

CST Discussion Paper

A knower-rich curriculum: Bringing knowers into the light

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A knower-rich curriculum: Bringing knowers into the light

Curriculum and Assessment Review

What might we expect from the government's curriculum and assessment review, and what might we hope for?

To prejudge the outcome of an independent curriculum review would be premature and unhelpful so it is right for government to hold off getting more into what to expect until the review work is done.

But there are some clues within the review panel's terms of reference. For example, it says: "The Review will develop a cutting-edge curriculum, equipping children and young people with the essential knowledge and skills which will enable them to adapt and thrive in the world and workplace of the future."¹

Landing this amidst the fractious and disputed territory of curriculum policy, it is clear that such wording has been chosen carefully. It's not fruitful here to drift into the substance of the usual curriculum debates, other than to point out they exist and that government has some sense of where it sits in relation to them. It seems to be sketching out broad positions: that knowledge *and* skills are important, and that the curriculum ought to be doing more to prepare children for the future.

While some have feared a curriculum review could lead to a pendulum swing towards a vastly different conception of curriculum quality, there are promising signs that meaningful iteration rather than outright revolution or replacement might be the order of the day.

For one thing, the decision to appoint Professor Becky Francis as chair appears to have landed well across the system, and rightly so. Prof Francis is rooted in evidence and possesses a considered rather than blinkered approach to complex issues. The terms of reference for the review speak to this, as does the selection of the panellists. So far, so good.

Change or more of the same?

The work will inevitably involve some reappraisal of the specified content in the national curriculum. While the body of knowledge in some subjects may be stable over time, in others there is change or contestation and we should expect some iteration in that regard.

Of course, the litmus test in the national conversation is always about what we should take out – suggesting what to add in is much easier. So, we should expect some caution from the review about where it specifies extra content, with judicious decisions being made in a national curriculum which is already very full in places. Indeed, it may be that a key part of the review's contribution, in particular subjects, will be identifying where some content can be removed.

The work of selecting and specifying the content to be included – topics given, bullet points listed and so on – is important, with Jensen et al's analysis of science curricula suggesting the degree of specificity needs

¹ Department for Education (2024) [Curriculum and Assessment Review: Terms of reference](#)



careful calibration.²

But it's also important to pay attention to the more philosophical foundations of the curriculum. What are its aims? How are these conceived? How do we deal with contested questions about 'which knowledge' and 'whose knowledge'?

This section in the terms of reference is worth noting:

The Review will build on the hard work of teachers and staff across the system who have brought their subjects alive with knowledge-rich syllabuses, to deliver a curriculum which is rich and broad, inclusive, and innovative.

It's interesting because it takes us a little further in understanding the philosophical foundations of the review. Significantly, it recognises the work schools have done in creating 'knowledge-rich' curricula and pledges to build on this. This implies some recognition and acceptance of the value of this work.

Of course, some of this could be explained as the government also signalling to teachers that it understands workload and capacity issues and is not seeking to tear up previous curriculum work for this reason. This is a welcome acknowledgement but it may also be that the new government has familiarised itself with the evidence and arguments in support of knowledge-rich curricula and has concluded the approach has some merits.

The statement does something else important though too. It encourages us to look beyond the existing knowledge-rich philosophy in the national curriculum by signalling that it will build upon it, not simply maintain it as is. Accordingly, we might begin to wonder if the government's conception of knowledge-rich is, perhaps, somehow broader, more inclusive, and more innovative.

This sort of thinking was also reflected in the initial opportunity mission paper Labour published in 2023:

Labour will build on the hard work and skill of thousands of subject specialist teachers who have developed a rich knowledge curriculum, brought alive the excitement of their subject and sequenced knowledge so that it builds pupils' conceptual understanding.

From this strong platform, we must build a broad education that enables children to thrive. Subjects like music, art, sport or drama, that build confidence and skills such as communication, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork, must be available to all our children not just some. These are skills employers value and which parents know help their children to achieve, while creative and vocational subjects can also boost young people's engagement in their education. Yet our curriculum has failed to keep up with the pace of change. The teaching of digital skills and navigating online platforms is out of step with the reality of young people's lives."³

This was reiterated in Labour's manifesto before the election: "Our reforms will build on the hard work of teachers who have brought their subjects alive with knowledge-rich syllabuses, to deliver a curriculum which is rich and broad, inclusive, and innovative."⁴

'Knowledge-rich' appears to be positioned as a necessary but insufficient component of national curriculum philosophy.

