

Understanding the new policy environment: a GA Think Piece and Guide

November 2010

Key references:

- *The Importance of Teaching*, Department for Education White Paper, November 2010
- *Could Do Better: using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England*, Tim Oates, Cambridge Assessment, November 2010

“I think the problem has been that over the last 13 years teaching as a profession has had the initiative, the fun, the enjoyment squeezed out of it” (Michael Gove, 24/11/10)

Introduction and context

This paper has been prepared as a comment on and response to particular aspects of the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*. It is especially concerned with plans for the curriculum assessment and qualifications. We note that the government plans to

- ‘review and reform the National Curriculum so that it becomes a benchmark outlining the knowledge and concepts pupils should be expected to master to take their place as educated members of society’ [p37]

Also, that it will

- ‘encourage schools to offer a broad set of academic subjects to age 16, by introducing the English Baccalaureate [p37]

The new national Curriculum will have ‘greater focus on subject content, outlining the essential knowledge and understanding ... the core knowledge’ [p38] Also, ‘The new curriculum will allow greater degree of freedom in how that knowledge might be acquired and what other teaching should complement this core’.

The English Baccalaureate will be ‘for any student who secures good GCSE or iGCSE passes in English mathematics, the sciences, a modern foreign language and a humanity such as history or geography’ [p40]

Interpretation

The GA welcomes both these proposals. There is an opportunity for more geography to be taught in primary and secondary schools, and the possibility of reversing the long term decline in GCSE numbers.

With the abolition of QCDA and greater independence of schools from local authorities, the GA will have a key role to play in identifying, promoting and supporting excellent geography in schools.

This will be achieved through participation in the Geography Quality Marks, purchase of key publications, attendance at workshops and conferences.

As all these develop we will need to tackle afresh the question of geographical knowledge in schools. What exactly is good school geography?

The rest of this paper is an analysis, already shared with government, of the radically new world envisaged. It is not a GA view – more a think piece to consider at this stage. Enjoy and comments welcome (to rbuck@geography.org.uk)

‘Core Knowledge’, Capability and the National Curriculum

“A school shouldn’t start with curriculum content. It should start with designing a learning experience and then check it has met national curriculum requirements”

[Mick Waters, quoted in the *Guardian*, September 2010]

Critique

The Waters quotation reveals a formulation of knowledge which is inert, given and almost passive in relation to what is claimed for ‘learning activity’. It implies that teachers are not really in the knowledge business. They are more into the ‘activity’ business.

It can be argued that such an approach is a betrayal of the promise of education to young people: the promise to provide access to a productive, engaged and fulfilled adult life.

There are obvious and not so obvious reasons why teachers have, in recent times, been discouraged from grappling with knowledge. Waters is voicing an orthodoxy. It has been fuelled partly by the assumed needs of the ‘google age’, but also by an incautious rush to ‘brain science’ to underpin an evidence-led approach to teaching and learning. It enthusiastically embraces

‘personalisation’, innovation, flexibility ... and, let’s face it, suggests deep dissatisfaction with stuffy, traditional schooling that seems so unsuited to the digital age – easily caricatured by reference to a 1950s grammar school stereotype of a rigid subject-based curriculum.

However, the problem with overemphasising a personalised and psychologised sense of ‘learning’ is that it leaves a vacuum at the heart of the education process. Thus, learning is regarded as:

- a good thing in itself: it is assumed to be value free in this sense. (Of course, it is not necessarily. Learning can be trivial, dangerous or wrong)
- an essentially scientific or technical process – it emphasises skills that can be honed and practised, and learning ‘accelerated’, as if this were an end in itself. (Whatever happened to the ‘beautiful struggle’ and the fun? Understanding aspects of science, history or art can be counter-intuitive, surprising, enormously enjoyable and sometimes require sustained, painstaking effort)
- paramount. Teaching is subservient to, and led by, the learning. We become embarrassed by teaching, and instead talk only about ‘facilitating’ learning. (A society that abrogates responsibility in this way may be one that has lost confidence in itself). We are therefore very happy with the title of the government’s November 2010 White Paper: *The Importance of Teaching*)

The ‘core knowledge’ thesis

E D Hirsch¹ critiques of the costs of a process oriented curriculum that emphasises ‘how-to knowledge’ over domain-specific ‘knowing what’. Such a curriculum turns its back on ‘enabling’ core knowledge. It is based on orthodox (‘progressive’) educational thought. As Hirsch’s explains, the damaging belief is that:

‘a specific, factual curriculum is not needed for gaining all-purpose cognitive skills and strategies. Instead of burdening our minds with a lot of dead facts, we should become expert in solving problems, in thinking critically – in reading fluently – and then we will be able to learn anything we need’. (Hirsch 2007 p11)

¹ 1987 *Cultural Literacy*, Houghton Mifflin; 2007 *The Knowledge Deficit*, Houghton Mifflin

The 'surface plausibility' of this position is based on:

'... the fact that a good education can indeed create skilled and critical thinkers. The mistake is to think that these achievements are the result of formal, all-purpose skills rather than abilities that are completely dependent on broad factual knowledge ... The thing that transforms reading skill and critical thinking skill into general all-purpose abilities is a person's possession of general, all purpose knowledge' (ibid p 12)

He argues a case for the schools (especially in primary and lower secondary age groups) to teach particular, precise core knowledge. It is important to acknowledge that nowhere does he advocate rote learning of facts, and in any case indicates that core knowledge may only be appropriate for around 40% - 60% of the curriculum time. Indeed, one of the benefits of core knowledge is that it would help break the tedium of formal process learning in which the focus is, repetitively, on a limited number of generic learning 'strategies' ('... this soul killing drill of clarifying and summarizing' ibid p 21).

