The humanities as the basis for how young children learn to become critical thinkers and active citizens

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Abstract

Drawing on the thinking behind the Humanities 20:20 initiative, this article explores why the humanities are so important in a balanced and broadly based primary curriculum, arguing that, well taught, they provide an essential basis for how children learn to become critical thinkers and active citizens. This does not just involve teaching history, geography, religious education and citizenship in traditional ways. The humanities should be seen more fluidly to include other areas, such as drama, language and literature. Whose histories and which cultures to introduce should be re-examined if children are to understand the importance of context, culture and perspective, and avoid the assumptions and stereotyping which result from studying only, or mainly, the dominant culture. Ways of working, such as fieldwork, observation, interpretation and discussion, are emphasised, rather than simply memorising information. Primary-age children, especially as they approach adolescence, should and can address the difficult, sometimes controversial, issues which inevitably arise.

Keywords: humanities; balanced and broadly-based curriculum; primary schools; critical thinking; active citizenship; Humanities 20:20

Introduction

This article explores why the humanities are so important in a balanced and broadly based primary curriculum, and particularly the contribution they can make in enabling young children to become critical thinkers and active citizens. Encouraging children to engage with complex, contested issues, such as those related to sustainability, globalisation and diversity – and who to believe – matters profoundly if they are to be able to deal with such issues thoughtfully and confidently.

In English primary schools, the humanities are usually seen in terms of subjects, especially history and geography and perhaps religious education and citizenship; sometimes including a modern foreign language. The strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy means that the humanities and the arts – what Alexander calls 'Curriculum 2'[1] – are frequently marginalised and seen as desirable but inessential. This article argues

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for a broader, more interdisciplinary view, in line with that adopted in higher education, and based on how young children learn. This is not to argue that literacy, mathematics, science and technology do not matter – far from it – but that the curriculum needs to be much better balanced than at present.

The next section considers the term 'humanities' and their scope and contribution to the education of the 'whole child'. A discussion of the Humanities 20:20 initiative adds to the argument that the humanities, well taught in primary schools, are an essential basis for critical thinking and active citizenship. However, this must not just involve teaching history, geography, religious education and citizenship in traditional ways if education is to be inclusive of children from diverse backgrounds. After a consideration of the implications for the curriculum and then pedagogy, the conclusion summarises the main points of the argument.

What are the humanities?

In 'Humanities in the primary school – philosophical considerations', I made a case for why the humanities matter in primary schools, in a context where they and the arts are marginalised in policy and practice and frequently trivialised.[2] Drawing particularly on Small,[3] I discussed how the humanities are understood in higher education as an 'umbrella' term with loose boundaries, usually including disciplines such as literature, history, philosophy, languages and music. These aspects have usually been seen as central to what it means to be a well-educated person. In contrast, secondary schools tend to operate on the lines of discrete subjects, although there is no consensus on what should be included. For instance, music and drama are usually placed within the 'creative arts' and geography often in the humanities in secondary schools, but not in higher education.

I argued that it is more fruitful to consider what the humanities are intended to achieve, and that a better starting point than thinking in terms of subjects may be the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of the humanities as 'learning or literature concerned with human culture'. This led me to argue that the humanities are what helps us to explore what it means to be a human being, and how people have lived and thought in different societies and cultures. These are learned through disciplines as varied as literature, philosophy, foreign languages and drama, as well as history, geography and RE, an approach which fits well with how young children learn without being constricted by subject/disciplinary boundaries. This accords with my argument in *Identity, Culture and Belonging*[4] that values and ethical considerations should underpin all learning, and that robust but flexible identities are required to cope successfully with a world of diversity and change, highlighting qualities and dispositions such as:

- playfulness, creativity and imagination;
- resilience and tenacity; and
- thoughtfulness and empathy.