² Jensen, B et al (2023) *Fixing the hole in Australian education: The Australian Curriculum benchmarked against the best*. Learning First

³ Labour (2023) *Five Missions for a Better Britain*

⁴ Labour (2024) *Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024*

The extra ingredient

So, what does the 'extra' bit look like that we might build on top of the edifice of knowledge-rich education?

If the new government is sensible on this matter, and I suspect it is, it will not want to position going beyond knowledge-rich as part of a knowledge/skills false dichotomy it has thus far tried to avoid. But it may be useful to find some reasonably succinct way of describing its curriculum philosophy, especially the additive element it wishes to introduce.

'Broader' takes us some of the way by capturing the sense that a wider range of subjects will be valued by government. But this doesn't seem to fully capture the additional richness government seems to want. Neither does 'skills', though these may be more explicitly positioned as curriculum aims.

This extract from the curriculum and assessment review terms of reference indicates why there's potentially something else going on too:

"The Review will ensure that the curriculum reflects the issues and diversities of our society and that every child and young person is represented."

This line implies the government intends the curriculum review – and therefore the resultant national curriculum – to be more context sensitive than the current national curriculum: something that more readily engages with and takes account of pupils and their backgrounds as part of the rationale for what schools teach.

Of course, none of this is to say that schools don't already do this. But it is significant at a national level. After all, much of the past ten years or so has seen a government curriculum philosophy centred on Matthew Arnold's "the best that's been thought and said": an emphasis on entitlement construed as something common or consistent – a body of knowledge that we share, typified in history by the 'island story' narrative. Part of the problem in this conception is that it can struggle to relate to challenges like 'whose story' the curriculum is foregrounding, and who is being silenced. And the universalising effect of this conception differentially impacts subjects depending on the knowledge in question.

The emphasis on diversity and representation set out in the review implies a different sort of entitlement but need not mean any less focus on the importance of knowledge. If it means that we continue to see knowledge as significant but that we develop a more sophisticated understanding of knowledge, that may well be a welcome additive to the existing paradigm of knowledge-rich education, which in some pockets of our discourse has come to mean that knowledge exists only or primarily in service of cognition, rather than being something deeply social as well: something that exists between us as much as it exists within our own brains.

The intellectual and professional tools we deploy to understand knowledge have been oriented towards how the brain works more than how society works.

There is room for the curriculum review to retain the good work that's been done thus far in relation to the importance of knowledge but to bring more into the light the other side of the knowledge coin: Maton's concept of the knower.⁵

⁵ Maton, K (2014) *Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*. Routledge



Knower-rich education

Trying to understand knowledge only through the lens of cognition is a bit like trying to understand the economy by only studying coins and notes. We miss the system in which interactions of 'contents' take place, and these exchanges carry meaning and impact.

Using the metaphor of a radio, Basil Bernstein emphasized that sharing, receiving, and understanding knowledge requires attention not only to its content (the radio message) but also to how it is structured and communicated (the frequency it's communicated on).⁶ The medium through which knowledge is transmitted shapes how it is understood and who can access it. This reveals how educational systems often privilege certain ways of communicating, reinforcing social inequalities by marginalizing those who do not share the dominant code. All of which we're potentially blind to if we don't find better ways to 'see' knowledge practices.

This requires us to look more closely at knowers – the people who know, discover, shape, select, use, and relate to the knowledge of the curriculum.

Much of this already goes on in our schools, but for a government grappling with what more we need to add to knowledge-rich in order to have a truly rich curriculum, I give three examples of what a more knower-rich national curriculum could mean:

1. Knowers as a beginning of curriculum

As described above, the 'knowledge turn' in England over the past decade or so has been very important in ensuring all children experience an education that explicitly seeks to build what they know as a primary concern. This has not been the experience of all children internationally or in England in previous decades. A range of evidence points to a relationship between what children know and their achievements, so it is to the credit of teachers in England that they have made this a focus of their work.

