

Discussion paper

Knowledge, curriculum, and the work of education

September
2026



Confederation
of School Trusts

The voice of school trusts

Knowledge, curriculum, and the work of education

The 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review explicitly reaffirmed a knowledge-rich approach, describing it as one that develops deep understanding of subject matter and concepts through carefully sequenced teaching.¹ But familiarity can sometimes conceal complexity.

Professor Zongyi Deng is UCL Institute of Education's Professor of Curriculum and Pedagogy. He served on the Curriculum and Assessment Review, chaired by Professor Becky Francis, and is also general editor of the *Journal of Curriculum Studies*. He has held faculty positions at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and the University of Hong Kong.

Professor Deng has recently published a paper on the thinking behind the Curriculum and Assessment Review: [Understanding 'knowledge-rich curriculum' and 'powerful knowledge' in England's Curriculum and Assessment Review: a case for educational and curriculum thinking](#).

Professor Deng's work invites us to pause and ask a more fundamental question: What do we mean when we say that a curriculum should be knowledge-rich, and what makes knowledge educationally powerful?

This matters enormously for school and trust leaders. Because the danger is that "knowledge-rich" becomes a technical proposition about more defined content, tighter sequencing, more retrieval, more assessment, when Deng is making a much deeper argument about the nature and purpose of education itself.

His argument is, at heart, an argument about what education is for, what a curriculum is, and what it means to teach.

Education begins with purpose

The first question for any curriculum is not: What should children know? It is: What is education for?

This sounds obvious, but it is surprisingly easy to lose sight of it. Educational systems can become dominated by performance measures, examination specifications, and accountability. These things matter. But they are means, not ends.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review conceives the National Curriculum as a purposeful national undertaking concerned with preparation for life and work, democratic citizenship and holistic development. The Final Report speaks of enabling young people to "flourish as informed and fulfilled individuals, as contributors to our democratic society, and as members of a better-qualified workforce that builds economic prosperity."

Deng draws upon the European educational tradition of *Didaktik* and the idea of *Bildung* to recover a richer conception of education. Education is concerned with the development of human powers:

¹ Department for Education (2025), [Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all](#)



understanding, judgement, capability, and disposition. Knowledge matters because of what it enables a person to see, understand and become.

This is a profoundly different proposition from simply saying that children need to know more facts.

A knowledge-rich curriculum should enlarge the horizons of the learner. It should enable a child to encounter ideas that are beyond their immediate experience; to understand ways of thinking developed over generations; to ask better questions; to recognise complexity; to exercise judgement; and to participate more fully in the intellectual, cultural and civic life of the world.

The curriculum is one of the principal ways in which a society makes an educational promise to its children.

Powerful knowledge is the manifestation of educationally purposeful knowledge

The phrase “powerful knowledge” has been enormously influential in English education. It has helped correct an earlier tendency to undervalue disciplinary knowledge and to imagine that generic skills can somehow be developed independently of substantive knowledge.

Deng does not reject this “knowledge turn”. Rather, he asks us to take it further.

Knowledge is not powerful simply because it is difficult, specialised or academically prestigious. Its educational power lies in what it makes possible. This distinction is important.

A curriculum can contain a great deal of knowledge and still be educationally impoverished. It can become a catalogue of content, a sequence of things to remember, or a race to cover material before an examination.

The more important question is: What does this knowledge enable the learner to understand, think, imagine, question or do?

This is what Deng means by considering the educational potential of knowledge.

For school and trust leaders, this offers a useful test. When reviewing a curriculum, we should ask not only whether the content is accurate, important and well sequenced, but also whether we can explain its educational significance:

- Why *this* knowledge?
- Why *this* subject?
- Why *this* sequence?

And what becomes possible for a young person because they have encountered it?

Subjects are more than collections of knowledge

Deng’s argument also has an important implication for how we think about school subjects.



A subject such as history, mathematics, geography, science, literature, or art is not simply a collection of facts. Nor is it merely a reduced version of a university discipline.

A school subject is an educational construction. It draws upon bodies of disciplinary and specialised knowledge, but that knowledge is selected, organised, and transformed for educational purposes.

This means that curriculum design is an intellectual endeavour. Someone has to decide what is worth knowing, what should come first, what concepts are foundational, what relationships should be made visible and what kinds of intellectual activity pupils should encounter.

Curriculum leadership therefore cannot be reduced to implementation. It is an act of judgement. And this gives curriculum leadership a particular professional and ethical character.

The leader is, in a sense, a steward of knowledge: responsible for ensuring that children encounter the intellectual inheritance of previous generations while also ensuring that this inheritance is made meaningful and accessible to the next.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review retains a knowledge-rich, subject-organised curriculum while relating subjects to wider educational purposes. Subjects are to equip young people with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the world, contribute to society and pursue their aspirations, with skills developed “in conjunction with knowledge” in subject-appropriate ways.

Teachers are curriculum makers

Perhaps the most important implication for school and trust leaders concerns teachers. If curriculum is an educational construction, then teachers cannot simply be curriculum deliverers. They are curriculum makers.