As Touya de Marenne writes: 'the humanities sharpen the human ability to think critically and differently; challenge assumptions, norms and traditions, open citizens to the world; and provide an ethical dimension to people's thoughts and actions'.[5] He sees the humanities as essential since they 'lead us to not only question the world as it is but how it ought to be' (*ibid.*, p23).

Martha Nussbaum argues that the humanities are essential as a foundation for democratic citizenship since they help children (and adults) to engage with complex ideas in thoughtful and reflective ways, taking account of other people's views and being prepared to listen, discuss and learn to disagree respectfully.[6] They encourage children to avoid being dispassionate or unfeeling towards other people. As Nussbaum writes, 'it is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learned any other way to see them' (*ibid.*, p23).

Jerome Bruner distinguishes between logical-scientific and narrative modes of thinking.[7] The former is helpful for understanding physical phenomena, while narrative thinking is a more appropriate way for human beings to organise and manage their knowledge of the world and structure their experience, and to understand people and their plights. The humanities encourage narrative, non-linear ways of thinking, and taking account of both logical-scientific and narrative ways of thinking can help bridge the divide between rationality and feeling.

The humanities provide opportunities which can enrich and strengthen children's identities and make a major contribution to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Studying the humanities can, and should, enable children to move beyond binary, polarised and simplistic answers to complex problems. They have a valuable role in helping children to explore, and where necessary to challenge, such views, and to encourage more thought-through and nuanced ones. They can help to reduce cultural encapsulation where any group becomes too caught up in the assumptions of that group or micro-culture.[8] In these ways, the humanities help children to become active and well-informed citizens.

In the 2021 Christian Schiller lecture, I argued that all children benefit from studying the humanities, but especially young children and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.[9] This is because of the active ways of working associated with the humanities, as opposed to a narrow, often decontextualised, approach to acquiring skills in literacy and numeracy; and because children from affluent backgrounds are likely to have more opportunities outside school to take part in the experiences related to the humanities.

In 'The future of the humanities in primary schools', providing 'reflections in troubled times', we presented this broad rationale:

> We believe, following Nussbaum (2010), that the humanities, and the knowledge and qualities associated with its associated disciplines, provide a foundation for how children become active and engaged citizens in a democratic society. This leads us to suggest 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. [10]

Such thinking formed the basis of the Humanities 20:20 initiative.

Humanities 20:20

Humanities 20:20 is an initiative to promote and improve the teaching of the humanities in primary schools. Its focus is mainly on history, geography, religious education and citizenship, largely because these are the subject areas usually thought of as the humanities in English primary schools.

The Humanities 20:20 manifesto (see www.humanities2020.org.uk) states that:

> Put simply, the humanities matter because they enable children to:

- consider questions about the meaning and purpose of their lives;
- explore their own identities, values and beliefs and concepts such as time, space and faith;
- develop skills and habits associated with critical and creative thinking;
- extend their cultural and imaginative horizons;
- learn to empathise with people who are different, as well as those who are similar, thereby celebrating diversity and challenging stereotypes;

- learn about democracy, global citizenship and sustainability;
- strengthen a sense of care for themselves, each other and the planet in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Humanities 20:20 was set up in the belief that children need to explore these sorts of issues and usually find them engaging and interesting; and that the humanities provide an excellent context for children to learn to apply literacy and numeracy skills in meaningful contexts. The approach advocated emphasises ways of working, such as fieldwork, observation and interpretation, and more generally how children learn to act and think in different ways associated with various disciplines, for instance as historians or geographers, or indeed as detectives or researchers. Moreover, the humanities encourage critical thinking which in Bailin *et al.*'s words involves 'the kinds of habits of mind, commitments or sensitivities [which] include such things as open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, the desire for truth and an inquiring attitude'.[11] Such qualities are needed in a world where information can be easily accessed, but where children, and adults, are frequently unsure who, and which information, to trust.