However, some of the epistemic foundations of this change have been both transformative and limiting. The previous government's adoption of ED Hirsch's work was effective in both foregrounding the importance of knowledge in the curriculum but also in providing an inadequate theoretical basis to navigate inevitable questions about *which* knowledge should be selected.⁷

Some of this has been mediated in the profession by reference to Young's concept of 'powerful knowledge'.⁸ Briefly summarised, Young's three futures of schooling are:

- Future one: The curriculum is inherited from the 19th Century. Knowledge is treated as a 'fixed' – to be transmitted to students capable of acquiring it.
- Future two: Knowledge is only a reflection of its historical and social roots. It is constructed in response to particular needs and interests. Ultimately this leads to relativism.
- Future three: Knowledge has historical and social roots but can't be reduced only to these roots. Knowledge is the creation of specialist communities, bound by epistemic rules. Subjects are the most reliable tools we have for enabling students to acquire knowledge. Rather than treating knowledge as a given, it is understood as fallible, contestable and provisional.

However, while providing a less positivist perspective than Hirsch, interpretations of this work have introduced some constraints too. Perhaps most notably the

6 Bernstein, B (1990) *Class, Codes and Control Volume 4: The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse*. Routledge

7 Hirsch, E D (1987) *Cultural literacy: what every American needs to know*. Houghton Mifflin

8 Young, M (2014) 'Knowledge, curriculum and the future school', *Knowledge and the future school: Curriculum and social justice*. Bloomsbury Academic

separation of disciplinary and everyday knowledge. While the distinction may hold up in epistemological terms, it's unclear how well aspects of it meet with the reality of wider school expectations that go beyond purely academic considerations.

For example, if the prime mission of schools is to teach powerful knowledge and such knowledge derives its legitimacy from its disciplinary roots, what of school subjects which are less firmly rooted in disciplines? Are we to consider that such subjects, some of which are more vocational nature, are not legitimate school subjects? If so, how does this fit with the aims of perspectives of wider society, parents, employers and so on?

The parent who wonders why their child does not have the opportunity to study particular subjects not derived from academic disciplines may feel an epistemic rationale of powerful knowledge feels rather remote from their own educational rationale and expectation. To be clear, this is not an argument for what Young describes as 'Future 2', which underplays or ignores the conceptual nourishment of disciplines, but it's an illustration of a gap that can exist between the space where academic theorization of the school curriculum takes place and the real world as experienced by pupils, parents, and teachers – and schools have to be able to exist in both of these.

It's also worth remembering that our everyday experiences can be important pedagogic resources that teachers draw on in the pursuit of more academic knowledge acquisition.⁹ The powerful knowledge of disciplines can often be exactly the right starting point for many questions of curriculum creation but it need not be the only one. Setting out from the everyday world knowers inhabit might be right sometimes too.

A second, perhaps related, aspect of seeing knowers more is to pay more attention to how the socio-economic contexts in which we teach can influence *what* we teach. As the curriculum review indicates, more consideration of diversities in relation to communities, histories, and so on, is welcome. This area is widely researched and argued by scholars such as Moncrieffe and Reay so I won't go into further detail here other than to say this area has been insufficiently explored in government curriculum policy and sentiment over the past decade.¹⁰

