School & College
CURRICULUM
DESIGN
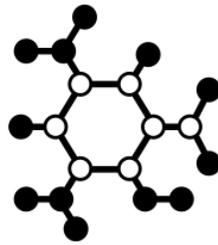
Book One:
INTENT

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Spark
BOOKS

DEDICATION

I am lucky: my job affords me the opportunity to visit countless schools and colleges in the UK and overseas. Ostensibly, I do so to share my expertise and experience which, let me tell you, gives me a sense of imposter syndrome. I'm particularly surprised when a school or college invites me back because they wish to hear more! But in so doing, I get to talk to and learn from so many wonderful colleagues – teachers, leaders, support staff all – who are dedicated to the education profession and determined to make a difference for the pupils and students in their charge.

It is fair to say my thoughts and ideas are continually reshaped and refined as a consequence of these inspiring interactions. Sometimes, my opinions are solidified because I see and hear hard evidence of their truth. At other times, my opinions are challenged and changed as they meet with the resistance of reality.

I therefore dedicate this book to the thousands of hard-working people who work in education every day and who have helped shape the ideas I share within these pages. They can take the credit; I will accept the blame for any errors or omissions.

FULL BOOK CONTENTS
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INTRODUCTION

This is the first of three guides to the school and college curriculum design process.

Taken together, this series will navigate you through the process of redesigning your school or college curriculum, in order to ensure it is broad and balanced, ambitious for all, and prepares pupils and students for the next stages of their education, employment and lives.

Our journey begins here in Book One with **curriculum intent** – the **'Why?'** and the **'What?'** of education. Book Two, meanwhile, tackles **curriculum implementation** – the **'How?'** of education. And Book Three concludes with **curriculum impact** – the **'How successfully?'** of education.

In *Part One* of this book on intent, we'll explore what the term 'curriculum' means and argue that a curriculum is a composite of at least four different elements: the national, the basic, the local, and the hidden curriculums. We shall also define the words 'broad' and 'balanced' and explore what a broad and balanced curriculum looks like in practice.

We will examine the primacy of the curriculum over teaching, learning and assessment, and defend curriculum's role as the master, rather than the servant, of education.

We will consider the purpose of education and, by so doing, determine the intended outcomes of an effective curriculum.

We will explore the vital role senior leaders must play in the curriculum design process whilst simultaneously defending the rights of middle leaders and

teachers – those with subject specialist knowledge – to create their own disciplinary curriculums with freedom and autonomy.

We will also explore the importance of creating a culture of high aspirations where each pupil is challenged to produce excellence. We will consider the centrality of social justice to effective curriculum design – using the curriculum as a means of closing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more advantaged peers.

In *Part Two* of this book, we will examine *why* designing a knowledge-rich curriculum matters because, contrary to popular opinion, pupils can't 'just Google it'. We will then discuss *what* knowledge matters most to our pupils' future successes and how to identify the 'clear end-points' or 'body of knowledge' of our whole-school or college - and indeed subject-specific - curriculums.

We will discuss ways of ensuring our curriculum is ambitious for all, including through a mastery approach whereby we set the same destination for all pupils and students, irrespective of their starting points and backgrounds, rather than reducing the curriculum offer or 'dumbing down' for some. We will talk, too, of modelling the same high expectations of all, albeit accepting that some pupils will need additional and different support to reach that destination.

In *Part Three* of this book, we will discuss how to assess the starting points of our curriculum, both in terms of what has already been *taught* (the previous curriculum) and what has actually been *learnt* (our pupils' starting points – their prior knowledge, and their knowledge gaps and misconceptions).

We will explore the importance of curriculum continuity, too, and consider the features of an effective transition process. And we shall look at ways of instilling a consistent language *of* and *for* learning.

In *Part Four* of this book, once we have identified both our destination and our starting point, we shall plot a course between the two, identifying useful waypoints at which to stop along the way – what we might term 'threshold concepts' – through which pupils must travel because their acquisition of these concepts (be they knowledge or skills) is contingent on them being able to access and succeed at the next stage.

We will explore the importance of having a planned and sequenced curriculum, ensuring we revisit key concepts several times as pupils travel through our education system but, each time, doing so with increasing

complexity, like carving a delicate statue from an alabaster block, each application of hammer and chisel revealing finer details and, in the case of curriculum sequencing, more - and more complex - connections to prior learning (or schema) that, in turn, will help pupils to learn more and cheat the limitations of their working memories in order to move from novice and towards expert.

We will explore how these 'waypoints' or threshold concepts may be used as a means of assessment so that curriculum knowledge – rather than something arbitrary such as scaled scores, national curriculum levels, GCSE grades or passes/merits/distinctions – is what we assess, by means of a progression model.

In *Parts Five* and *Six* of this book, we will turn to the subject of differentiation – arguing (as I say above) that all pupils deserve access to the same ambitious curriculum, no matter their starting points and backgrounds, and no matter the opportunities and challenges they face in life.

Of course, as I also say above, some pupils will need more support and will need more time in order to reach the designated end-points of our curriculum, and not all will do so, but we should not 'dumb down' or reduce our curriculum offer for disadvantaged, vulnerable or SEND pupils because by so doing we only perpetuate the achievement gap and double their disadvantage. Rather, we should ensure that every pupil is set on course for the same destination, albeit the means of transport and journey time may differ.

First, in *Part Five*, we will define excellence and explore the importance of 'teaching to the top'. We will look at how to model high expectations of all pupils. And we will look at ways of 'pitching' learning in pupils' 'struggle zones' (delicately positioned between their comfort zones and their panic zones where work is hard but achievable).

Then, in *Part Six*, we will look at ways of diminishing disadvantage - accepting that if we want to offer all pupils the same ambitious curriculum, we must also identify any gaps in their prior knowledge and skills, and support those pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities to access our curriculum and have a fair – if not equal – chance of academic success.

We will look at the role of cultural capital in closing the gap, arguing that vocabulary instruction (particularly of Tier 2 words) is a useful means of helping disadvantaged pupils to access our curriculum, but that this, in and of itself, not enough. Rather, we will assert that cultural capital takes myriad

forms and, as such, we should also plan to explicitly teach pupils how to speak, read and write in each subject discipline, and fill gaps in their world knowledge.

We will also look at how to make a success of in-class differentiation and additional interventions and support. And we will look at how to develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills in order to help disadvantaged learners to access our curriculum. Finally, we will examine ways of developing pupils' metacognition and self-regulation skills to help them to become increasingly independent, resilient learners.

