

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.

[News story: Charity Fraud Awareness Week \(23 – 27 October\)](#)

During fraud awareness week we'll be helping the charity sector become more resilient to fraud.

This is the second annual [Charity Fraud Awareness Week](#), aiming to help you increase resilience against fraud.

A group of around 40 charities, regulators, professional bodies and other stakeholders are joining forces to help combat fraud targeted against charities. The main aims of the week are to:

- raise awareness of the key risks affecting the sector
- promote and share good counter-fraud practices
- promote honesty and openness about fraud

How to get involved

We are encouraging the charity sector to get involved in Fraud Awareness Week, you can:

You can find out more about [getting involved](#) on the Fraud Advisory Panel website.

e-learning resources

The partners involved in Charity Fraud Week have developed a range of e-learning resources and webinars for the week.

These will be focused on specific risk areas from 9.30 am each day on the [Fraud Advisory Panel website](#):

Monday 23 October Creating a counter fraud culture
Tuesday 24 October Bribery and corruption
Wednesday 25 October Cyber-fraud and identity fraud
Thursday 26 October Fundraising fraud
Friday 27 October Insider fraud and reporting fraud

[News story: Joint Communiqué between Mexico and the United Kingdom](#)

The UK and Mexico held High Level Political Talks in London on 19 October 2017

1. Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Dr Luis Videgaray Caso, and Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Boris Johnson, held High Level Political Talks between Mexico and the United Kingdom on 19 October 2017. The Talks were an opportunity to discuss co-operation in areas of mutual interest including foreign policy priorities, multilateral issues, education, culture, innovation, human rights and the rule of law, science and technology, and trade and investment.
2. Both sides noted that strong progress had been made since the last round of High Level Political Talks in Mexico City on 2 May 2016. They agreed that the momentum generated by the 2015 'Dual Year' and State Visit by President Peña Nieto had been sustained. The Foreign Ministers underlined their commitment to strengthen relations further and emphasised the continued importance of political dialogue and reciprocal high-level visits. They recognised the importance of furthering the legacy of the Dual Year by continuing to engage in a cultural dialogue, exchanging knowledge and increasing links between both countries.
3. Secretary of State Johnson expressed the UK's sincere condolences for the loss of life and damage caused by the earthquakes in Mexico in September 2017, and noted that the UK stood in solidarity with Mexico at this difficult time. Secretary Videgaray commended the remarkable resilience shown by the Mexican people and thanked the UK for its messages of solidarity and support for Mexico's recovery efforts. Both sides also expressed their condolences and support for the people affected by Hurricanes Irma, Maria and Nate, and agreed on the need to

support those affected using all available resources.

4. The Foreign Ministers discussed a range of foreign policy priorities in the Americas, Europe and in multilateral fora such as the United Nations and the G20.
5. Mexico highlighted the UK's role as an observer of the Pacific Alliance and welcomed its attendance at the XII Pacific Alliance Summit in Colombia in June 2017. The two sides also noted that they looked forward to future discussions in the framework of the EU-CELAC relationship.
6. Both sides expressed deep concern about the situation in Venezuela and called on all parties involved to pursue credible negotiation efforts made in good faith aimed at achieving the peaceful restoration of democracy in the country with full respect to human rights, the constitution and democratic institutions, and the legitimate aspirations of the Venezuelan people.
7. Both Foreign Ministers agreed that global challenges can be solved through multilateral solutions, and reiterated their support for the United Nations and other multilateral fora.
8. On international security, both countries condemned the multiple missile launches and nuclear tests conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and urged the DPRK to immediately and fully comply with all its international obligations, including by implementing all relevant UN Security Council resolutions.
9. The UK recognised the participation of Mexico at the United Nations Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial in London in September 2016 as a sign of its commitment to playing a greater role in global UN peacekeeping operations.
10. Both sides expressed their support for the global efforts to tackle the scourge of Modern Slavery. Mexico agreed to support the UK's Call to Action to End Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking endorsed at the 72nd Meeting of the UN General Assembly on 19 September 2017.
11. Secretary of State Johnson welcomed the UN General Assembly Resolution of 11 September 2017, co-sponsored by the UK and Mexico, which highlighted the Illegal Wildlife Trade as a transnational crime. Both countries agreed to work more closely in the global efforts to tackle the trade, including through high-level attendance from Mexico at the international Illegal Wildlife Trade conference in London in 2018.
12. The UK highlighted plans for new prosperity programming in Mexico to boost the UK's longstanding partnership with Mexico and work towards increased shared prosperity. The programme will help to increase productivity, including through technology and innovation, strengthen the economy and expand markets in Mexico with a focus on four strategic strands: energy, future cities, financial services and the business environment. Some of the objectives, such as increased access to financial products and better infrastructure projects, will help increase Mexican earthquake recovery and resilience efforts. The programme, which will also expand the potential for trade and investment with Mexico, will be worth around £60 million over four years.
13. Both sides committed to strengthen bilateral economic relations further and looked forward to High Level Economic Talks due in Mexico City in 2018 as well as to the third meeting of the Senior Business Leaders

Group, which held its first meeting during President Peña Nieto's State Visit in March 2015, and its second meeting in Mexico City in April 2016. The UK and Mexico expressed their strong commitment to champion free trade and open markets within a global economic system that works for everyone, including through active engagement in the G20, WTO and OECD.