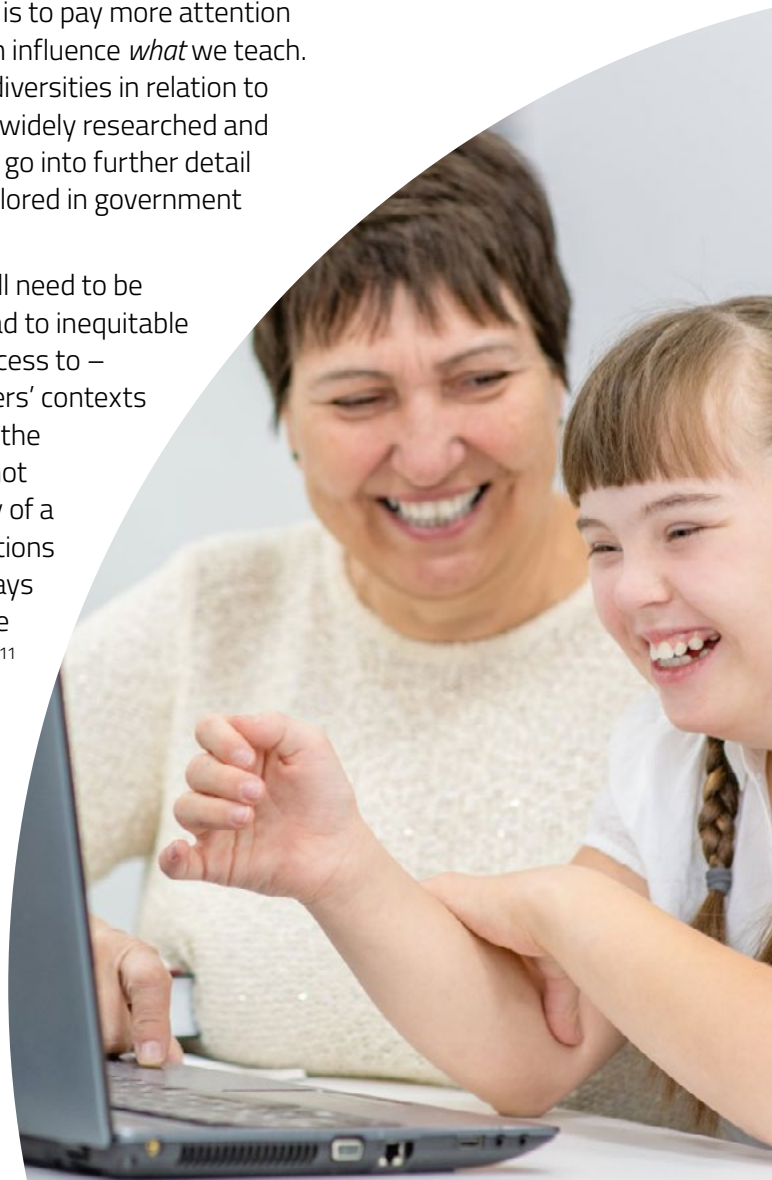
In thinking more explicitly about curriculum knowers we will need to be mindful that greater consideration of contexts does not lead to inequitable limitations on the knowledge that particular pupils have access to – Young's 'Future 2' critique. However, we can't ignore knowers' contexts without introducing limitations of different sorts, including the risk that some children experience a curriculum that does not appear to 'speak to' them and their lives. This is an inequity of a different sort. As Rollett (2021) notes, "unequal power relations between groups have established structures where the ways of knowing and being of one group are held as a norm while others are found to be in deficit according to those norms."¹¹

Stewart and Thompson (2021) argue powerfully:

9 Lambert, D, Solem, M, & Tani, S (2015) 'Achieving human potential through geography education: A capabilities approach to curriculum making in schools', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 105(4), 723–735

10 Moncrieffe, ML (ed) (2022) *Decolonising curriculum knowledge: international perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches*. Palgrave Macmillan; Reay, D (2017) *Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes*. Policy Press

11 Rollett, S (2021) *Curriculum decolonisation as a disciplinary process*. Confederation of School Trusts



Discussions surrounding the powerful knowledge to be imparted in schools cannot focus solely on providing disadvantaged students with access to 'elitist' knowledge but must also embody the need to include a range of voices and experiences, in order to strive for equitable education and progress for all marginalised groups.

This is not a binary case. The bonus of diversity (in both identity and cognitive definitions) is cumulative: the marginalised are represented and the eyeline of the (consciously or otherwise) folk whose attitudes have led to marginalisation is extended.

Powerful knowledge is, indeed, a form of social justice, as Stewart and Thompson argue.¹²

It is complex territory but it is the right territory for the government's curriculum review to carefully explore. The commitment in the review's terms of reference to ensuring all children see themselves in the curriculum is right, and it is another way in which we can see our knowers as the jumping off point for decisions about what we teach – a way of bringing knowers into the light.

2. Knowers as an end of curriculum

Another way to consider the importance of knowers is to remind ourselves that we are shaping people. Through exposing children to the knowledge, skills, and experiences that make up the curriculum we are cultivating perspectives, dispositions, attitudes and so on. The knowledge is of course important, but part of its importance comes from how it changes us as knowers.

This is the opposite of an anti-knowledge position; it's more about means and ends. Zongyi Deng, one of the review panellists, makes this point: "knowledge is a vehicle for developing human powers—not something to be taught for its own end."¹³

In his exploration of the concept of 'Bildung,' Deng dissolves the false dichotomy of the 'skills vs knowledge' (or progressive vs traditionalists) debate by bringing knowledge and knowers together as follows:

A distinctive purpose of schools, as Young (2009) has rightfully argued, is the transmission of disciplinary knowledge that students cannot acquire at home.