This book, therefore, follows a six-step process of curriculum design as follows:

1. Agree a vision

2. Set the destination

3. Assess the starting points

4. Identify the way-points

5. Define excellence

6. Diminish disadvantage

PART ONE

AGREE THE VISION
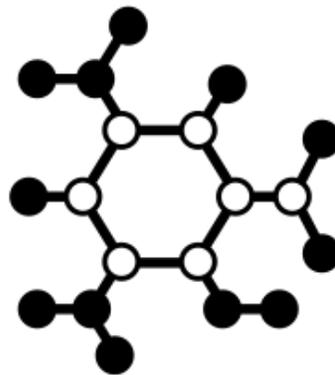
CHAPTER ONE
WHAT IS A CURRICULUM?

What is a curriculum? It's a simple question, isn't it, and, surely, before we can embark upon the complicated process of curriculum design, we must first understand what a curriculum actually is? After all, you wouldn't try to manufacture a widget without first knowing what a widget looks like, what it does, and how it works.

So, yes, it is indeed a simple question. But, unfortunately, the answer is not quite so simple…

For too long in our schools and colleges the curriculum has been synonymous with a timetable (the lessons we teach in structured blocks) and yet surely it is much more than this?

In a blog in October 2017 Ofsted's National Director, Sean Harford, said that "Without [the curriculum], a building full of teachers, leaders and pupils is not a school. If pupils don't get the benefit of a rich and deep curriculum then they will have learnt too little and made little progress."

Harford bemoaned the fact that, in recent years, "there has been a lack of reflection on the design, content and implementation of curriculums" and that, even today, there is "a lack of coherent debate and discussion about the curriculum."

To help reshape the discussion, Ofsted proffered a working definition of 'curriculum'. The curriculum, Ofsted said, is "a framework for setting out the aims of the programme of education, including the knowledge and

understanding to be gained at each stage" - what the inspectorate, in the EIF, now calls 'intent'.

The curriculum is also a means of "translating that framework over time into a structure and narrative, within an instructional context" - what Ofsted calls 'implementation'.

And the curriculum is also a means of "evaluating what knowledge and understanding pupils have gained against expectations" - what Ofsted calls 'impact'.

Even with this more detailed definition, many may regard the FE curriculum as synonymous with an awarding body specification and the school curriculum solely through the lens of the *national* curriculum. A curriculum is much more than what is prescribed in an exam specification or in the national curriculum – as we will discover shortly – but first let's define what is meant by the 'national curriculum'…

The national curriculum

We can trace the evolution of the national curriculum in England back to a speech by Sir James Callaghan at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1976. Certainly, this speech signalled the state's intention to assume a greater role in deciding, not just funding and facilities, but what was taught in its schools.

In his so-called 'Great Debate' speech, Callaghan argued that education should "equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both."

It took until the Education Reform Act of 1988 for Callaghan's dream to be realised. The 1988 Act led to the publication of a national curriculum which was officially introduced in schools in 1989.

The original national curriculum was a substantial document and contained attainment targets, programmes of study, and assessment arrangements. When it was first published, prime minister Margaret Thatcher famously decried she "never meant it to be this big". As such, each subsequent review of the national curriculum – including in 1995, 2008 and 2013 (with updates in 2014), has seen the documents slimmed down and simplified.

The current version of the national curriculum says that "Every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based and

which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life."

Furthermore, the national curriculum provides pupils with "an introduction to the core knowledge that they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said; and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement."

With this last sentence, the curriculum borrows from Matthew Arnold who said that "a good modern society can only come about when all of its citizens are educated in "the best that has been thought and said in the world".

In conclusion, then, the purpose of the national curriculum is to set out the principles, aims and content of the subjects to be studied by pupils in primary and secondary schools, and to ensure all pupils nationally encounter the same content and material that's considered important.

As such, the national curriculum, though certainly more insightful than a timetable, is still not the entirety of a school's curriculum; it is only those aspects afforded to all pupils nationally.

Dylan Wiliam, in his SSAT pamphlet, 'Principled Curriculum Design' (2013), said that "In recent years in England, discussion of the school curriculum has been all but absent. This neglect has been largely driven by the adoption in 1988 of a national curriculum for schools in England and Wales. Many teachers, leaders and policymakers assumed that because the government had specified what schools were required to teach, then no further discussion of the issue of curriculum was necessary."

Wiliam argued that this belief is mistaken for two reasons:

"The first is that the legal framework of the national curriculum specified only what schools were legally required to teach – any school was entirely free to teach whatever it wished in addition to the prescribed national curriculum.

"The second is that the real curriculum – the lived daily experience of young people in classrooms – requires the creative input of teachers. For example, the national curriculum may require that students learn about negative numbers, but the kinds of analogy that a teacher might use to teach this topic (e.g. heights above and below sea level, temperatures above and below zero, positive and negative bank balances, and so on) must be chosen with an

understanding of the students, their experiences, and a range of other contextual factors."

The real curriculum, then, is created by teachers, every day.

In fact, the 'real' curriculum in maintained schools consists of at least three distinct elements of which the national curriculum is but one:

1. **The national curriculum** which, as I explained above, is that prescribed by statute and consists of the core and foundation subjects.

2. **The basic curriculum** which describes the statutory requirements for curricular provision beyond the national curriculum, comprising the requirements in current legislation for the teaching of RE (within the guidelines of the local Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education), sex education, careers education, and opportunities for work-related learning. These are compulsory requirements, but schools are able to determine for themselves the specific nature of this provision.

3. **The local curriculum** which is one that schools are free to adopt in order to complement the national and basic curriculums with other curricular elements that are determined at school or community level. Often, these will reflect the individual nature of the school and its community, and perhaps its subject specialism(s).

Tim Oates et al (2011) argued that "Education can be seen, at its simplest, as the product of [an] interaction between socially valued knowledge and individual development. It occurs through learner experience of both of these key elements. The school curriculum structures these processes."

The QCA (2000), meanwhile, offered a broader definition which included "everything children do, see, hear or feel in their setting, both planned and unplanned."

The unplanned parts of the curriculum are often referred to as the 'hidden curriculum', a term first used by Jackson (1968). Jackson argued that what is taught in schools is more than just the formal curriculum and that schooling should be understood as a socialisation process whereby pupils receive messages through the experience of being in school, not just from what they're explicitly taught in lessons. The hidden curriculum, therefore, includes learning from other pupils, and learning that arises from an accidental juxtaposition of the school's stated values and its actual practice.

When designing a curriculum, therefore, we need to think carefully about all the ways in which pupils learn, not solely in structured lessons but also in the space between lessons and in the behaviours and values of the adults working in the school. As John Dunford (2012) puts it, "The school curriculum is not only the subjects on the timetable; it is the whole experience of education."

The curriculum, therefore, can be found, not just in a policy statement, and certainly not in the timetable or even in the national curriculum, but in the subjects and qualifications on the timetable, in the pedagogy and behaviours teachers and other adults use, in the space between lessons when pupils interact with each other, in approaches to managing behaviour, uniform, and attendance and punctuality, in assemblies and extra-curricular activities, and in the pastoral care and support offered to pupils… in short, in the holistic experience every child is afforded in school.

