

Speech: Nick Gibb: The importance of knowledge-based education

It has been a pleasure to work with the Association of Schools and College Leaders (ASCL) over the years as Minister of State for Education. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Malcolm Trobe for all of the work he did as interim General Secretary, and Deputy General Secretary before that. It has been a pleasure to work with him and I look forward to working with Geoff Barton in the years ahead.

The way the curriculum is discussed in this country has changed dramatically over the last 10 years. In 2007, the previous government launched a national curriculum that had been stripped of knowledge content in favour of skills.

'[Could do Better](#)' – a review of the then National Curriculum carried out by Tim Oates in 2010 – found that the National Curriculum for England had been subjected to a protracted process of revision, with the 2007 reforms failing to adequately draw from emerging analysis of high-performing systems around the globe.

A change of government in 2010 prevented the [Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum](#) recommendations being brought in. This review argued that the primary national curriculum should place less emphasis on subject areas and a greater emphasis on so-called areas of learning and development:

- personal, social and emotional development
- communication, language and literacy
- problem solving, reasoning and numeracy
- knowledge and understanding of the world
- physical development
- creative development

This review of the primary curriculum drew on the example of Finland – still the doyenne of the international education circuit – which had moved away from emphasising knowledge just at the time it reached the summit of the international education league tables. The review described the Finnish position as follows:

Core content is described as activities and skills, rather than detailed subject-based content. This places the onus on the municipality, and more importantly on the school, to develop their curriculum to meet learners' needs as well as national expectations.

The Finnish curriculum also had seven cross-curricula themes:

- growth as a person
- cultural identity and internationalism

- media, skills and communication
- participatory citizenship and entrepreneurship
- responsibility for the environment, well-being and a sustainable future
- safety and traffic
- technology and the individual

The review drew on numerous other international examples of countries that have moved away from a traditional focus on knowledge and towards generic, cross-cutting skills. The romantic notion that teachers need not focus on knowledge and instead turn their attention to developing creativity or communication skills has gripped many countries around the world.

But as Gabriel Sahlgren argued in [Real Finnish Lessons](#), Finland's success – often a catalyst for skills-focused education reforms in other countries – is probably not explained by their more recent curriculum changes. These changes have been wrongly credited with education success, which is more likely to be due to Finland's traditional educational culture until that point at about the turn of the millennium when it changed.

Instead, Sahlgren argues persuasively that Finland's recent fall in performance – albeit from a very substantial height – is due to a movement away from this culture. In particular, the teacher-centred educational culture is being replaced by more pupil-led ways of working.

Thanks to the result of the 2010 general election, the English education system did not undergo further skills-focused reforms. Thanks to the work of Tim Oates and others, the new National Curriculum put knowledge back at the centre of schooling.

And knowledge is – rightly – back at the heart of discussions about the curriculum. '[The Question of Knowledge](#)' is an important pamphlet, making the case for a knowledge-rich curriculum with essays written by leading experts and headteachers. It is a significant contribution to our national education conversation.

In her foreword, Leora Cruddas describes the importance of E. D. Hirsch – someone who has deeply influenced my thinking on education:

The influence of E. D. Hirsch on educational thinking has been profound. At its heart is the idea that returning to a traditional, academic curriculum built on shared knowledge is the best way to achieve social justice in society. His work has also encouraged schools to focus on the concept of building cultural capital as a way to close the attainment gap.

A knowledge-based curriculum is too often tarred by opponents as entrenching social divisions, whereas a well taught knowledge-rich education is a driver of true meritocracy – as the headteachers who contributed to this pamphlet well know.

Dame Rachel De Souza – of the Parent and Teachers for Excellence (PTE) and

the Inspiration Trust – understands the importance of knowledge as well as anyone:

Knowing those things – and not just recalling the bald facts but deeply understanding them – gives you an upper hand. It gives you the confidence to discuss a wide range of live topics with those around you, it gives you social status. It makes you part of the club that runs the world, and the inside track to change it.

And the pendulum swing towards knowledge and away from skills that has taken place over the past few years has been profound.

Academies and free schools have control over the curriculum they teach, and with the National Curriculum setting the standard high, innovative schools led by exceptional head teachers have developed world-class curricula. But shifting a school's focus towards a knowledge-based curriculum is not a short-term commitment, as Stuart Lock – the newly appointed headteacher of Bedford Free School – explains:

I think there is a real danger that developing a knowledge-based curriculum might be seen as “done” after a year or two. In reality, we are just over one year into a long-term job. There is no moving on to another initiative; we are playing the long game. This is what is important in schools, and hence is our continued focus for development over the next few years. Everything is subservient to curricular questions. So pedagogy, assessment, tracking and qualifications must lead on from us developing further our understanding of what makes a pupil knowledgeable, and ensuring we get as close to that understanding as possible.

This view is shared by Luke Sparkes and Jenny Thompson of Dixons Trinity Academy, which achieved outstanding results this year. Their excellent free school serves a disadvantaged community in Bradford, and is one of a number of high performing free schools and academies that demonstrate that a stretching, knowledge-rich curriculum, a sensible approach to behaviour and evidence-informed teaching result in exceptional results for all pupils.

High performing free schools and academies are providing empirical evidence of what it is possible to achieve when teachers and headteachers – given freedom to innovate with their curriculum – pursue an evidence-based approach. The exceptional results achieved by schools such as King Solomon Academy, Mossbourne Community Academy and Harris Academy Battersea demonstrate that disadvantage need be no barrier to achieving academic excellence.

