

The importance of a knowledge-rich curriculum

School reform has been central to the Conservative agenda since 2010. We have made good progress but there is still more to do, and the challenge has become still more urgent by the days of lost education that have resulted from the pandemic.

My belief, and my argument today, is that we will only deliver on the promises that all politicians make, of ensuring that every child receives a first-class education, if we ensure that all our children are taught in schools with an extensive knowledge-rich curriculum by well-trained and supported teachers;

In schools where strong discipline means pupils are taught in a safe and caring environment, with high expectations and where success is rewarded and celebrated;

In schools that develop character and resilience;

In schools that encompass the arts, languages, music and the humanities as well as science and maths;

In schools that give every child the knowledge they are entitled to as part of their cultural inheritance.

If every school delivers these key objectives, only then will we succeed in reducing the gap between children who come from backgrounds where the importance of education can sometimes take a back seat to the trials of day-to-day living and those whose families have the time and ability to add to the education that their children receive at school.

This approach is central to our plan to spread opportunity and to Level Up, and an important way in which we can rise to the challenge of creating a more inclusive and cohesive society, a society in which argument and debate is based on evidence rather than emotion.

And yet, some have been using the pandemic to argue for a different approach, for a reheated so-called progressive agenda – to abolish GCSEs for example – which would take our education system back decades and, once again, fail the most disadvantaged children.

Since 2010, the reforms that we put in place have been driven by the idea that the transmission of rich subject knowledge should be the priority for schools.

We replaced the 2007 National Curriculum because it was based on a series of general aptitudes with insufficient subject-based content. In its place we introduced a National Curriculum which gives pupils a grounding in the ‘best that has been thought and said’.

And we gave schools freedom over how to teach it, trusting teachers to do the best for their pupils.

But the thinking behind this approach goes back decades. In the late 1970s, an American literary analyst and professor, E. D. Hirsch, made a discovery.

He ran tests that found that community college students performed worse than university students when it came to understanding how different styles of writing influenced comprehension.

He was dismayed because it was poorer students who were doing worse.

And he found something enlightening: that while community colleges students could read and write as well as their university contemporaries, they failed whenever background knowledge was involved.

Despite the Civil War being a central event in American history, they could not understand passages of text about the subject – because they had not been taught elementary facts that many Americans take for granted.

It was a lack of knowledge that was the problem. And it is by no means just an American problem. In 'The Strange Death of History Teaching' published in 2009, Derek Matthews, an economics lecturer at Cardiff University, reported results of a short history test that he gave to 280 undergraduates over a three year period.

60% did not know Brunel's profession; 65% did not know who the reigning monarch was at the time of the Armada; 83% did not know that Wellington led the British army at Waterloo and 88% couldn't name a single nineteenth century prime minister.

He blamed the drive to teach 'historical skills' rather than historical knowledge as a key cause of the problem.

And as Hirsch writes, knowledge should be thought of as mental Velcro.

People who have lots of subject-specific knowledge find that new knowledge 'sticks' to it, helping them commit the new information to long-term memory.

In the same vein, a lack of subject-specific knowledge can mean that new concepts slip past you or that you make mistakes.

The outcome of this is completely predictable: those with more prior knowledge learn more than those with limited prior knowledge, and therefore the gap between these two groups widens.

In 'The Schools We Need And Why We Don't Have Them', Hirsch describes this as the 'Matthew Effect', drawing on Matthew Chapter 25:

"For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away".

And this gap can widen drastically if we are not careful, because there is an accumulative advantage that pupils with large vocabularies experience once they start school.

Put simply, because they know more, they learn more, and the gap between them and their less advantaged peers grows ever wider.

I believe that it is the job of schools to close this gap by making sure that every child is taught the same knowledge – what Hirsch describes as ‘communal knowledge’.

We cannot anymore ignore the evidence that shows that pupils from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely than their peers to access this ‘communal knowledge’ at home, who by contrast enjoy frequent guided reading with parents from a young age, as well as rich conversations at the family dinner table as they grow older.

So, teaching a knowledge-rich curriculum is essential to the task of spreading opportunity and Levelling Up.

Of course, we can never make sure that every child has exactly the same opportunities in their family life.

But it is because of this that our schools must be bastions of knowledge so children can, as Newton said, ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’.

I am inspired by the passion so many young people show for changing the world. I have been privileged to meet Malala whose determined bravery is doing so much to promote female education around the world. I share the admiration for England’s young football team who are standing up against the hate encountered everyday by so many on social media because of their race, gender, their beliefs or simply for who they are. I have been impressed by the insistence of children that we take action to address climate change which has helped shape the Government’s approach to preparing for COP26 in Glasgow this autumn.

I believe that together we can achieve great things. We can ensure that this generation leaves a better and fairer world for the next.

But we will not do this by turning our back on the past. It is knowledge of what came before us – of the battles that led to victory or to defeat, the experiments that led to discovery or to failure, the actions of leaders that led to change or to untold inhumanity.

Without knowledge of all that came before we will fail to create that better world.

