

Does the curriculum matter? And, if it does, how do we make decisions about it?

In recent years the school curriculum itself has been largely absent from the discussions about how to improve schooling. Leadership, teaching, learning, character and, of course, the many assessment and examination changes have all attracted the headlines instead.

Through a small research project in 2017-18, funded through a grant from the Farmington Trust, I had the opportunity to look again at the school curriculum and its significance. My focus was on Key Stage 3 and my interest was in the decisions which headteachers and schools are taking about their curriculum and why this is important to them. I interviewed 19 heads about the decisions they had taken about their Key Stage 3 curriculum in the past 3 years, with some interesting results. I also discovered that some important things have been written about the curriculum in recent years, which should be better known.

One interesting outcome of this research was that, although no one is talking about it, the Key Stage 3 curriculum is at the top of the agenda for every Headteacher with whom I have spoken. This report explains why!

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PREFACE

Luke writes at the start of his Gospel that:

'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled amongst us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of things you have been taught.'

Opening to Luke's Gospel

Here is some inspiration for a hesitant writer about how to combine method and purpose. The simple word *also* acknowledges that there is a bigger scheme of things, to which his work makes a distinctive contribution. Therein lies also the challenge of writing up a Farmington research project.

30 days of study, snatched out of a typically busy year as a headteacher of a relatively small Church of England mixed comprehensive secondary school, can only add some insights to thinking about education. Yet it does nevertheless seem good to write up what I discovered through reading, reflection and interviews with headteachers about the school curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3.

I am spurred into action by a deep gratitude to those enabling this research year to happen: Dr Ralph Waller and the Farmington Institute for their belief in my project; the Governors of Archbishop Tenison's Church of England High School in Croydon for not hesitating to see the benefits; Nathan Walters, as Deputy Headteacher, for standing in for me when I could not be in school; Andrew Cook, Kathryn Eyre, and Neil Hart, as Assistant Headteachers for their understanding and support; Gareth Balch, School Business and Development Manager, for his encouragement; and Sue Rathbone, my PA, who had to handle many of the practical implications of my having two priorities for part of this year. The staff, pupils and students at Archbishop Tenison's have also supported this project willingly and with great understanding. Thank you. My thanks also go to Dr Tina Isaacs, my Farmington Tutor, whose guidance, insight and advice have been critical to me at different stages of this project. The last thanks goes to Anna, my wife, whose understanding was the greatest and whose patience the most necessary. Her sensible approach was, as usual, most wise!

INTRODUCTION

Why I chose this topic

When I became a teacher, curriculum development was a vital part of a school's work. It was, as Husbands (2015) recalls, at that time even seen as the most important component of what we now call school improvement. Two generations later, as the dust settles on the intervening period of a relentless focus on school leadership, teaching, learning and (sometimes) character, the curriculum is once again emerging from the shadows as something worth talking about. It is not, however, yet widely seen as having a dynamic role to play. This project, therefore, has come to be about a concept of the curriculum which is far from an 'inert idea' (Whitehead, 1941:p2). In measuring up to the challenge of providing schooling for all pupils (Whitty, 2010), including those who are socially or economically or even spiritually disadvantaged, this aspect of pedagogy is going to be a significant factor in our success.

The story begins in 2014: the National Curriculum was revised once again; the structure of assessment at Key Stage 3 changed. I suddenly remembered a basic principle of my work as a Head of Department, namely to start with (curriculum) change at Year 7 and work gradually upwards. As I thought about this, I could not understand why I had never done this systematically with anything in my first ten years as a headteacher. The following year, as we started our work collectively on writing new curriculum *Standards* for every subject at Key Stage 3, my part was to start teaching Latin to every Year 7 class. I had to set up a new department, plan a course with no history behind it, work out how to teach it appropriately, design formative and summative assessments and communicate its purpose to colleagues, pupils, parents, governors and others. Then came the challenge of progression into Year 8, organisation of groups and pathways and succession planning for the teaching and development of a new subject. It all depended on different forms of internal and external support, freely given. The challenges continue, but in the meantime Classics has become part of the school's DNA.