14. They welcomed the strong collaboration between the UK and Mexico on Climate Change and reiterated their commitment to implementing the Paris Agreement. The UK also congratulated Mexico on its progress towards formal membership of the International Energy Agency.
15. Both countries expressed support for the existing dialogue regarding the threat posed to global economies and societies by antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and stressed the need urgently to implement the 2016 UN agreement on tackling AMR.
16. The UK underlined its support for the ongoing negotiations to modernise the EU-Mexico Global Agreement, including an ambitious trade pillar. Both sides welcomed the visit to the UK by Secretary of the Economy Ildefonso Guajardo in April 2017 and the visit to Mexico of the Secretary of State for International Trade, Dr Liam Fox, in July 2017 as a sign of commitment to the bilateral trade and investment relationship. Looking ahead, both sides reiterated their shared objective of ensuring continuity for British and Mexican businesses and to strengthen bilateral trade and investment once the UK has left the EU.
17. Discussions were conducted in a positive atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. Secretary Videgaray expressed his gratitude to Secretary of State Johnson for his kind hospitality and that of all the high level officials he met during his official visit. The two countries looked forward to the continued strengthening of bilateral relations in 2017 and beyond.

Press release: Welsh Secretary: "DevOpsGuys are leading the charge in Welsh digital transformation"

Secretary of State for Wales, Alun Cairns supported the opening of a new Cardiff HQ for tech start-up DevOpsGuys on 18 October. The software development company founded in 2013 now employs over 85 people across its London and Cardiff offices, with the aim of delivering practical IT engineering and consultancy solutions to clients including BAE Systems, Vodafone, gocompare.com as well as various UK Government departments.

The firm contributes in excess of £14m into the local economy via investment in the tech community and building strong relationships with universities through its internship and graduate schemes.

The new office will be based on Greyfriars Road in the capital.

Secretary of State for Wales, Alun Cairns said:

The tech sector across the UK and Wales is growing rapidly, and firms such as DevOpsGuys are making sure that knowledge in this field stays in the local area.

I'm delighted that DevOpsGuys has flourished and is addressing challenges in digital transformation, and provides vital training and support to interns and graduates, strengthening the local economy.

The UK Government is committed to investing in digital infrastructure which has for too long been a barrier to economic growth across Wales. I'm pleased to see an increase in research and development funding – by £2bn a year by 2020/21 – which will help Wales build on its strengths in this field and make it a more innovative economy for the years ahead.

[Press release: Latest NCMP data show obesity in reception children rises again](#)

New [National Child Measurement Programme \(NCMP\) data](#) show the number of obese children in reception year has risen for the second consecutive year – to 9.6% in the 2016 to 2017 school year, up from 9.3% in 2015 to 2016. For year 6 children, it has remained stable at 20%.

The latest data from the NCMP, overseen by Public Health England (PHE), also shows a stubborn gap between the richest and poorest. In the most deprived areas, 12.7% of children in reception year are obese, compared to 5.8% in the least deprived. Obesity in year 6 is 26.3% in the most deprived areas, compared to 11.4% in the least deprived.

Today's report (19 October 2017) underlines the importance of PHE's work to tackle childhood obesity. This includes working with the food industry to reduce sugar and calories in the foods children eat the most.

Dr Alison Tedstone, Chief Nutritionist at PHE, said:

Children deserve a healthy future and these figures are a reminder that addressing childhood obesity requires urgent action.

There is no single solution to reverse what's been decades in the making. We need sustained actions to tackle poor diets and excess calorie intakes. We're working with industry to make food healthier, we've produced guidance for councils on planning healthier towns and we've delivered campaigns encouraging people to choose healthier food and lead healthier lives.

Children who are overweight or obese are more likely to suffer from poor self-esteem, bullying and tooth decay in childhood. They are also more likely to be overweight or obese adults, which can lead to a range of preventable illnesses including heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

With the government's [Childhood Obesity Plan](#) published a year ago, significant steps are already being taken to help children avoid a lifetime of poor health.

In addition to PHE's work to reduce sugar and calories in food, the Soft Drinks Industry Levy has become law and will take effect from April 2018. Leading retailers and manufacturers have announced they are, or already have, lowered the amount of sugar in their products as a result of these programmes.

PHE's Change4Life campaign is also helping millions of families to make healthier choices through meal swap suggestions and the Be Food Smart app, helping parents to identify the sugar, salt and fat in food. It also supports schools to help them embed healthier habits into everyday school life.

Progress on childhood obesity will be monitored through the yearly NCMP data but, with obesity rates increasing over many years, significant change will take time.

Eustace De Sousa, National Lead for Children, Young People and Families at PHE, said:

A healthy weight in childhood lays the foundations for decades of healthy life as an adult. This data underlines how important it is for families to talk about health and weight as part of everyday life.

Each year, more children leave primary school overweight or obese and our most deprived areas are the worst affected. It's never too soon to make a change and there is lots of support from councils and Change4Life to help.