

## Children's Agency, Knowledge, and the Primary Curriculum

*By Dominic Wyse, Professor of Early Childhood and Primary Education at University College London (UCL), Institute of Education (IOE) and Founding Director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11 years).*

A few months ago I heard an inspiring presentation about a school's approach to the curriculum. As a result, I travelled to Gatley Primary School, which is part of the Education Learning Trust in Greater Manchester to visit the school. What I saw I had barely believed was still possible in view of the increasing control of the national curriculum by successive governments in England. Each half term the children are encouraged to give their views about what they want to learn. These views are given structure through themes that reasonably represent the range of views in any class: the children and teacher agree the name of the theme. This is no simple return to topic-based teaching of the 1980s: these themes are more complex, for example 'Inequality isn't Sporting'. In addition to enhancing pupil's agency, and an emphasis on cross-curricular teaching, the children's learning is mapped against progression in a set of key skills, as the school describes in the following extract:



*The curriculum context is set by the pupils, term by term. Pupils demonstrate the relevance and maturity of their cultural literacy through choices of complex thematic approaches ultimately reflected in the titles that they agree, such as 'Inequality isn't Sporting'. In the example observed, the pupils recognised the tensions which exist in the sporting world. The staff blend pupil choice for the context of the curriculum with National Curriculum requirements seamlessly as they have worked in curriculum teams to*

*co-construct curriculum progression grids indicating where the National Curriculum benchmarking sits and how the curriculum offered exceeds this benchmarking.*

*The pupils navigate a learning environment based on key skills, explicitly communicated to the pupils, such as problem-solving, collaboration, communication, ICT, and research. Pupils have a high degree of agency in being able to select which aspects of the learning environment they visit and for what*

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*purpose. The purpose is further underpinned by the concept of a learning cycle which enables pupils to develop their self-awareness as learners in understanding how they move their learning through the four stages and as such developing their metacognition, in order for pupils to 'master' concepts.*

*(<https://www.gatleyprimary.com/school-information/our-curriculum>).*

This current example of curriculum organisation in a primary school links with some fundamental debates, such as what are the most appropriate curriculum models and pedagogy to introduce knowledge to children? And, what is the most appropriate knowledge to be learned (see Pollard et al. 2019, and Alexander 2010 for contributions to relevant debates in primary education)?

A current strand of curriculum debates in England has centred on 'powerful knowledge' (e.g. Young, 2014). The key idea about powerful knowledge is that learners need to access, and be familiar with, certain kinds of knowledge that are regarded as more important because without this knowledge, it is argued, learners are less likely to succeed in their future lives. Those who promote powerful knowledge have also questioned an emphasis on knowledge that children acquire out of school because of a perception that this emphasis risks failure to give access to the powerful knowledge required to succeed in life. In short powerful knowledge advocates regard schools as places



where pupils should be introduced to knowledge that they do not encounter at home.

The main underpinning of the idea of powerful knowledge is theoretical not empirical, and the related practical publications have tended to use models from secondary education. This has not stopped advocacy by some vocal commentators for the use of powerful knowledge in primary schools (in addition to undue emphasis on 'secondary school readiness'). Although there is a relative lack of specific research on powerful knowledge compared with more learner-centred curricula in primary education there is some research that is relevant to the debates about building on pupils' knowledge. For example, multiple studies of teacher-pupil interaction have revealed that teachers, not pupils, tend to dominate classroom interaction and therefore control

curriculum content (Galton et al. 1999). Evidence from the history of curriculum policy reveals that content and pedagogy has increasingly been prescribed by governments with each iteration of England's national curriculum (e.g. see Wyse et al. 2018). The picture of education in England is one of knowledge increasingly controlled by government, schools and teachers and only very rare attempts to genuinely build on the knowledge that children bring to school. And this picture of school and teacher control has endured for at least 100 years (Wyse, Davis, Jones, & Rogers, S., 2015). So any claims by powerful knowledge advocates that learner-centred curriculum models represent a significant risk are misplaced because they have never been the dominant model in England's primary schools in spite of repeated claims to the contrary.



## Teaching is based on robust and holistic assessment of children's existing knowledge so that teaching is well matched developmentally with children's learning needs.