By this route the curriculum re-entered my thinking. Without it, something had been missing, a vital dimension of school leadership forgotten and an important key to school improvement lost.

Asking the right questions

This insight prompted the application for a Farmington Scholarship, available to headteachers for research linked to values underpinning schooling. The initial question was why the curriculum had been allowed to fade from view. It was an opportunity to reassert that the curriculum matters. Initial reading confirmed this intention, highlighted knowledge, memory and literacy in all its different forms, but did not yet form a clear, overarching question, translatable into sensible and achievable research. Dr Tina Isaacs, Farmington Tutor, advocated focusing specifically on Key Stage 3, the 'forgotten Key Stage'. This shaped the reading and interviews which followed. Johnson (2012) clarified the aim of research in schools – 'to understand' – and the method – 'to collect data' and reflect on it. Two closely related questions crystallised around (1) whether the curriculum does matter and (2) how we make decisions about it.

Does the curriculum matter?

Explaining the theme of the project to the Farmington Headteachers' Forum prompted one participant to observe that the school curriculum didn't matter, because it is essentially a vehicle for developing the skills needed for life ahead. According to this view, content is secondary to an overarching purpose. This project had to find the counter-arguments.

If so, how do we make decisions about it?

In practice, five aspects of any curriculum decision seemed important:

1. the decisions made, in this case about the Key Stage 3 curriculum in the last three years;
2. who took these decisions;
3. on what basis;
4. the factors which most influenced their implementation;
5. the criteria used to judge whether this decision was a good one.

At one level I hoped the answers to these questions from different schools and types of schools would reveal different conceptions of the Key Stage 3 curriculum. At another level, I wanted to see whether the aspects of good decision-making were clearly identifiable, applicable across schools and linked in a coherent way to other aspects of school development. Looking at the relatively unscrutinised and less regulated area of Key Stage 3 was expected to make this enquiry more possible.

What emerged from this research project

This research project established that our school is not alone in thinking hard about the curriculum. Although not talked about in recent years, particularly at Key Stage 3, the curriculum is being seriously thought about, as this set of semi-structured conversations with serving secondary headteachers demonstrates. It has also been much more written about than one would think. This pertinent theoretical perspective could make a radical difference to the quality of such curriculum decisions in the long-term future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. How much does the curriculum matter?

It can be quickly agreed that the curriculum as a factor in the quality and improvement of schooling has been neglected for some time. Changes have been driven by exam specifications at GCSE and A Level, OFSTED inspection criteria subsumed the curriculum into leadership and management and even their recent re-emergent interest in it only confirms its previously low status. Noting now ‘a lack of coherent debate and discussion about the curriculum’ (Harford, 2017:p1) and ‘a weak theoretical understanding of curriculum’ (Spielman, 2017:p3), hardly matches the idea that: ‘Without a curriculum, a building full of teachers, leaders and pupils is not a school.’(p2)

It is notable that even those thinking about these things have other preoccupations. Husbands (2015) reviews the place of knowledge in the curriculum, but concludes:

Knowledge matters, curriculum matters, but pedagogy probably matters most. (p49)

How we teach counts more than what we teach.

Wiliam (2015) also wants to say that: ‘Pedagogy trumps curriculum’ (p9). He argues for the uniqueness of every school’s curriculum and for curriculum development as part of the work of every teacher, but actually thinks that:

A great intended curriculum badly taught is likely to be a much worse experience for young people than a bad intended curriculum well taught.(p9)

No wonder curriculum planning ‘is rarely given enough time, is generally done by teachers working alone and tends to be done as an ad hoc activity’ (p3), if the real test is the translation of ‘the intended curriculum into the achieved curriculum’ (p11). When Wiliam calls the ‘failure to realise that curriculum is pedagogy ... one of the great tragedies of the last quarter-century in England’s educational system’ (p10), it seems to be only two cheers for the curriculum itself.

2. What is the relationship between the curriculum, teaching and learning?

The use of the word ‘pedagogy’ is perhaps confusing. When Young (Young & Muller, 2015) distinguishes helpfully between knowledge and experience, theoretical and everyday knowledge, and school and non-school knowledge, this brings a clearer understanding of the relationship between curriculum, teaching and learning. According to this logic,

‘While pedagogy necessarily involves the teacher in taking account of the non-school knowledge that his/her students bring into school, the curriculum explicitly does not.’