Through their passing on disciplinary knowledge to the next generations, schools fulfil an important role in 'reproducing human societies' and 'providing the conditions which enable them to innovate and change'. This purpose, nevertheless, needs to be seen as inextricably intertwined with another (arguably) more fundamental purpose that, from the perspective of Bildung, is the formation of independent and responsible individuals for 'a future that is not yet known' (Uljen & Ylimaki, 2017). The formation as such calls for the cultivation of human powers which include, not least, self-determination, imagination, critically reflected action, and a sophisticated and informed understanding of the world (Uljen & Ylimaki, 2017; Willbergh, 2016). The set of powers can be extended to include many of those so-called twenty-first-century competences such as communication, problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, learning to learn, and intercultural capability (Carlgren, 2005; Willbergh, 2016). In other words, a knowledge-rich curriculum needs to be future-oriented because it is concerned with not only the present question of 'what should they [students] know?' but also the future question of 'what should they [students] become?' (Hamilton, 1999)

12 Stewart, F & Thompson, J (2021) *Powerful knowledge as social justice*, Confederation of School Trusts

13 Deng, Z (2022) 'Powerful knowledge, educational potential and knowledge-rich curriculum: pushing the boundaries', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54:5, 599–617

3. Teachers as curriculum-makers

The concept of 'bildung' is related to 'didaktik', which Deng defines as the educational substance, meaning, and significance which are to be interpreted and unpacked by teachers. Deng writes:

Through Didaktik analysis teachers are entrusted with a high level of professional autonomy to interpret the state curriculum guideline. They are viewed as curriculum makers 'working within, but not directed by' the state curriculum framework, informed by the idea of Bildung and the Didaktik way of thinking (Westbury, 2000).

Teaching is construed as a 'fruitful encounter' between content and students (Copei) – rather than a mere transmission of knowledge (Klafki, 2000). The teacher unlocks the potential of content by tackling its educational substance, ie. by analysing and unpacking its meaning and significance in terms of Bildung. He or she also opens up the 'potential' of specific students in class to experience what is opened up to them. In classrooms the (enacted) curriculum is knowledge-rich in terms of the potential – a world of possibilities.

For Deng, teachers draw on disciplinary knowledge in interpreting and unpacking the educational meaning and significance of content. Therefore, the fundamental task of teachers is not one of *transferring* disciplinary knowledge to students but one of using disciplinary knowledge as a tool for *unlocking* the educational potential of a piece of content.

So, a third interpretation of knower-rich national curriculum is the centrality of teachers, both individually and collectively as teams, as curriculum-knowers and curriculum-makers who interpret and transform the national curriculum into instructional events, in other words, the enacted curriculum.

Human Flourishing and the Curriculum

A knowledge-rich and knower-rich curriculum is a curriculum to enable human flourishing. CST has identified human flourishing as being a foundational concern of educational quality (Cruddas, 2023).¹⁴

At its core, human flourishing is about developing the whole person, encompassing not just academic success but also the cultivation of well-rounded, resilient individuals who can thrive in a rapidly changing world and live a good life. A truly enriched curriculum should support students' cognitive, emotional, and social development, encouraging curiosity, creativity, empathy, and self-awareness.

It should provide opportunities for students to connect their learning to their identities, values, and future ambitions. In this way, the curriculum builds from, and builds with, knowledge acquisition, aiming at fostering a lifelong engagement with learning, enabling all pupils to live fulfilling lives and contribute positively to society.

Human flourishing, therefore, is both an outcome of and a driving force behind a knower-rich education, nurturing capable, confident, and compassionate individuals.

¹⁴ Cruddas, L (2023) [Flourishing together – a reflective review](#)

Conclusion

The government's aim to build on the knowledge-rich work of schools in recent years is welcome. It is a sound position in both theoretical and practical terms. It is grounded in theory and evidence, and it would in any case be a significant capacity draw to push schools in a very different direction at a time when system capacity is stretched. It is welcome that the review's terms of reference recognise this.

But it is right too that the review seems poised to broaden and deepen how the national curriculum is conceived in the months and years ahead. The ideas sketched out in this paper show that it's possible to do this by bringing knower building more into the light. This does not require a turn away from knowledge. As Deng points out, quite the opposite: knowledge acquisition is done in the service of developing human capabilities.

A government or curriculum review panel seeking to theorise and explain the additionality that's hinted at in the review's terms of reference could do worse than to supplement the existing paradigm of knowledge-rich curriculum with the notion of a *knower-rich* education set out in this paper.







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