As well as the national, basic, local and hidden curriculums, it may be helpful to think in terms of the intended, enacted and real curriculums. The intended curriculum is that which is planned and written down in curriculum statements, schemes of work, lesson plans, resources and so on. The enacted curriculum is that which is actually taught and transmitted to pupils by teachers in lessons. And the real curriculum is that which is received and learnt by pupils, both in and out of lessons. Together, they form a pupil's whole experience of education.

Curriculum vision

Once you have clearly defined what is meant by the term 'curriculum' in your school or college, the next step, I think, is to agree and articulate a clear and shared vision setting out what you think is important and what you regard as the purpose of education.

The vision should, I think, comprise a list of the broad and rich learning experiences each pupil in the school can expect in each subject as well as outside of lessons.

This vision should make reference to the hidden curriculum and be cognisant of the fact that pupils' learning is not confined to the classroom; they learn from each other and from the way in which all the adults in school behave.

The reason I recommend you start the process of curriculum design with a vision is because this vision will provide the benchmark against which all subsequent decisions about curriculum content, structure, sequence,

monitoring, evaluation and review can be tested.

As such, I do not advocate the writing of a vision statement which is then locked away in a dusty drawer, but of engaging in a meaningful debate about why your school exists and what it seeks to achieve for its pupils and community, and why these purposes and aims are important.

Finnish education experts attribute much of their success to the driving force and guiding power of their curriculum vision which is: to improve access to previously under-represented groups excluded or restrained by poverty, ethnicity, [and] gender, [and] to provide for broader meta-cognitive and interpersonal skills requiring deeper learning to meet the needs of an emerging knowledge society with more sophisticated labour requirements and built-in instability.

Here are some questions to consider when drafting your vision:

- What are the desired outcomes of our curriculum? Are academic outcomes – including high grades and value added - enough on their own? What of progress from individual starting points? What else do we desire for our pupils?
- What will excellence look like? Will it always look this way? Will it be the same for all pupils?
- What does social, moral, spiritual and cultural development mean for our pupils?
- What does employability mean for our pupils? How can we support its development at all stages of education and beyond school?
- What do we really believe about our pupils, their potential, and their destiny? How does this translate in practice? How can we ensure high expectations – and high challenge – for all pupils not just the higher performing, compliant ones?
- What, ultimately, is the purpose of education at our school? Why?

It is, I think, the last question on the list that will influence your curriculum vision the most and yet it is perhaps the most difficult question of all… so, I would advise you start here and we will return to this vital question in Chapter Four. First, though, let us consider what is meant by the term 'a broad and balanced curriculum'…

CHAPTER TWO
WHAT IS A BROAD AND BALANCED CURRICULUM?

In the previous chapter I explained that we might meaningfully define the 'curriculum' as a pupil's or student's holistic experience of education – the national, basic, local and hidden curriculums; the intended, enacted and real curriculums. But what might make it both broad and balanced?

In June 2017 the Chief Inspector of Schools, Amanda Spielman, gave a speech at the Festival of Education in which she advocated a broad and balanced school curriculum. All too often, she argued, schools lose sight of the real substance of education: "Not the exam grades or the progress scores, important though they are, but instead the real meat of what is taught in our schools and colleges: the curriculum."

She said that, although education had to prepare young people to succeed in life and make their contribution in the labour market, "to reduce [it] down to this kind of functionalist level is rather wretched." Education, she argued, "should be about broadening minds, enriching communities and advancing civilisation," and "ultimately, it [should be] about leaving the world a better place than we found it."

So, a broad and balanced curriculum is, or at least to begin with, about ensuring pupils are prepared for the next stages of their education, employment and lives… that they are developed holistically, and leave school or college skilled and knowledgeable employees and well-rounded, healthy and active citizens of the world.

But what else?

The 2002 Education Act requires schools to provide a 'balanced and broadly-based curriculum' – a phrase echoed in the national curriculum – which: promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and; prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

Although only maintained schools are required to teach the national curriculum, all schools – including independent schools and academies – must meet the requirements of the Education Act. However, there are no legal requirements for any school about the methods of delivery of the curriculum or the amount of time allocated to each subject.

Colleges are not governed by the national curriculum but by government policies and acts of parliament which dictate, for example, that students who did not achieve a standard pass of grade 4 in GCSE English and/or maths must continue to study the subject(s) until the age of 18. Colleges are also governed by funding arrangements (for example, the coalition government of 2010, and Conservative government of 2015 focused sector funding on apprenticeship provision and a current review of FE is likely to recommend the abolition of several vocational programmes) and, in most cases, through the instrument and articles of government.

So, within these rather vague legal frameworks, how can schools and colleges ensure that their curriculums are broad and balanced and will, therefore, produce well-rounded young people who can succeed in life and work as well as stand up to the increased scrutiny of Ofsted post-2019?

The regulatory standards for independent schools provide a useful way of thinking about breadth. The standards require schools to provide a curriculum that gives pupils experience in the following areas: linguistic, mathematical, scientific, technological, human and social, physical, and aesthetic and creative, so that it promotes spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

A broad curriculum, therefore, might be regarded as one in which there are enough subjects on a pupil's timetable to cover all these experiences. Narrowing the curriculum for less able pupils or stretching GCSE study into Key Stage 3 clearly runs counter to this definition of breadth. A broad curriculum offers *all* pupils a wide range of subjects for as long as possible.

A balanced curriculum, meanwhile, might be regarded as one in which each subject is not only taught to all pupils but is afforded sufficient space on the timetable to deliver its distinct contribution. The danger here is that some subjects, such as art, music, and languages, are squeezed out of the timetable by English, maths and science. It is not uncommon for English to have five or more lessons on the timetable per week and art just one, or for the arts to operate on a carousel whereby design technology is only taught for one term of the year.

In his Ofsted blog, Sean Harford said that in 10 out of the 23 secondary schools inspectors visited as part of their consultation on the curriculum, school leaders admitted to "reducing key stage 3 to just 2 years". Whilst this might work for subjects where concepts are revisited at deeper levels (such as English and maths), "it doesn't work for all subjects, especially those that pupils drop before GCSE."

Amanda Spielman, in her speech at the Festival of Education, bemoaned this increasing "cannibalisation" of Key Stage 3 into Key Stage 4: "Preparing for GCSEs so early," Spielman said, "gives young people less time to study a range of subjects in depth and more time just practising the tests themselves." We have, she said, "a full and coherent national curriculum and [it is] a huge waste not to use it properly."

All children should study a broad and rich curriculum, she said, and yet "curtailing key stage 3 means prematurely cutting this off for children who may never have an opportunity to study some of these subjects again."

In short, Spielman said that schools had "a tendency to mistake badges and stickers for learning itself… [and put their own interests] ahead of the interests of the children in them."