Such an approach to teaching is very different from that which relies on traditional views of subject knowledge, as reflected in current policy, where there is an overemphasis on memorising factual information – know-that – at the expense of procedural – know-how – and personal/interpersonal knowledge. Therefore, rethinking what the humanities involve, in relation to the curriculum and pedagogy, is necessary if teachers are to respond to the needs of a more diverse society and the challenges that face the world. Cox discusses the implications in relation to values and citizenship and the next two sections consider some of the wider implications, for the formal curriculum, then for pedagogy.[12]

If you wish to know more about Humanities 20:20, to sign the manifesto and, ideally, to contribute your own ideas and experiences, you are invited to do so at the weblink above.

The implications for the curriculum

As indicated, the humanities are often seen in English primary schools as history, geography and sometimes RE and citizenship. In other systems, both in the other nations of the UK and elsewhere, the primary (or elementary) curriculum tends to be structured on broader areas of learning, with the humanities often within an area such as social studies. But they are too often marginalised or trivialised and so not well taught. The danger of trivialisation is illustrated by Egan and Judson, who write:

> Social Studies, and later history, geography, and global issues, are represented as accumulations of facts, events, and ideas contained in textbooks, and the set of

> textbooks line up one after the other through to the final years of schooling. The world, in short, is presented to the student as known, and, for the most part, as not wonderful. Where the wonders of the content should live energetically and fruitfully in students' minds these are, for nearly all students today, rather less than imaginatively engaging.[13]

Doing and discussing, rather than just listening, help to engage children's interest and strengthen their sense of agency. Rather than thinking in terms of discrete subject areas, with children mostly expected to memorise information, I suggest focusing more on active ways of working and thinking, such as fieldwork, observation, interpretation and discussion, enabling children to recognise and take account of different views and interpretations. Such an approach is motivating for most children, especially those less engaged with more 'academic' learning, though these ways of working may be initially unfamiliar and disconcerting for children used to listening.

Movements such as Black Lives Matter have re-emphasised that the traditional view of English history as 'our island story' is a limited, partial and inaccurate one. Issues such as industrialisation, slavery and war are understood very differently depending on the perspectives from which these are approached. This raises questions such as:

- whose history and what sorts of history – political, social, economic and industrial – should be studied; and
- to what extent history should be about trying to understand and feel how life was in a different era and recognise that things have not always been as they are now, for instance in the treatment of disadvantaged groups, such as women, people of colour, gay people and those with disabilities.

Similar questions arise in relation to geography, for instance in considering how physical, environmental and human factors intersect and affect each other, and RE in exploring different worldviews, beliefs and practice; but also other curricular areas, such as literature, science and the arts. Such issues present a profound and, in my view, welcome challenge as to the 'canon of knowledge' with which all children should be expected to be familiar – and whether any one canon is applicable to everyone if the curriculum is to be inclusive and decolonised.

This discussion raises three questions:

- whether young children can deal with complex, often controversial issues;
- whether there is a danger of disciplinary knowledge being diluted or lost; and
- how primary teachers should approach teaching the humanities, especially with all the other demands on their time.

All of which are matters of pedagogy, the how of teaching, as opposed to the what.

The implications for pedagogy

Children from a young age need to start to cope with complexity and uncertainty, though many find this difficult as they tend to think in somewhat binary ways. When working with young children, teachers must recognise the difficulty that most of them have with abstract ideas, the extent to which their cognitive processes and executive function are not yet well developed, and the benefits of first-hand experience. While some of the issues highlighted above may be too difficult or abstract for very young children, most from the age of about seven can increasingly understand and engage with them. Although most children below that age may not be able to deal with such issues in great depth, particularly in the abstract, and may be over-trusting of teachers, they can show considerable insight. As children approach adolescence, many take an active interest in questions such as those related to the environment and social justice. Protecting children by regarding them as incapable of addressing complicated and contested ideas risks infantilising them. So, teachers must be careful to introduce issues in ways that children can understand without overprotecting them, though most are more able to cope with difficult ideas than adults tend to believe.