But the excuse-making has shifted. Increasingly, there is a chorus of naysayers who claim that only schools in London or the south east can achieve top results. Dixons Trinity Academy – along with the likes of the Tauheedul Education Trust – shows conclusively that geography need be no barrier to

academic achievement.

According to Luke Sparkes and Jenny Thompson, the secret to success isn't the socio-economic make up of your cohort or the location of your school. For them:

A knowledge-based curriculum is about harnessing the power of cognitive science, identifying each marginal gain and acting upon it; having the humility to keep refining schemes of work, long term plans and generating better assessments.

Unlike the easy-sounding promise of generic skills, there is no doubt that developing a knowledge-rich curriculum is hard. But, unlike a skills-based curriculum, the rewards are worth it.

The West London Free School – run by Hywel Jones – is determined to provide a classical liberal education for all of its pupils. Too often, when considering what comprises a knowledge-rich curriculum, the arts are not given the prominence they deserve.

In tired arguments against the English Baccalaureate, opponents of the policy sometimes characterise proponents of a knowledge-rich curriculum as opposing the development of human creativity and appreciation of the arts. Nothing could be further from the truth.

[Analysis published earlier this year](#) by the Department for Education showed that there is little correlation between the change in EBacc entry and the change in arts uptake in state-funded mainstream schools. The small correlation that does exist suggests that schools where EBacc entry has increased tend to have also seen an increase in their arts uptake.

In an earlier [NSN report](#) showing the same trends, the Culture Minister Matt Hancock and I wrote that there should be no battle between the arts and other subjects, but instead a battle for stronger, better, well-rounded education.

I am clear that the arts are a vital component of every pupil's education. Arts and culture are part of the fabric of our society and the government firmly believes that every child should be taught a high-quality arts curriculum.

At Hywel's school, music has pride of place in the curriculum – a school in which the vast majority of pupils are entered for the EBacc suite of core academic subjects. That is because music – along with other important arts subjects – has an important role to play in ensuring that pupils leave school with the cultural literacy they will need. And cultural literacy is a vital goal of a knowledge-rich curriculum, as Hywel explains in his essay:

We want children to leave our school with the confidence that comes from possessing a store of essential knowledge and the skills to use it. We believe that independence of mind, not compliance with

socio-economic expectations, is the goal of a good education. We believe the main focus of our curriculum should be on that common body of knowledge that, until recently, all schools were expected to teach. This is the background knowledge taken for granted by writers who address the intellectually engaged layman – the shared frames of reference for public discourse in modern liberal democracies. Sometimes referred to as “intellectual capital”, at other times as “cultural literacy”, this storehouse of general knowledge will enable all our pupils to grow to their full stature. Passing on this knowledge, as well as the ability to use it wisely, is what we mean by a classical liberal education.

The implementation of a core-academic curriculum currently occupies less bandwidth in our national conversation, but it is no less important. And the deep subject knowledge of teachers is vital to the successful delivery of the curriculum, as Ian Baukhram made clear in his excellence [review of modern foreign language pedagogy](#) for the Teaching Schools Council.

In his essay for ‘The Question of Knowledge’ he expertly dissects the key relationship between a teacher’s subject and curriculum knowledge, and their appropriate choice of pedagogy. He writes:

The core knowledge pertaining to a foreign language when learnt by a novice consists of vocabulary (words, the lexis), grammar (the rules, syntax, morphology) and pronunciation and its link to the written form (phonics, phoneme-grapheme correspondences). It is essential that language teachers understand this and that their curriculum planning must sequence the teaching of this knowledge and its practice to automaticity in structured but decreasingly scaffolded contexts.

He also adds an excellent critique of the dominant pedagogical approaches that grip far too many modern foreign language classrooms in our country:

The modern languages equivalent of ‘discovery learning’ or ‘child centred’ approaches, which we now understand to be not only time inefficient but also unfairly to disadvantage those pupils with least educational capital, is a ‘natural acquisition’ approach to language learning. A ‘natural acquisition’ approach emphasises pupil exposure to the language, exaggerates the role of ‘authentic resources’ at the expense of properly constructed practice or selected material, and tends to favour pupils spotting grammatical patterns for themselves rather than being explicitly taught them. It tends to emphasise the ‘skills’ of linguistic communication, listening, reading, speaking and writing, over the ‘knowledge’ which is a prerequisite for these skills (grammar, vocabulary and phonics), and it often turns the skills into the content leading to an ill-conceived curriculum. Moreover, it tends to plan courses

around thematic topics (so holidays, the environment and so on) and in so doing to de-emphasise grammatical progression towards a coherent whole picture, as in such a schema grammar is secondary to the 'topic' so is introduced in small disconnected chunks as pertaining to the thematic topic.

Again, this critique returns to the core purpose of the movement for a core academic curriculum for all, embodied by this pamphlet. The driving motive behind the reforms the government has embarked upon since 2010 is shared by this teacher-led movement; the desire for every child in this country to receive a world-class education that equips them with the knowledge they need, taught to them by expert teachers, using evidence-based approaches to teaching.

It is a simple aim, but realising this ambition requires and will require great effort and our continued joint endeavour. I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who is here and everyone who contributes each and every day to this movement. Together, we are changing this country's education system for the better.