Questions about knowledge in the curriculum, and related pedagogy, are most complex in relation to the youngest children's learning. What might be the powerful knowledge that say five-year-old children need to acquire? No doubt broad agreement exists about the importance of learning to read because literacy gives access to whatever kind of knowledge is the focus of learning later in children's education. A typical category of knowledge in relation to literacy would be the texts that children encounter. Some might argue that 'classic' children's literature should be the focus: this would be consistent with claims about canons of English literature that feature more prominently at secondary education. Others argue that 'decodable texts' should be the main texts that children should encounter in the early stages because of the claim that this better supports systematic phonics teaching. But the texts that children encounter at home are a vital source on which to build the teaching of reading, and these texts include a wide range of print - both analogue and digital. One reason for teachers to engage with the texts that children experience at home is the opportunity to support children's self-esteem and motivation for school by affirming that their experiences and knowledge are relevant. But it is also about ensuring that teaching is based on robust and holistic assessment of children's existing knowledge so that teaching is well matched developmentally with children's learning needs.

The importance of pupils' agency to make choices in their curriculum



is just as relevant to older primary children. For example, the curriculum areas of geography and history can of course be studied through textbooks and through digital sources. But when teachers and schools seriously attend to pupils' experiences and knowledge in order to plan experiences that include visiting sites in the local environment this study can be so much more meaningful and authentically powerful. Some years ago I was part of a team that investigated children's sense of place and belonging stimulated by a wonderful book aimed at older children. Children's experiences in the contrasting inner-city and rural schools were revelatory, not least the *transcultural meanings* that were part of their sense of identity (Charlton, et al 2012)

Looking internationally there is evidence that learner-centred national curriculum models

can be at least as successful as knowledge-based models. For example, in a comparison of the national curricula in four jurisdictions performing highly in international comparative tests it was found that the national curriculum in Hong Kong, which is learner centred, was at least as successful as more knowledge based and skills based models (as measured by international comparative testing, Manyukhina and Wyse, 2019). And on England's door step the models of national curriculum in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have given much greater attention to learners' agency. The primary curriculum in Ireland is similarly noteworthy, has been successful internationally for many years, and is undergoing current renewal based on robust evidence, stakeholder engagement, and appropriate pacing of curriculum change.



A review of successive versions of England's national curriculum reveals politicians' control of England's national curriculum, and pedagogy, increasing at each iteration (Wyse et al. 2018). The national curriculum of 2014 is the most extreme version, and the exertion of overall control continues to extend, for example in the proposals that teacher training providers who do not deliver synthetic phonics will be failed (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/initial-teacher-education-inspection-framework-and-handbook-2020-inspecting-the-quality-of-teacher-education>). There are even moves to link England's knowledge-based

curriculum with more pupil textbook teaching (Gibb, 2017). An ever-present danger is to breadth and balance in the curriculum ([see https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2020/09/03/breadth-and-balance-the-essential-elements-of-a-recovery-curriculum/](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2020/09/03/breadth-and-balance-the-essential-elements-of-a-recovery-curriculum/))

One of the most pressing questions raised in this piece is: how should children's agency in primary and early years education in the 2020s be reflected in the curriculum? In order to address this the thinking behind children's agency will be the main theme of an ASPE-HHCP (Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy) conference taking place in June 2021

(details to be available later). The nature of the conference will first be shaped by stakeholders invited to a virtual seminar in November 2020.

The relevance of curriculum knowledge at different ages and phases will also be the focus for a British Educational Research Association event on the 8th October 2020 (<https://www.bera.ac.uk/event/knowledge-curriculum-and-pedagogy>). An important issue for debate is the ways in which the evidence supports schools and teachers who are innovating with their curricula, in spite of the constraints caused by political ideology.

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## Pen Portrait

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Dominic's research focuses on curriculum and pedagogy. He has a distinguished career teaching in primary schools and subsequently researching primary education. He is now a leading academic, researcher and author. Dominic has worked at Liverpool JMU, the University of Cambridge and UCL where he has had experience as the Head of the Department of Learning and Leadership. He has written a very wide range of publications including those for broadcast, print and social media. Dominic is also an accomplished musician, and has held a range of professional music roles.