This makes the curriculum and teaching mutually complementary, the former distinct from the latter.

What we seem to have observed in recent years is the flattening of a fruitful triangular relationship (*Figure 1*) into a more superficial straight line (*Figure 2*), whereby the curriculum, as in what is taught and why, has been reduced to the unremarkable content of a well-taught lesson.

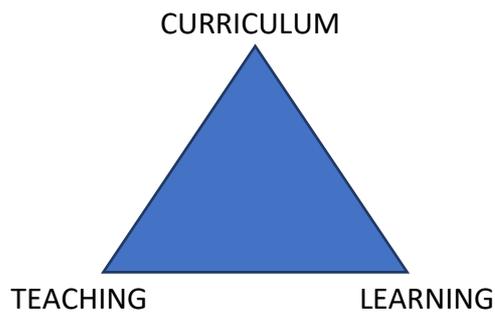


Figure 1



Figure 2

This prevents us from giving due attention to content, processes and outcomes (*Figure 3*); and to the proper balance between knowledge, understanding and skills (*Figure 4*). Our task is to keep alert to the theoretical, personal and practical dimensions of a pedagogy which includes all three elements.

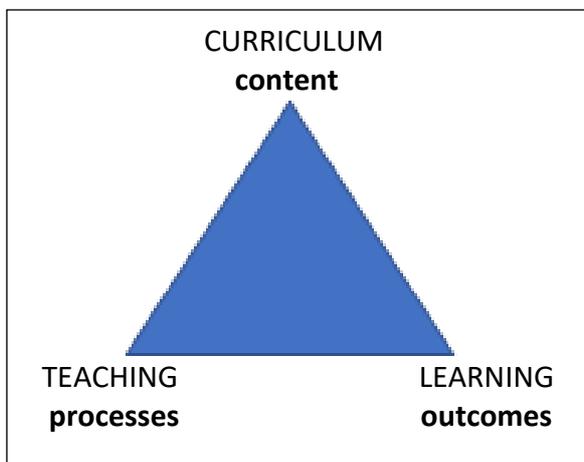


Figure 3

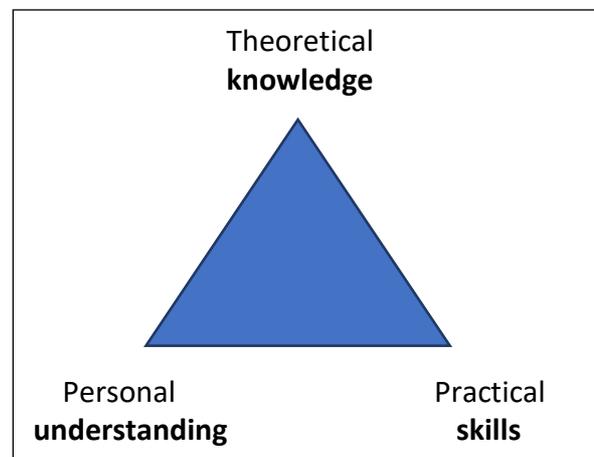


Figure 4

Young’s observation that the curriculum matters as something in its own right and is not reducible to a subordinate role in the pedagogical process is an important foundation for what follows. If the curriculum has moved from the foreground in the 1960s-1980s (Ross, 2000), and almost out of sight since then, it now needs to find its proper place in the scheme of things. One of the reassuring outcomes of my interviews with 19 headteachers is that all of them articulated clearly how the curriculum at Key Stage 3 was integral to their vision and thinking about their school. The school curriculum in this sense may be absent from conscious, public discussion, but it is being thought about, even if it is not being talked about.