"We should be ashamed," she said, "that we have let such behaviour persist for so long."

The 2019 Education Inspection Framework, as we have already seen, seeks to put an end to this behaviour and encourage schools – with the carrot and stick of inspection - to develop broader, more balanced curriculums that better prepare pupils for the future.

Though now outdated, the 2014 Common Inspection Framework (CIF) might provide some clues as to how Ofsted defines a broad and balanced curriculum…

In the CIF, inspectors were told to evaluate:

1. The design, implementation and evaluation of the curriculum, ensuring breadth and balance and its impact on pupils' outcomes and their personal development, behaviour and welfare.

2. How well the school supports the formal curriculum with extra-curricular opportunities for pupils to extend their knowledge and understanding, and to improve their skills in a range of artistic, creative and sporting activities.

3. How well the school prepares pupils positively for life in modern Britain and promotes the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect for, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith.

When designing and delivering a curriculum, therefore, we might infer from this the following:

- We should consider the curriculum in its widest sense – it takes place in and between lessons, in subjects and in extra-curricular activities, and it develops pupils' skills in a range of areas including in the arts and sport, and – although important – it is not solely concerned with the pursuit of academic outcomes.
- We should ensure our curriculum prepares pupils, not only for the next stage of their education and training, but also for their lives as active citizens and for success in the world of work, developing employability skills and work-ready behaviours, and educating pupils on their career options.
- We should think carefully about how, once we've designed the curriculum, we will implement and evaluate it in order to ensure it delivers its stated aims and continues to be relevant.

In FE settings, I think it useful to consider breadth and balance in the guise of the 16-18 study programme which already requires young learners to study, not just a main qualification, but also English and maths, and to engage in meaningful work experience (including a work placement) and enrichment opportunities.

The development of English and maths skills, and employability and wider (enrichment) skills must be integral to the programme of study each learner pursues and not regarded as 'add-ons' or distractions from the main academic, vocational or technical qualification. If this is to happen, the shape of the study programme must be made clear to learners and teachers and

their importance articulated loud and clear and often. What's more, the employability and enrichment opportunities must be relevant and meaningful to the main aim.

Further, what's good for young people is good for all and so a rounded study programme should be afforded to all learners in a college, irrespective of age, level of study, and area of study.

So far, we have defined the word 'curriculum' and described what a broad and balanced curriculum might look like in practice. Now let's consider *why* the curriculum is so important…

CHAPTER THREE
WHY DOES THE CURRICULUM MATTER?

The curriculum, as I have already said, is in the ascendency – in part because of its centrality to the new Ofsted inspection framework. Indeed, one of the best things about the new Ofsted framework is the fact that, after decades in exile, it's helped the curriculum be crowned king once more.

The curriculum - it's intent, implementation and impact - is front and centre in the new 'quality of education' judgment, which is the leading judgment. And the curriculum runs through all other areas of the framework like the letters in a stick of rock, notably in the 'personal development' judgment (whereby the curriculum is the means by which schools prepare pupils for the next stage of their lives) as well as in 'leadership and management'.

This – I think – is a positive step because, for too long, assessment means, methods and outcomes, not the curriculum, have held the sceptre in education.

Outcomes have been paramount – not just to Ofsted inspections but to the way the Department for Education measures educational effectiveness and indeed how they judge individual schools (including in the national league tables) and also to the way in which many schools and colleges are run.

Outcomes data (test and exam results, qualification pass rates and achievements, retention, value added scores and high-grade achievements) have been the primary means by which school and college effectiveness has been judged. Outcomes have often been the focus for senior leaders, too; underpinning teachers' performance management, and driving teaching and

interventions.

The *means* of assessment have also trumped the *meaningfulness* of assessment - for example, national curriculum levels became the primary method of describing pupil learning and progress in primary schools and at key stage 3, and yet describing a pupil as a '5a' or '4b' in, say, English, makes little sense because a level cannot possibly do justice to a pupil's grasp of complex curriculum content nor does an arbitrary level provide any useful information for pupils and their parents/carers about what a child can and cannot yet do and what that child does and does not yet know. The levels were never designed to be used in the ways they came to be used.

Assessment has been at the wheel for far too long, drunkenly swaying all over the road. But now, having failed the breathalyser and unable to walk the line, it's handed the keys to the curriculum, our new designated driver.

The real substance of education

HMCI Amanda Spielman has said that, with her new inspection framework, she wants to stop teaching to the test and focus on the real substance of education. Put another way, she wants to shift the emphasis from qualifications outcomes - though still important – onto the curriculum.

In this brave new world, assessment becomes - quite rightly - the servant and not the master of our education system.

I personally hope that, in light of this, schools not only spend time on developing their curriculum provision, re-professionalising teachers and middle leaders as subject specialists crafting ambitious and exciting curricula that reflect the nature of their subject disciplines and their schools and colleges, but that this also allows the curriculum to dictate the means of assessment, not vice versa.

In other words, our methods and means of assessment should be driven by the curriculum and therefore inform us if pupils are making progress through that curriculum, rather than be based on dubious, arbitrary numbers or letters.

When the national curriculum levels were scrapped, schools had the opportunity to design an assessment system that was meaningful and yet many schools replaced levels with levels-in-all-but-name. For example, some schools starting using GCSE grades from Year 7 and yet not only was this demotivating to pupils (because they started on, say, a grade 3), it was - if you

really think about it - a nonsense. GCSE grades are designed to assess pupils' achievements at GCSE not in key stage 3. In short, if you use grades 1-9 to assess pupils in Year 7 then you're using a car to cross the Atlantic or an ocean liner to navigate the M25.

If curriculum dictates assessment, however, it will tell you who has and who has not yet mastered certain aspects of that curriculum. For example, who does and does not know certain key concepts - or 'end points' to use the Ofsted parlance.

In fact, once you've identified the 'end points' of your curriculum (which we will do in Part Two of this book) these can be converted into curriculum statements or learning intentions which provide a ready-made means of assessment (as we will see in Part Four).

For example, if one such end-point of the English Language curriculum is that pupils have mastered the concepts of, say, explicit and implicit meanings (which is the first bullet under Assessment Objective 1 for GCSE English Language), then we could devise a set of curriculum statements - or checkpoints - through which they each must travel.

For example, they might first be taught to define the words 'explicit' and 'implicit', then be taught how to identify both explicit and implicit meanings in a non-fiction text. Next, they might be taught to explain why a writer has chosen to imply something rather than state it outright, and perhaps several different ways in which a writer could imply something. Then, they might be taught how to analyse the effects of explicit and implicit meanings on the reader. And so on and so forth.