The main impact of the core knowledge approach is that it enables a deeper form of literacy development. Reading with meaning, and in a way that enables engagement with the text, *requires* core knowledge. More advantaged homes often supply some of this, especially to younger children. If schools are to serve the aims of creating a more egalitarian society, then they should take seriously the need to introduce all children to knowledge that some of them may never otherwise encounter.

It is important to recognise that the 'text' may be words of fiction or of fact, but also could be a landscape, an historical narrative, scientific experiment or debate about a controversial issue. In all cases, the specific knowledge that can be brought to the 'text' enables a deeper engagement with it. Teachers cannot just assume such knowledge will be 'picked up' along the way, or that such knowledge does not matter.

Similar arguments underpin Hirsch's ambitious idea of cultural literacy, which hinges on the need to create a public sphere of knowledge that enables all cultural groups to engage with common issues and debates: that is, issues that go beyond people's local culture (perhaps based on ethnicity or class). Cultural literacy does not negate the 'multicultural society' but it does challenge the idea that local groups need not assimilate a wider 'national' culture.

Antithesis

Hirsch's argument is convincing, up to a point. But it has attracted trenchant criticism. For example, a core knowledge approach to the school curriculum is said to:

- confuse knowledge with closed 'facts' and thus undervalues a more open idea of understanding, which may deepen and change over time (but the 'facts' emphasis appeals to common sense and the commonplace mistrust of liberal educational professionals)
- endorse the very old fashioned idea of education based on the accumulation of fragmented, received information rather than the co-construction of coherent knowledge (in the latter, both teachers and students could be described as 'knowledge workers'; in the former, there is no 'conversation', only 'delivery')
- promote a timeless concept of education based on an unchanging canon of facts, even though the rate of knowledge production continues to accelerate, relentlessly (and who decides this canon? Who is in a *position* to decide?)

Criticism of a Hirschian curriculum is therefore wide-ranging and deep-seated. It is wrapped up in quotations like this well-known statement from Professor Stephen Ball:

'... the preservation and transmission of the 'best of all that has been said and written'; (this is) itself a pastiche, an edited, stereotypical, unreal, schoolbook past. A curriculum which eschews relevance and the present, concentrating on 'the heritage' and 'the canon' ... A curriculum suspicious of the popular and the immediate, made up of echoes of past voices, the voices of a cultural and political elite. A curriculum which ignores the pasts of women and the working class and the colonised - *the curriculum of the dead*²

Synthesis

Is there a way to reconcile such different views? Perhaps all sides can benefit from a careful reading of what the other is attempting to say. A case in point may exist in Professor Michael Young's recent re-assessment of his and others' 'new sociology' of education in the 1970s³ in his

² Ball, S. J. (1993) 'Education, Majorism and 'the Curriculum of the Dead', *Curriculum Studies*, 1, 2, pp 195-214 [p 210]

³ Young, M. (1971) *Knowledge and Control*. London: Collier Macmillan.

2008 book⁴. Whilst the influential critique in the late 20th century was of the controlling *knowledge of the powerful* – see the Ball quotation above – the perspective now is the need to provide access, for all children, to *powerful knowledge*.

This includes (but is certainly not limited to) the ‘enabling’ core knowledge that Hirsch refers to. The curriculum cannot consist solely of core knowledge, as Hirsch himself agrees. This is probably the main reason it would be ill-advised, in the English context, to propose a national *curriculum* based solely upon core knowledge. Hirsch’s well known ‘core knowledge sequence’⁵ applies to the US context where there is little chance of a national curriculum: it can be adopted, or not; in full or amended. Given statutory power a core knowledge curriculum could easily be misinterpreted.

Another approach may be to incorporate the notion of core knowledge into a broader based knowledge curriculum. The benefit of doing this is that it would provide the opportunity for teachers to grasp the purpose and the place of core knowledge in the context of the broad and balanced curriculum which they play a crucial part in making.

Thus, core knowledge is an element of powerful knowledge that contributes to students’ ‘capabilities’⁶. **For geography**, we can say ‘capability’ is enhanced through:

- Acquisition and development of ‘world knowledge’ (this may be equated with ‘core knowledge’, or essential and *enabling* knowledge; it is worth noting that a lot of this is quite stable – although the world is a rapidly changing entity, the continents and major river systems, the oceans and global wind systems, the main biomes and even the distribution of population and main city systems do not change *that* quickly.)
- Development of ‘inter-relational understanding’ – the basis of grasping global interdependence (captured by Prof Doreen Massey’s concept of a ‘global sense of place’)
- Enhanced propensity to think, through ‘decision making’ and other applied pedagogic activities, about how places, societies and environments are made (this can incorporate a futures dimension).

⁴ Young, M. (2007) *Bringing Knowledge Back In: From social constructivism to social realism in the sociology of education*. London: Routledge

⁵ www.coreknowledge.org

⁶ See Lambert D and Morgan J 2010 *Teaching Geography 11-18: a conceptual approach*, Open University Press

Such a knowledge based view of the school curriculum, underlying the development of capability, has a key part to play in rectifying some of the deficiencies noted at the beginning of this critique. In addition to the transmission and development of statutory core geographical knowledge, the capabilities approach knowingly recognises the need to use the subject discipline as a resource to co-construct deeper conceptual understanding: so that young people can make sense of the world.

A 'capabilities' geography expresses geography in terms of educational *goals*. The curriculum content, beyond the statutory 'core knowledge', still has to be selected. *But the goals at least suggest what we are trying to achieve*. It could have a major impact on British school children in that it will give them an improved knowledge and understanding of the world and their relationship with it.

[David Lambert November 2010]