A common trope in the Western world today is that the rise of the internet has made the memorisation of knowledge redundant, akin to those in an earlier generation saying that the invention of calculators meant we did not need to teach children arithmetic.

In recent years, many academics in university schools of education, leaders

of tech businesses and politicians of all stripes have argued that, with the world's information at our fingertips, the focus of school should be less about teaching maths formulae or historical dates.

Instead, they suggest schools should focus on teaching pupils so called '21st century skills', such as how to be more creative, to work in teams and to be problem-solvers.

This notion of 'generic skills' is one of the most damaging myths in education today.

Skills exist within subject disciplines – they aren't generic. This means they rely on the acquisition of underpinning knowledge.

It is fanciful to believe that a thinking skill in one domain can be readily and reliably transferred to other domains.

It is ignorant of the evidence of how people learn.

The ability to 'just Google it' is highly dependent on what a person has stored in their long-term memory.

And this focus on competency over knowledge is actually a tepid vision for education.

In her landmark book, '7 Myths About Education', Daisy Christodoulou deconstructs the myth that the way to develop pupil expertise in subjects like science or history is to teach them to think like expert scientists or expert historians.

She writes, and I quote:

"The difference between experts and novices is that experts have a huge body of background knowledge and processes stored in long-term memory, and that they have spent a huge amount of time practising using that knowledge and those processes. In most fields, it takes several years and thousands of hours to become an expert."

She adds: "There is no short-cut strategy or tactic that can bridge that gap."

So, every lesson a teacher spends trying to make experts out of children through teaching them to 'think like an expert', rather focusing on the essential building blocks of knowledge required on the path from novice to expert, is a lesson wasted.

Accumulated over weeks, terms and academic years, pupils taught in this way are having the opportunities that rich subject knowledge brings taken away from them.

Rather than setting pupils' hearts alight with the beauty of great music and art or giving them the gift of fluency in reading, and arithmetic, and maths, they would be subjected to a mundane, content-light curriculum tilted towards

the world of work.

Far from being innovative and new, it is a rehash of the failed child-led approaches which view the teaching of knowledge as Gradgrindian rather than the cultural inheritance of every child.

As Pritesh Raichura, a teacher from Michaela Community School, writes in their book 'The Power of Culture':

"An excellent curriculum in any discipline ought to be a curated tour of the most influential creators of the knowledge that contributes to that particular discipline."

And he adds: in literature, this must include Shakespeare; in physics, Newton; in music, Mozart.

Why?

Because these thinkers' works have endured for centuries. Time and time again, they have been hailed as being remarkable contributions to our civilisation.

There are some who say that such knowledge is outdated. How, they say, can a child today relate to the work of an early 17th century playwright or an 18th century composer?

I believe the job of the teacher – and our best teachers indeed do this – is to teach a curriculum which opens up a world of wonder and beauty from people of all creeds and colours, far beyond the narrow experience of an individual child.

A curriculum based on relevance to pupils is to deny them an introduction to the 'best that has been thought and said'.

And of course, there is no reason why the work of a 'dead white man' is not appropriate for children from ethnic minorities to learn about. As Maya Angelou famously said, "Shakespeare must be a black girl," because his poetic words expressed so intensely what she, a victim of poverty, racism and childhood sexual abuse, felt inside.

We will not create a more harmonious, tolerant and equal society through promoting a curriculum based on relevance to or representativeness of any one group.

Nor will we do so by being ashamed of who we are and where we came from. One of the many hugely impressive things about Gareth Southgate is his ability to speak so clearly of the things that unite us as a country. At the beginning of Euro 2020, he wrote about how shared experiences, common memories and family history all come together to build a "collective consciousness" and how our collective experience builds a sense of pride.

His England team – drawn from right across England and including players not only of great skill but from very different backgrounds – demonstrated a

sense of togetherness and pride, conscious of the achievements and failures of the past, determined to achieve success and live up to the expectations and hopes placed upon them which inspired the country.

Gareth Southgate has shown us how we can respect the past and build a different and better future.

We cannot rewrite our history or undo our past mistakes. We should tell the full and true story of who we are and what, as a country, we have done; right and wrong. And, by doing so, we can build a broad and accepted understanding of the country and create a common sense of belonging and shared history.

And the broader the knowledge is that is taught the more inclusive it can be.

E. D. Hirsch showed what is possible with his Core Knowledge Curriculum. In his book 'What Your Fifth Grader Needs to Know', he shows that 10-11-year-old pupils – equivalent to our last year of primary school – can learn an incredible amount.

In just a single academic year, they will cover the Maya, Aztecs and Incas; the discovery of the 'New World', including the transatlantic slave trade; the European Renaissance and Reformation, including the role played by Muslim scholars in contributing to discoveries in maths and science; 15th to 18th century England; Russia; Japanese history; Westward Expansion in North America; the US Civil War and Reconstruction; and Native Americans and the impact of settlers.

This is an incredible amount of subject content. We need to be ambitious for what our children and young people can achieve – because they can do it.