Each of these 'threshold concepts' can become a simple 'can do' curriculum statement, assessed simply as 'yes' or 'no' - for example, "I can define the words 'explicit' and 'implicit'". This yes/no assessment tells us something meaningful and useful - concrete not abstract. It shows us how well and how quickly a pupil is travelling through our curriculum towards clear end-points. It shows us what pupils do and do not yet know and provides us - and indeed them - with tangible information on which we and they can act. It can inform our whole-class teaching, too - telling us what we need to go back and re-teach or re-cap.

As well as providing meaningful, actionable information to and about each pupil, the data can be aggregated to provide useful information about the effectiveness of the curriculum. For example, we can ascertain at any point, what proportion of pupils have acquired the expected standard or reached

the stage we had planned for and predicted. If they haven't, we know we need to revisit our curriculum model and the teaching strategies we have employed in order to ensure more pupils make better progress in future.

These end-points and threshold concepts will and should look different in each subject, of course. In Science, they may take the form of key (or 'big') questions; in Geography, they may be features of the natural or human landscape. It is important, therefore, that senior leaders allow their subject specialists the freedom to devise both a curriculum and a means of assessing that curriculum in a way that best suits the nature of the subject. We will explore this further in Chapter Five.

Having said this, senior leaders can ask some common questions of all subject leaders, such as:

- **What do you expect pupils to know?**

- **When do you expect pupils to know this?**

- **Why do you want pupils to know this?**

- **How will you know when pupils know this?**

- **What next?**

But senior leaders need to avoid the temptation to provide standardised pro forma for all their subject specialists to complete. And senior leaders need to accept that all subjects cannot conform to a whole-school curriculum and assessment mould.

We will explore meaningful assessment in Book Three of this series but, whilst we're on the subject, briefly, what else can we do to improve our assessment practices and ensure they are the servants of our curriculum rather than its master...?

Assessing the curriculum: Purpose, process and validity

Any discussion about improving curriculum assessment should, I believe, focus on three things:

1. Purpose

2. Process

3. Validity

Purpose

As a handy rule of thumb, whenever we ask teachers to engage in any form of assessment, we should ask ourselves: Why? What is the point of this assessment? How will this assessment - and the data we collect from it - help pupils to make better progress and improve the quality of education at our school?

If an assessment or data collection exercise is solely for management purposes (to produce a report to governors, say; or to generate pretty graphs to impress colleagues in meetings) rather than to actually help pupils make progress, then it should stop.

Of course, I know that it's not always as simple as this…

A teacher's time is finite and sometimes we also need to stop doing things that are indeed in pupils' best interests rather than for management purposes in order to afford us the time to do other things that are more impactful to pupils, or to cut a teacher's workload and make their jobs more manageable. As Dylan Wiliam sagely says, the essence of effective leadership is stopping teachers doing good things to give them time to do even better things.

Process

As well as considering the *purpose* of assessment, we should think about the *process* by which teachers are expected to assess, input data, and report the outcomes of assessment.

Here, it is useful we ask ourselves whether the process is as efficient as it can be or unnecessarily burdensome.

Consider also: when and how often are teachers expected to assess and input data? Are teachers expected to engineer a test for pupils or can data be gathered in a more holistic, synoptic way? How is the data inputted, directly into software or can teachers supply it in written form for the admin team to input? If it requires the use of technology, do all teachers have easy access to it? What will be the outcome of this data collection exercise? What will be done with the data afterwards and by whom?

As well as considering the time implications of data collection, it is wise to consider the extent to which teachers are trained in using the systems – including what you might consider basic spreadsheets as well as commercial software – and the extent to which they have the requisite skills to assess, record and analyse data, as well as act upon that data. Again, we should think about the opportunity cost, too. How long will it take a teacher to input this data and what else could they be doing with their time that might have a bigger impact on our pupils?

Validity

Finally, we should consider how valid the data they garner from assessments will be. By this, I don't mean how useful the data will be (we covered this under 'purpose', after all) but rather how accurate and useable it will be. In other words, although we may have confidence that the data will be very useful in helping pupils to make better progress (for example, by identifying 'at risk' pupils who require additional interventions, and by 'stretching' the higher-performing pupils to high grade achievement and good value added scores), the actual data we mine might not be as accurate as we hope and so all our subsequent actions may be futile or misguided.

To help answer this question of accuracy, we may wish to consider once again whether or not teachers have the requisite skills to be able to assess and provide data. Have we triangulated previous teacher assessments with actual validated outcomes? Have teacher assessments proven accurate in the past? Were some teachers' predictions way off-mark and, if so, have we identified any training needs? Have teacher assessments helped to predict eventual outcomes and therefore been useful in terms of identifying those pupils who are at risk of underachievement? Did the subsequent interventions prove effective? Sometimes we keep doing what we've always done because that is easy but, sometimes, we keep doing the wrong things. We should not be afraid to be bold and question seemingly unquestionable practices.

We may also wish to consider what is actually being assessed and if indeed that thing is assessable in a meaningful way. What, for example, are we comparing a pupil outcome to? Are those two things indeed comparable? Is the data we draw reliable and defensible? Is it, for example, possible at this stage to assess progress, or might we be measuring a poor proxy for progress? If assessments are used to measure progress over time, such as on a 'flight-path', is progress in this topic and subject actually linear? Should we be able to see nice neat contrails heading for the skies? Or is progress messier than this because pupils need to go backwards before they can go forwards, or because different things are being assessed in different topics at different

times? Succeeding in topic one might not, for example, mean that pupils will do even better in topic two because the knowledge and/or skills being taught in each may be different and/or unrelated.

To conclude, the curriculum is king, and this is a good thing because the curriculum needs to take precedence over teaching and assessment. What's more, assessment should not be based on arbitrary measurements divorced from curriculum content but should measure how well and how quickly a pupil travels through our curriculum and how successfully they learn – in other words, the extent to which they know more and can do more than they could previously.

If we are to take full advantage of this golden opportunity in our schools and colleges to design an effective, relevant, exciting and ambitious curriculum, then we should also ensure that we make our methods and means of assessment meaningful and useful.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE ROLE OF SENIOR LEADERS

In truth, the process of curriculum design is largely within the purview of middle leaders and teachers because subject specialists must design a curriculum that befits their discipline.

An English curriculum is distinct from a Maths curriculum, which is distinct from a Science curriculum and so on. The key concepts are different and will likely take different forms; the ways in which experts in each field think differ, too – for example, if you apply a scientific way of thinking to the study of Theology, it will fail, and vice versa.

Language and its meanings also differ in each subject – for example, to 'analyse' something in English is not quite the same as to 'analyse' something in History, Maths or Science.

The shape of the curriculum in each subject discipline is different, too – some are linear, some helical or spiral in nature – and so the time it takes pupils to progress through a curriculum and the path they must take is, by definition, different.