The written curriculum matters. The National Curriculum matters. Subject frameworks and agreed sequences matter. But curriculum only becomes real in the encounter between teacher, pupil and knowledge.

Teachers interpret curriculum. They select examples. They anticipate misconceptions. They make connections. They decide how to represent difficult ideas. They judge when to slow down and when to move on. They connect new knowledge to what pupils already understand. They make the significance of knowledge visible.

This is professional work. It is pedagogical work.

It is why a genuinely knowledge-rich curriculum requires more than a well-written curriculum document. It certainly requires a curriculum document that is not over-specified and leaves enough space for teachers to bridge the gap between what is specified and the higher order aims. It requires teachers with deep subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and curriculum knowledge, and it requires the professional conditions in which that knowledge can be exercised.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review's Conceptual Position Paper explicitly conceives of teachers as “curriculum makers” who interpret and transform subject content in relation to



educational purposes, pupils and contexts.² This places professional judgement at the heart of curriculum enactment rather than treating teachers simply as deliverers of prescribed content.

The implication for school and trust leaders is significant. If we want powerful curriculum, we must invest in powerful professionalism.

A highly specified curriculum can sometimes create the illusion of consistency while simultaneously diminishing the very professional judgement upon which good teaching depends. The challenge is not to choose between coherence and professional autonomy. It is to build the kind of institutional coherence that enables professional judgement rather than replacing it.

Curriculum is a form of stewardship

There is a deeper leadership idea here. Curriculum is an act of stewardship.

Every generation inherits a body of knowledge, ideas, cultural practices, and intellectual traditions. We do not own these things. We receive them, interpret them and pass them on. Schools stand between generations. This gives curriculum a civic and moral significance.

The child who encounters Shakespeare, algebra, evolution, the causes of the Industrial Revolution, a great work of art, a scientific explanation or a philosophical argument is being invited into a world larger than their immediate experience.

This is particularly important for children whose lives may otherwise give them less access to cultural, intellectual, and social capital. A knowledge-rich curriculum can therefore be profoundly egalitarian. It is an act of social justice.

It can say to every child: "This knowledge belongs to you. These ideas are yours to encounter. You have a right to enter these conversations."

This is why curriculum is not simply about examination success. It is also about belonging. It is about access to the intellectual inheritance of humanity. It is about agency. And it is about the possibility that education can enlarge the horizons of a child's life.

The danger of turning knowledge-rich into a technique

There is, however, a warning embedded in Deng's argument. We should resist the temptation to turn "knowledge-rich" into a recipe.

There is a danger that an idea that began as a serious educational proposition becomes translated into a set of techniques: knowledge organisers, retrieval routines, curriculum maps, scripted sequences and compliance checks.

² Department for Education (2025), [Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report: Conceptual position paper](#)

These may all have their place. But none of them, by themselves, makes a curriculum educationally powerful. Indeed, the more we reduce curriculum to implementation, the more we risk losing the intellectual work that curriculum requires.

The question should therefore not be: *Are we doing knowledge-rich curriculum?*

It should be: *Are we thinking deeply enough about knowledge, subjects, teaching and educational purpose?*

That is a much more demanding question.



What should school and trust leaders do?

Deng's argument suggests five questions for leadership teams.

1. Can we articulate the educational purpose of our curriculum? Not simply what pupils will achieve, but what kinds of understanding, capability, judgement and disposition we want education to cultivate.
2. Does every subject have a clear intellectual rationale? Can subject leaders explain the distinctive contribution their subject makes to a child's education?
3. Do we understand the educational potential of the knowledge we select? Can we explain why particular knowledge matters and what it makes possible?
4. Are our teachers genuinely curriculum professionals? Do they have the subject knowledge, pedagogical expertise and professional space required to interpret and enact curriculum well?
5. Are we measuring what we value? If the purpose of education is broader than examination performance, our institutional attention must not become narrower than our educational purpose.

The most valuable contribution of Deng's work is not another definition of a knowledge-rich curriculum. It is a challenge to think more deeply. We should certainly resist the idea that education can be reduced to generic skills. Knowledge matters. Subjects matter. Intellectual traditions matter. What children know matters profoundly.

But knowledge is not the destination. Education is the destination.

Knowledge is powerful because it can enlarge human possibility. It can enable a child to see beyond the immediate and the familiar. It can give language to experience, concepts to thought, evidence to judgement and possibilities to imagination. It can enable children not merely to succeed within the world as it is, but to understand it sufficiently well to participate in shaping the world as it might become.

For school and trust leaders, this creates a particular responsibility. We are not simply managing the delivery of a curriculum. We are stewarding an educational inheritance. We are deciding, with teachers and communities, what is sufficiently important to place before the next generation. And we are creating the conditions in which teachers can turn that knowledge into educational encounter.

Perhaps, then, the question we should carry with us is not simply: Is our curriculum knowledge-rich?

It is the more demanding question: What kind of human possibility does our curriculum make available to every child?

That question takes us beyond curriculum design. It takes us to the heart of the work of education.





Confederation
of School Trusts