3. What do we miss when we don't think about the curriculum?

At Key Stage 3 schools currently have freedom to develop both the curriculum and the accompanying assessment, as they see fit. It seems important to take this freedom and responsibility seriously. We have seen that this perspective cannot be taken for granted, but there are good reasons why we should do so.

a. *Vitality*

Whitehead (1929) makes a timely assessment of the problem:

English education in its present phase suffers from a lack of definite aim and from an external machinery which kills its vitality. (p20)

Livingstone (1941) opposes drift for a similar reason (p7):

'... our worst failures are due to the fact that we drift into and through education in a mechanical, automatic and unthinking way, instead of clearly defining to our own minds what we wish education to do for us and asking whether it is doing it and, if not, why not.'

Thinking clearly about the curriculum within a school brings a much underestimated energy to that school, a clarity about its purpose and an increased ownership of its central task.

b. *Coherence and progression across schools*

It is not just about what happens in a single school or phase. The succinct, but thorough *Curriculum Matters 2* (HMI, 1985), from the time before a National Curriculum, set out the argument for a coherent framework which held good for all schools: 'The 11 years of compulsory schooling should not result in a sequence of disparate and unrelated experiences' (para 4). Pupils should have access to 'a broad, balanced, relevant and coherent curriculum, irrespective of the schools they attend' (p1). They had seen the confusion, lack of co-ordination, piecemeal planning and 'wasted effort, experiments embarked on and left unfinished or unexamined, unnecessary repetitions, and, most of all the lack of agreement on fundamental objectives' which characterised the curriculum development previously (*Curriculum 11-16, 1977: p3*). 30 years of much more centralised control later, it is easy to be complacent and to disregard the value of a concerted, common effort across schools in curriculum development.

c. *Teachers' curriculum literacy*

There is also a legitimate concern about the calibre of a teaching profession which cannot reflect adequately on what Moore (2012) calls the basic questions (p27):

- What is education about?
- How does learning effectively take place?
- What are the purposes of this lesson or set of lessons?
- What is being achieved by them?

Such a level of reflection is absent from programmes based on a 'fidelity perspective' (Marsh, 2009: p101) which assumes that 'teachers have a low level of curriculum literacy, the planned curriculum must be highly structured and teachers must be given explicit instructions about how to teach it'. Such superficial initiatives cannot be sustained, when they are not genuinely owned by teaching staff.

d. *Clarity of educational thinking*

At a broader level human beings in all spheres are prone not to think things through adequately. Hirsch's critique (1988) is now well known, but still apt:

In the modern age the role assigned to our schools is to prepare our children for the broader activities of society and to train them in the literate public culture. Our schools have played this role less well than they should, chiefly because they have followed faulty educational ideas. (p110)

Hirsch (2016) follows this through by demonstrating how extended preparation for generalised reading tests in fact hampers students' ability to read well in the long term and prevents them from gaining a more secure basic knowledge of Arts subjects. Again he makes the connection between thinking, the curriculum and outcomes:

These historical facts, coupled with recent cognitive research, will add credibility to our view that our educational fate is largely controlled by ideas rather than by irresistible social forces. (p6)

Whilst most of his evidence is drawn from the primary phase, there are implications also for Key Stage 3 and for how the Key Stage 3 curriculum builds on what precedes it.

Hirsch's thinking has its own focal points, but the danger of constructing or adopting a poor curriculum by default is a concern often highlighted. Interestingly, Hirsch's critique applies to a curriculum model adopted relatively uncritically and often with professional acclaim in the United States and, more recently, France. We need a way of working which allows dearly held, but misguided assumptions to be questioned effectively (Christodoulou, 2013).

e. *What schooling contributes to education*

Livingstone (1941) is concerned with the school curriculum as a prelude to what follows – hence his determination to keep the curriculum properly balanced and not to allow it to become overcrowded. Livingstone's 'test of a successful education' was 'not the amount of knowledge which a pupil takes away from school, but his appetite to know and his capacity to learn' (p28). He applies the same principle to reading: 'if a school is unable to teach children to wish to read for themselves, it will be unable to teach them anything else' (p30). He is stringent about what is included in the curriculum: 'Too many leave school with the appetite killed and the mind loaded with undigested lumps of information. The good schoolmaster is known by the number of valuable subjects which he declines to teach' (p28).