In some subjects, we may see a neat line of progress as pupils incrementally increase their knowledge and skills and build upon their prior learning. In other subjects, pupils will likely go backwards as well as forwards, or will succeed in one topic but then be required to learn a different, unconnected set of skills and knowledge, which means any attempts to extrapolate progress between the two points is meaningless. For example, a pupil may excel in football in term one, but might not be as adept at tennis in term two,

and so their progress, if a line is drawn between the two terms, may look negative when in fact we are comparing apples and oranges.

In short, each subject *is* a subject in its own right precisely because of the differences between it and other subjects, and so subject specialists must be allowed to design a curriculum that works in their discipline. As a secondary English specialist, I can design an English curriculum for key stages 3, 4 and 5, but I could not do so for Science or indeed for my own subject at key stages 1 and 2 without first deepening by knowledge of how pupils learn the knowledge and skills required at this level. Only subject specialists are equipped with the depth of knowledge and understanding to make decisions about curriculum design.

Remember what Michael Young said about powerful knowledge in the previous chapter: it is *systematic* in that it is based on concepts that are related to each other in groups we call disciplines rather than rooted in real-life experience; and is *specialised* in the sense it is developed by experts in clearly defined subject groups who work in fields of enquiry with socially and historically fixed boundaries.

It would be easy, therefore, for senior leaders to feel impotent, disenfranchised and divorced from the process.

However, I think senior leaders have five key roles to play:

Firstly, it is the responsibility of senior leaders to **agree the vision** for their whole school or college curriculum. This, as we have already explored, involves defining what is meant by the term 'curriculum' and making decisions about the national, basic, local and hidden curriculums.

Secondly, senior leaders – particularly the curriculum and timetable leads – are key to determining how broad and balanced the whole school or college curriculum will be and why. They must make decisions about **which subject disciplines and vocations matter most** and **which subjects are afforded the most time** on the timetable. For example, senior leaders must be attuned to their community and learner needs and if their school population predominantly has English as an additional language (EAL), they may decide to timetable more English lessons.

Thirdly, senior leaders **articulate the purpose of education** in their school or college – and therefore guide middle leaders in determining the broad 'end-points' (schools) or 'body of knowledge' (FE) to be taught. For example, senior leaders must have an overview of what qualification types and levels

are offered in their school or college, and must ensure that their offer meets local needs (including learner needs, employer needs, community needs, etc) and that each entry-point to their curriculum leads to a higher level of study and/or into meaningful employment rather than to a series of dead-ends. Only senior leaders have the necessary oversight of the whole school or college curriculum to be able to make these decisions.

Senior leaders can also help their middle leaders and subject specialists to determine the 'end-points' or 'body of knowledge' they plan to teach within their subjects by asking some broad questions about their curriculums such as those which follow:

Why?

- Why teach this subject? Why does it matter? In what way is it or will it be useful?
- Why teach this qualification? Why this level of study?
- Why (for examined courses) use this awarding body and this specification?
- Why teach this module/topic? Why is this knowledge more important than this?
- How does this subject relate to other subjects? How will you make the links explicit?

What?

- What do you expect pupils/learners to know and be able to do at the end of the topic/scheme/term/year/course/school or college?
- Why is this knowledge important? Who decides and why?
- What knowledge and skills will be most useful to pupils in the future? Says who? Is this likely to change?
- What knowledge gaps (inc. vocabulary) might some pupils need to have filled before they can access the curriculum? How will you identify the gaps and the pupils? How and when will the gaps be filled?

When?

- When do you expect pupils/learners to have acquired this knowledge/skills?
- Why then?
- What must be taught before and after this knowledge/skills? Why?

- How will the learning be sequenced? Is this a logical order?
- How will the curriculum build increasing complexity over time?
- Does each entry-point to the curriculum lead to a higher level of study and/or into meaningful employment? (If you offer a Level 1 course, do you also offer a suitable Level 2 course, and so on?)

How?

- How will this knowledge/skills be taught to ensure long-term learning? Will all teachers teach in this manner? How will you know?
- How will prior knowledge be activated? How will pupils be helped to transfer knowledge/skills from one context to another, and from the classroom to life/work?
- How will retrieval practice be built into the curriculum to ensure prior learning is kept active?
- How will the curriculum be spaced and interleaved to aide long-term retention?

Fourthly, senior leaders **create the culture** in which a curriculum flourishes. This, I think, has three layers:

1. **The staff culture;**

2. **The pupil and student culture; and**

3. **The learning culture.**

Finally, and perhaps most critically of all, senior leaders are the gatekeepers and defenders of staff skills and time. They have a duty to **provide appropriate training** to staff to ensure they are skilled at curriculum thinking, and they have a duty to **provide protected time** for staff to engage in the time-consuming task of designing, delivering and reviewing the curriculum in their subjects.

With a just focus on teacher workload, senior leaders must do all they can to prevent this renewed focus on curriculum design adding to teachers' workloads and must decide what to stop doing in order to carve out the time for teachers to focus their energy on 'the real substance of education'.

Over the course of the next three chapters, we'll now take a closer look at some of these five aspects of senior curriculum leadership: In Chapter Six we will look at creating the culture; in Chapter Seven we will look at teacher

professional development; and in Chapter Eight we will look at teacher workload…

PART TWO

SET THE DESTINATION
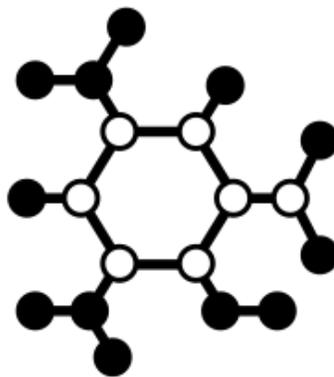
CHAPTER NINE
WHY KNOWLEDGE MATTERS

Earlier, I explained that, with its new Education Inspection Framework, Ofsted will shine a brighter light on the quality of school and college curriculums. This, I said, posed a problem because there is no agreed definition of what the curriculum is and should comprise. Whereas Ofsted believe it is "a framework for setting out the aims of the programme of education, including the knowledge and understanding to be gained at each stage," a means of "translating that framework over time into a structure and narrative, within an instructional context," and a means of "evaluating what knowledge and understanding pupils have gained against expectations," others promote a broader definition of the curriculum which comprises "everything children do, see, hear or feel in their setting, both planned and unplanned" (QCA 2000).

The notion of an unplanned curriculum – or a hidden curriculum – is important, as I explained in Chapter One, because pupils learn not solely through their experiences in the classroom, but also from other pupils, and through the accidental juxtaposition of a school's stated values and its actual practice. As John Dunford (2012) puts it, "The school curriculum is not only the subjects on the timetable; it is the whole experience of education."

The curriculum, therefore, can be found, not just in a policy statement, but in the subjects and qualifications on the timetable, in the pedagogy and behaviours teachers and other adults use, in the space between lessons when pupils interact with each other, in approaches to managing behaviour, uniform, and attendance and punctuality, in assemblies and extra-curricular activities, and in the pastoral care and support offered to pupils… in short,

in the holistic experience every pupil and student is afforded in school and college.

