democratic practices entails by participating in these and recognising the need to listen to, and take account of, the views of people who are different and with whom they may disagree.

As the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2010) indicates, teachers, especially those working with young children, require an extensive repertoire of pedagogies. So, no one way is going to be appropriate in all contexts, and there may be times when formal instruction is necessary. However, one implication of the discussion above is that the primary teacher's role is more to enable than to deliver, more to facilitate than to tell. The relationship between teacher and children should be more in the nature of an apprenticeship, where a more experienced person treats a less experienced one as if they were capable and, gradually, over time, transfers control of the task. This implies taking account of children's voices, listening to and following children's lines of enquiry, and creating learning environments where children are active and have a sense of agency and ownership. More generally, it suggests that teachers should listen to children more and talk less, and should act more as guides and facilitators than as instructors and deliverers.

In practical terms, the ways of working described above and the importance of direct experience imply providing children with many opportunities, such as those to:

- hear and read a range of stories, poems and songs from different cultures;
- visit and study places, both those which may be familiar, such as the local park or parade of shops, and those which may be unfamiliar, such as historical sites, museums and places of worship;
- see and handle artefacts where possible and use a variety of modes of representation to record their experiences;
- participate in drama as a way of exploring their own and other people's feelings and responses, and creating personal/interpersonal knowledge in many subject areas;
- take part in discussions and debates – for instance, through an approach based on Philosophy for Children, though preferably throughout the school week rather than only in sessions called Philosophy for Children.

Implications for Primary Classroom Teachers and Curriculum Organisation

One commonly asked question in the current context is whether the humanities should be taught as separate subjects or in cross-disciplinary, thematic ways. This is linked to the issue of whether older primary children benefit from being taught by specialists in particular subjects or disciplines. There is no simple answer to such questions, as either can be successful or otherwise. To a

considerable extent, the best answer to such questions in any context may depend on the expertise of the teacher(s) available.

If teaching is in separate subjects, it is essential that teachers try to encourage cross-disciplinary links and, if teaching is cross-disciplinary, that they enable children to learn the knowledge, especially the skills and concepts, associated with particular disciplines. For example, if a history project is about the Egyptians or the Tudors, children should be encouraged to consider aspects of geography, religion and culture rather than just history, and if a cross-disciplinary project is about the local community or climate change, children should be encouraged to approach such issues through different lenses and use the skills and concepts associated with particular disciplines, such as those outlined above. While subject specialists can provide a depth of knowledge which generalists will find hard to match, the importance of cross-disciplinary approaches, of relationships, and of knowing the strengths and misconceptions of a particular group of children leads me to favour the generalist classroom teacher, as long as they have at least an adequate knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, the humanities.

A deep subject knowledge of, say, history, geography or religious education may be helpful but is not sufficient. What matters more is teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, which Shulman (2004, p. 203) defines as:

a particular form of content knowledge that embodies the aspect of content most germane to its teachability ... the most useful forms of representation ... the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations and demonstrations – in a word, the ways of formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others.

This challenges the idea that teachers need only to have a high level of subject knowledge, and emphasises the need for teachers to integrate assessment of children's current understanding into their teaching if they are to pitch lessons at the correct level. However, the primary classroom teacher's need for pedagogical content knowledge in many different subject areas and disciplines highlights the extent of the expertise which such teachers require, and the difficulty of building such expertise in teaching the humanities. Such considerations are challenging, especially in a context where these have not in recent years been emphasised in professional development, either in initial teacher education or subsequently, as a result of the relentless focus on literacy and numeracy skills (for a more detailed discussion of these points, see Eade, 2018b).

Conclusion

This article has argued that the humanities are an essential element of a balanced and broadly based primary curriculum as they help enhance children's understanding of themselves and other people. A breadth of experience at school is especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, not

least because other children are likely to have access to this out of school. Therefore, access to a balanced and broadly based curriculum becomes a question of social justice. This does not mean that literacy, numeracy, the sciences and the arts do not matter, but that the current imbalance in the primary curriculum and the associated pedagogy should be redressed. The humanities should be seen not just in terms of subjects such as history, geography and religious education, but more as the study of human culture and what it means, and has meant, to be human, now and in the past, in one's own and other cultures. Moreover, the humanities, well taught, help to strengthen qualities and dispositions such as empathy and compassion, and contribute to children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and the construction of their identities, and have the potential to enable children to become more respectful and humane. All of these are important aspects of global citizenship.

In considering the pedagogical implications, a greater emphasis on the needs of the 'whole child', seen much more holistically than only as what can be measured, is required. Teachers need to encourage ways of working which enable children to explore and deal with complex, often contested issues, using a wide repertoire of pedagogies and creating trusting relationships and enabling environments. Moreover, striving towards a balanced and broadly based curriculum appropriate for a world of change calls for a fundamental rethinking of the aims of education, challenging a narrow view of 'the basics' and helping to humanise the curriculum and the pedagogies needed to meet these aims. In such a curriculum, the humanities – and the arts – must be seen as, and be, essential elements rather than optional extras. And if children are to become active and compassionate citizens, able to consider deeply the complex and difficult questions which face them and the societies they live in, the ways of working associated with the humanities, as well as those associated with science, mathematics and the arts, will help equip them for the challenges that they and the planet face.

Note

- [1] For further details on Humanities 20:20, and a four-page manifesto, see <http://www.humanities2020.org.uk/>

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