Throughout their time in school, all British pupils can learn about the arc of history, from the ancient kingdoms of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and China, to a millennium of British history up to the two World Wars and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Taught well, pupils exposed to this knowledge would learn about the struggles and achievements of peoples from all races.

Taught well, this curriculum is diverse and inclusive.

This is because it is 'powerful knowledge'; that which, as Professor Michael Young of the Institute of Education writes in a piece for the Cambridge Journal of Education, "is powerful because it provides the best understanding of the natural and social worlds that we have and helps us go beyond our individual experiences".

The more shared knowledge we have as a society, the more integrated and inclusive that society. And the vehicle for delivering that shared knowledge is our school system, but only if schools teach a knowledge-based rather than competence-based curriculum.

A broad and rich knowledge-based curriculum, as well as being a vehicle for inclusion, can also help to bring civility, nuance and evidence to some of

the heated debates that dominate public discourse.

Our schools should be unashamed champions of knowledge; citadels of civilized debate where pupils are encouraged to express views and discuss ideas.

Young people have always felt the urge to question and challenge the world they are brought up in. I did. I'm sure that you did too. Indeed, it is a key role of our education system to equip young people to test arguments and assumptions. Not to tell children what to think but to give them the knowledge they need to ensure that their passion is grounded in fact.

Over the last few months, I have been worried by video clips on Twitter, and by reports from schools around the country, of violent and angry protests sparked by the recent unrests in Gaza. The violence and the terrible loss of life was yet another turn in a conflict with deep and complicated roots which cannot be understood without an understanding of the past.

To understand the situation in Israel and Palestine, we need to give young people important facts about the world.

We need to teach them about the Balfour Declaration and the Six Day War. We need to teach them about the religious significance of Jerusalem to both Jews and Muslims. We need to teach them about the expansion of Jewish settlements.

The aim is not to prejudice children; it is to give them the facts so that they can then make informed analysis themselves. It is to provide them with the knowledge they need to understand and to challenge and to form their own views.

We must be on our guard to ensure that schools do not become centres of one-sided propaganda or a hostile environment for young people of any faith or religion. And as we have seen over the last few years, anti-Israeli sentiment can too easily and too quickly turn to anti-Semitic prejudice.

Ensuring young people are equipped with knowledge is ever more important with the rise of social media, where false narratives, based on fake news, are drawing people in – especially the young – with the starkness of their message and the simplicity of their solutions.

The old, misguided, argument of progressives, that we could downplay knowledge because children could look up facts in encyclopaedias, has been blown away in the internet age.

Online there is no simple reservoir of facts that children can access and know to be true. So much is nuanced around creating a narrative argument that suits an agenda.

A 2012 PISA study found that “the majority of students consider [material they encounter on the internet] first in terms of relevance or interest, rather than looking at the reliability of its source”.

This is a real problem with dangerous impacts. It means students may believe what they read purely because it is interesting to them.

We have a responsibility to make sure that young people are able to tell the difference between truths and falsehoods, and that the driving force of the Enlightenment – the commitment to reason and the pursuit of truth in the face of religious dogma and political bigotry – remains central to human progress in the 21st century.

It is our moral duty to teach them important facts and truths, delivered through a well-sequenced, knowledge-rich curriculum.

A 21st century curriculum must have the transfer of knowledge at its core – to “pass the parcel”, as Hector said in Alan Bennett’s play, ‘The History Boys’.

That is why I believe that we are the true romantics – believing in education for education’s sake.

We want to make sure that every child is taught a broad, ambitious and knowledge-rich curriculum until at least the age of 16.

The teaching of a broad and balanced academic curriculum is central to Levelling Up. It is central to pupil wellbeing. It is central to preparing pupils for the 21st century.

This is why our reforms to the National Curriculum were so important.

And that is why the EBacc, the English Baccalaureate, performance measure – introduced to ensure that all children have the opportunity to be taught the type of academic curriculum too often restricted to pupils from more privileged backgrounds – is so vital.

Our ambition is for 75% of year 10 pupils in mainstream state-funded schools to study these GCSEs by September 2022 and 90% by 2025.

We are ahead of target in four of the five EBacc subject ‘pillars’, where uptake has exceeded our ambition for 2022, with the exception being languages (which is at approximately 46%). And between 2011 and 2020, there was a 19.3 percentage point rise in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools entering the EBacc.

We have taken huge strides, I believe, over the past decade.

Many schools across the nation have risen to the challenge of putting a knowledge-rich curriculum at the core of what they do.

From Michaela Community School in London, to Dixons Trinity Academy in Bradford, and all those involved with the Midland Knowledge Schools Hub based at Saint Martin’s Catholic Academy in Stoke Golding, committed teachers and head teachers are showing that children flourish when given the gift of knowledge.

But there is more to do.

This Government is energetic and focused in its mission to break the link

between background and destiny.

And our schools have a crucial role to play by making sure that every child is taught the knowledge they need to grasp the opportunities the failed approaches of the past were denying them.

We are undeterred by the pandemic that we are living through, and by working together and through the teaching of a knowledge-rich curriculum, we can truly Level Up across the country and give children the education they deserve.