In Chapter Two, I attempted to define what makes a curriculum 'broad and balanced'…

A broad curriculum, I said, is one in which there are enough subjects on the timetable – for all pupils - to cover all the experiences deemed important by society. Narrowing the curriculum for less able pupils or stretching GCSE study into Key Stage 3 clearly runs counter to this definition of breadth. A broad curriculum offers all pupils a wide range of subjects for as long as possible.

A balanced curriculum, meanwhile, is one in which each subject is not only taught to all pupils but is afforded enough time on the timetable to deliver its distinct contribution. The danger is that some subjects, such as art, music, and languages, are squeezed out of the timetable by English, maths and science.

Before we consider why a knowledge-rich curriculum is important and then how we might decide upon the knowledge we wish to teach our pupils, first let's return to our debate about the purpose of education because only when we are clear about this purpose can we decide *why* we need to teach knowledge and *what* knowledge to teach…

In a 2014 speech, Michael Gove – during his tenure as Secretary of State for Education - set out what he regarded as the purpose of education. He said, "I want every child to be able to go to a state school which excels, which nurtures their talents, which introduces them to the best that has been thought and written, which prepares them for the world of work and adult responsibility, which imbues them with the strength of character to withstand life's adversities and treat other humans with courtesy and dignity, which gives them the chance to appreciate art and culture, to enjoy music and drama, to participate in sport and games, which nurtures intellectual curiosity and which provides a secure grounding in the practical skills the modern world requires."

In practice, the way in which Gove implemented his education policies prevented much of his vision from being realised and rather than afford pupils the opportunity to appreciate art and culture, and enjoy music and drama, the curriculum in many schools was narrowed to the academic suite of subjects contained within the English Baccalaureate. But – and I never thought I'd say this - Gove's vision is a good place to start when considering

why knowledge matters in our schools and why our curriculum has a duty to introduce pupils to the best that has been thought and written.

This last statement alludes to Matthew Arnold who, in 'Culture and Anarchy' (1869), argued that "Culture...is a study of perfection [and] seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light."

In the preface to 'Culture and Anarchy', Arnold argued that culture is the pursuit of "total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically".

Arnold was therefore arguing in favour of polymathy and a resurgence of the Renaissance Man... and I think we could do worse than shape our knowledge-rich curriculum around this Renaissance ideal…

A renaissance of the Renaissance?

The Renaissance is the name given to a period of European history which provided a bridge between the Middle Ages and modern history. The intellectual foundations of the Renaissance lay in 'humanism', a concept that derived from Roman Humanitas and the rediscovery of classical Greek philosophy, such as that of Protagoras, who said that "Man is the measure of all things."

This new way of thinking came to permeate the fields of architecture, art, literature, politics, and science. As a cultural movement, the Renaissance signalled a resurgence of learning based on classical sources, which contemporaries credited to Petrarch, as well as gradual but widespread educational reform.

The Renaissance began in Italy in the 14th Century but had spread to the rest of Europe by the 16th Century. During this time, Renaissance humanists studied classical Latin and Greek, and its authors began to use vernacular languages which - combined with the introduction of printing presses - allowed many more people access to books.

The term 'Renaissance Man' was first recorded in written English in the early 20th Century to describe great thinkers living before, during, or after the Renaissance.

The Italian painter, Leonardo da Vinci - whose impressive array of interests included anatomy, architecture, and art, botany, cartography, and engineering, literature, maths, and music, and science, sculpting, and writing - is often described as the archetypal Renaissance Man.

Da Vinci and other notable polymaths who lived during the period were called Renaissance Men because they had a rounded approach to education that reflected the ideals of the humanists of the time. For example, a gentleman or courtier of the era was expected to speak several languages, play a musical instrument, write poetry and so on, thus fulfilling the Renaissance ideal.

The universal

The idea of a universal education was essential to becoming a polymath, hence the word 'university' was used to describe a seat of learning.

At this time, university students did not specialise in specific subjects as is the case today, but rather trained in science, philosophy and theology. This universal education gave them a grounding from which they could build their mastery of a specific field through subsequent apprenticeships.

Today, we use the term Renaissance Man - or 'polymath' which comes from the Greek 'having learned much' - to refer to a person whose expertise spans a significant number of different subject areas, and who is therefore able to draw on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems.

If we are to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for our pupils, I believe we should return to this Renaissance ideal. Our curriculum vision should be to provide a broad and balanced curriculum which gives pupils a solid grounding from which, later, they can build their mastery in a specific field.

In terms of colleges, the Renaissance ideal can be achieved by ensuring every learner, no matter their age, level of study or qualification, is afforded a rounded study programme which includes opportunities to continue to develop their literacy and numeracy skills, their employability skills and other skills through enrichment opportunities. The 16-18 study programme already mandates this for young students, but the same broad curriculum

should be afforded for every learner and it should be meaningful and relevant, not a tick-box exercise.

In short, our curriculum vision should be to produce polymaths.

Having fixed on this aim, the big question is: how do we decide what core knowledge is included in our broad and balanced curriculum? And why, in this internet age, does it matter what knowledge pupils learn? I will now attempt to answer these questions…

Just Google it?

It seems to me the world is full of education experts. The people who criticise schools for their outdated pedagogy wouldn't dream of proselytising their views on medicine or law without having first qualified in these areas, but because they've been to school or their children are at school, they think they know what works and what doesn't.

Many of the highest profile commentators are what we might call 'outliers', successful entrepreneurs who themselves failed at school. They are the exceptions who think they prove the rule that traditional schooling doesn't work, is outdated, and doesn't prepare people for the world of work.

Virgin boss Richard Branson, for example, has said that, at school, "children are taught to pass exams rather than understand concepts and expand their minds" and thus schools are failing to teach the skills that are needed in the business world. He went on to say that "many children are set up to fail by a system that only cares about exam results."

Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, has bemoaned the fact that "every student [has to] sit in a classroom and listen to a teacher explain the same material at the same pace in the same way" and has argued that "students will perform better if they can learn at their own pace, based on their own interests, and in a style that fits them."

Every exam results day brings with it well-intentioned but ultimately unhelpful interjections from the likes of Russell Brand who once tweeted, "Good luck today – I didn't get any [A Levels] and still ended up with a job as a psychedelic bus driver", and Jeremy Clarkson who tweeted, "If your A Level results are disappointing, don't worry. I got a C and two Us, and I'm currently on a superyacht in the Med". As I say, some of these messages are, I am certain, well intentioned, reassuring young people that life is full of

second chances, but they also reinforce the message that education doesn't matter.