There is a risk that using an umbrella term such as 'the humanities' will lead to a loss of focus on the knowledge, concepts and skills used in particular subjects or disciplines. However, there is also a danger in separating what and how children are taught into separate silos, as they may not see the connections between different areas of learning. Children need to learn factual knowledge, but they must also be introduced to alternative interpretations, and encouraged to ask and explore questions. Through the ways of working associated with the humanities, such as fieldwork, observation and interpretation, children can become familiar with the concepts, language and skills associated with particular disciplines. This is more likely to be successful than an approach which starts with factual information and concepts which many children find hard to understand. What children actively experience is more comprehensible and memorable than what they only hear.

There is a place for lessons with a focus on one subject, but opportunities for children to cross subject boundaries and use their knowledge from other areas are valuable. To give a simple example, understanding how one's own local, or any other, community has been shaped requires an exploration of historical, geographical, religious and cultural influences. For younger children, this may involve looking at buildings and talking to local people, while older children can make use of maps, documents and statistics such as census records to consider the questions which emerge in greater depth.

Margaret Donaldson emphasised the importance of context and relationships in how young children learn.[14] To think deeply, especially about tricky issues, children need space, time and usually guidance. Such thinking may sometimes be best done

individually, but is usually more productive in groups which include a range of views. Since children's background, and socialisation, especially in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, class and religion, affect how they see and understand the world, working in groups – at least some of the time – which are mixed in these respects helps them to see and understand different perspectives.

The example which teachers and other adults set is vital, based on what Rogoff calls apprenticeship and guided participation, where there is gradual transfer of control and knowledge from a more experienced person to a less experienced one.[15] This process can be seen as the teacher drawing on, and extending, a child's existing knowledge, holding a metaphorical hand, sometimes tightly, sometimes more loosely. Such an approach emphasises children's agency, allowing discussions to be led as far as possible by children's observations and questions, rather than adults seeking to dominate the discourse or impose their own answers. In this context, it involves teachers asking open-ended questions, extending and enriching children's answers and not being too certain. While a deep knowledge of all the different subject areas is desirable, this is unlikely to be possible for most primary school teachers, but passion, curiosity and being willing to find out are arguably no less important.

Conclusion

In 'Re-humanising primary education', I called for the primary curriculum and pedagogy to be re-humanised, with the humanities and the arts and relationships of mutual trust between teachers and children all necessary to achieve this.[16] Although the humanities in primary schools are too often marginalised and reduced to memorising factual information, they are an essential element of a balanced and broadly based curriculum. Children must become literate and numerate, but also learn – through science, the arts, physical education and many other areas – to understand themselves and other people.

The humanities have a valuable role in enabling children to explore often-difficult questions related to time, place, belief and culture, including those with ethical implications, such as the planet's sustainability, the uses of technology, and migration. They provide an excellent context both for applying skills associated with literacy and numeracy and for discussing interesting and often-controversial issues. This helps to develop children's critical thinking skills, extend their cultural horizons and avoid insularity, so challenging simplistic assumptions and stereotypes. But *how* the humanities are taught matters even more than *what* is taught.

While my focus has been on young children, many of the points raised are relevant also to older children and young people and their teachers, in particular the emphasis on qualities necessary for active citizenship, such as critical thinking and being prepared to listen respectfully and respond to those with whom one may disagree. Such

a view challenges many of the assumptions of a neo-liberal model of education, based on performativity, particularly that education is mainly about literacy and numeracy skills and memorising information. The assumption that a primary curriculum based on discrete subjects is the best way for it to be structured needs to be challenged. The humanities have a central role in a more holistic approach which emphasises the whole person and the wide range of types of knowledge, skills and qualities necessary to become an active citizen, able to address confidently and thoughtfully the complex challenges which face the planet and the people who live on it, both now and in the future.

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Notes

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