And yet education does matter. It matters to a young person's health – well-educated people are more likely to live long, healthy lives; it matters to a young person's success in life – well-educated people are more likely to vote and contribute positively to society; it matters to a young person's success at work – well-educated people are more likely to earn more in later life. Well-educated people are also less likely to become teenage parents and go to prison.

So, despite its detractors, education does matter.

Those who claim it does not often make the mistake of thinking we live in a world where technology has replaced knowledge and we must prepare young people for jobs that haven't yet been invented, perhaps by developing 21st Century skills. And yet, as E D Hirsch said, skill *is* content, and content *is* skill. A 21st Century skill such as creativity – which, according to Sir Ken Robinson, schools kill off – isn't really a skill at all; rather, creativity is a combination of many different skills which are specific to a particular discipline and require a lot of content knowledge.

Having said this, I do believe that pupils need to be taught traits such as resilience or grit, but not as an isolated 'skill' taught out of context; rather, resilience needs to be developed as the hallmark of an effective learner who willingly grapples with difficult tasks and finds a way through the quagmire towards clarity. Resilience is best developed in context when pupils face challenges head-on and - through trial and error and learning from their mistakes - find their own light in the darkness.

These 'experts' also believe the industrial model of education – whereby pupils sit in rows and are taught facts – is dead because we live in an internet age where you can 'just Google it'. Knowledge doesn't matter, they say, because knowledge is easily accessible on the web. What matters, therefore, are workplace skills such as team-work and problem-solving.

But there's a fundamental flaw with this argument: you can't just Google it because acquiring new knowledge requires existing knowledge and we process new information within the context of what we already know. E D Hirsch argues that, "Those who repudiate a fact-filled curriculum on the grounds that kids can always look things up miss the paradox that de-emphasising factual knowledge actually disables children from looking things up effectively."

Hirsch goes on to say that, "To stress process at the expense of factual knowledge actually hinders children from learning to learn. Yes, the internet has placed a wealth of information at our fingertips. But to be able to use that information – to absorb it, to add to our knowledge – we must already possess a storehouse of knowledge."

It may sound paradoxical, but it's a theory easily tested…

The cognitive scientist George Miller, for example, conducted an experiment whereby pupils were asked to look up definitions in a dictionary and then use those words in a sentence of their own construction. Miller was given sentences such as 'Our family erodes a lot' meaning they frequently eat out, and 'Mrs Morrow stimulated the soup' meaning she stirred the broth.

Commenting on Miller's study, Hirsch said that although "Miller is in favour of dictionaries in appropriate contexts where they can be used effectively… those contexts turn out to be the somewhat rare occasions when nuances of meaning can be confidently understood."

In his book 'Why Don't Students Like School?' (2009), the cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham says that "Thinking well requires knowing facts, [and] critical thinking processes such as reasoning and problem solving are intertwined with factual knowledge stored in long-term memory."

Knowledge really is power.

As John Sweller (2011) said, "Novices need to use thinking skills. Experts use knowledge."

Knowledge in long-term memory is essential in helping make sense of new information because, amongst other things, it improves reading comprehension and critical thinking...

Knowledge in long-term memory is essential for reading comprehension because, although the ability to decode words is transferable to different texts, pupils are more likely to understand a text if they have prior knowledge about the topic. Put simply, the more you know about a topic, the more effectively you can read a text on that topic and understand it. If I asked you to read a text on, say, nuclear physics or macroeconomics, you'd probably struggle to make full sense of it because some of the words would be unfamiliar and many of the concepts certainly would be. However, if I asked you to read an article on teaching strategies, you'd probably fare well, bringing

your prior knowledge to bear on the words and meanings contained within the text.

Knowledge in long-term memory is also essential for critical thinking. Critical thinking – often regarded as a transferable skill that can be taught in isolation – cannot occur if a pupil does not have sufficient foundational knowledge on the topic being discussed. In history, for example, in order for pupils to be able to reason effectively about chronology and cause and effect, they must know enough curriculum content. Teaching pupils about history in an abstract way doesn't work as well as arming them with lots of knowledge with which to better understand the way the world works. In maths, pupils need to be taught through worked examples rather than unstructured problems. And in science, pupils need to be taught the knowledge gained through scientific discovery not necessarily *how* science discovered that knowledge. Facts matter. Put simply, you cannot be critical about something of which you are ignorant (although, admittedly, that doesn't stop Nigel Farage from trying).

But not only is factual knowledge essential to reading comprehension and critical thinking, it's also a means of closing the gap between the attainment of disadvantaged learners and their non-disadvantaged peers, and this is the reason our curriculum should promote challenge for all not just the most able…

Building cultural capital

I mentioned cultural capital earlier when providing the Ofsted context because the new inspection framework explicitly mentions the importance of teaching pupils the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life. I will return to cultural capital again in more detail in Chapter Twenty-Three. But I'd like us to consider it here as a means of closing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more advantaged peers…

Educational disadvantage starts early - certainly before a child enters formal education. One of the reasons for this is that children born into families who read books, newspapers and magazines, visit museums, art galleries, zoos, and stately homes and gardens, take regular holidays, watch the nightly news and documentaries, and talk - around the dinner table, on weekend walks, in the car - about current affairs and about what they're reading or doing or watching - develop what's called 'cultural capital'…

In other words, they acquire an awareness of the world around them, an understanding of how life works, and - crucially - a language with which to

explain it… all of which provides a solid foundation on which these children can build further knowledge, skills and understanding.

Those children not born and raised in such knowledge-rich environments don't do as well in school because new knowledge and skills have nothing to 'stick' to or build upon. Put simply, the more you know, the easier it is to know more and so the culturally rich will always stay ahead of the impoverished, and the gap between rich and poor will continue to grow as children travel through our education system.

One of the aims of our broad and balanced school or college curriculum, therefore, must be to help the disadvantaged build their cultural capital and this takes one tangible form: vocabulary.

The size of a pupil's vocabulary in their early years of schooling is a significant predictor of academic attainment in later schooling and of success in life. Most children are experienced speakers of the language when they begin school but reading the language requires more complex, abstract vocabulary than that used in everyday conversation.

Young people who develop reading skills early in their lives by reading frequently add to their vocabularies exponentially over time. Department for Education research suggests that, by the age of seven, the gap in the vocabulary known by children in the top and bottom quartiles is something like 4,000 words (children in the top quartile know around 7,000 words).

For this reason, when designing our curriculum, we must recognise the importance of vocabulary and support its development across the curriculum – in lessons and in the space between lessons - so that pupils who do not develop this foundational knowledge before they start school are helped to catch up. Literacy – or 'the language of learning' – should permeate our curriculum plan.

Of course, diminishing disadvantage is not as simple as building word power – disadvantage takes many forms and is a complex subject. The solutions are, by necessity, complex too. We will explore other means of building knowledge and cultural capital later but, for now, let us remember the centrality of vocabulary to our curriculum.

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