Livingstone's argument is against two things combined: a confusion about the purpose of the school curriculum on the one hand with a neglect of adult education on the other. A good schooling at all levels is only the first part of the task. In forgetting adult education, it is as though we have built 'a railway from London to Oxford which ends in Didcot' (p9). There is more value in studying history and literature later as adults, informed by a significant life experience, but an initial value in learning these things in school. The training and pleasure given to young people, the resulting improvement in their powers of mind, a grounding in the facts which give pupils 'the hard skeleton of knowledge' and an imagination kindled by the sounds, pictures and historic characters are all benefits which accrue as the seeds are planted to 'lie dormant' until 'the quickening power of experience brings them to life' (p24).

For all these reasons – vitality, coherence, professionalism, thinking clearly and as the seed of a future education as adults – the school curriculum does matter.

4. What do we mean by the curriculum?

Harford (2017) complains that ‘much of the language used to talk about the curriculum is ambiguous’. In a related document, Spielman (2017) describes the curriculum as ‘the vast accumulated wealth of human knowledge (p2) and what we choose to impart to the next generation’ and later in the same paper asserts that: ‘The substance of the curriculum is a matter for government policy’ (p7). Here is the same term used differently in two ways, but without explanation and any awareness of other uses, in the same paper!

a. *Something unique to each school*

Oates clears some ground for us: the National Curriculum for England and Wales is actually not a curriculum but a national framework for core or curriculum standards (2015):

Used correctly the term ‘curriculum’ actually refers to the totality of the experience of learning. It encompasses aims, content, methods, assessment, evaluation ... and curriculum theory explains the distinctions between intended curriculum, enacted curriculum and actual learning outcomes, as elements of the experience of schooling. (p67)

William (2015) sees this misconception about the National Curriculum being the curriculum as responsible for the lack of curriculum focus in schools:

Every school’s definition has to be, by definition, unique, but ... schools can adapt and build on the work of others to design a curriculum that will meet the needs of the students. (p3)

Every headteacher I met had a strong sense of responsibility for the curriculum. Several noted the negative impact of funding or timing of changes made, but most welcomed and were exercising the increased freedom at Key Stage 3 since 2014. Some headteachers in challenging circumstances saw this autonomy very positively. There were also specific, named examples of how one school had built on what had been done in another.

b. *A vision realised*

Oates’ comprehensive view echoes Kerr (1968):

all the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school (p16).

Brighouse and Woods (2013) contend that a successful school motivates and energizes its pupils specifically with a wider definition of the curriculum: ‘that is to say, everything which happens at a school, not just within the timetable, but including assemblies, what happens at break-time and after school, as well as in residential trips and so on.’ (*C is for Curriculum*)

Kerr’s focus on planning with objectives combines with three other focal points of knowledge, school learning experiences and evaluation to give a broad account of how such curriculum planning works. Marsh’s (2009) trio of ‘planned’, ‘enacted’ and ‘experienced’ (p3) also seeks to do justice to the whole.

In response to the questions headteachers ranged widely with their examples of curriculum decisions. Analysing these decisions from the complementary perspectives of rationale, implementation and evaluation provided a full account of each decision described.

c. *Something theoretically defined*

Theoretical understanding of the curriculum (whether definitions, models or frameworks – Marsh, 2009) did not have a bearing on my interviews, except in the case of a school which was rethinking its whole curriculum from Year 7 upwards. Headteachers can be criticised for this gap (e.g. Spielman, 2017 – see above), but it may be more interesting as an example of trained professionals not having an adequate repository of specialist knowledge on which to draw independently in different and new contexts (Wheelahan, 2010). If theoretical knowledge is valuable for pupils (Young, 2015), then it must be doubly so for educators.

d. *Something socially constructed*

No headteacher referred directly to the curriculum as socially constructed (Moore, 2012). Lawton (1975) is much cited: ‘The school curriculum is essentially a selection from a culture of a society’ (p7). Wiliam (2015) explains such choices can be either explicit or implicit, often simplistically done, with consequences of which pupils are not conscious. The ‘problematic nature of human knowledge’ (Kelly, 2004: p16) or of the curriculum as something imposed by dominant social or economic groups did not feature in these interviews; the idea that pupils should cease being ‘passive recipients’ of reified knowledge and instead become ‘active participants’ in its creation was sometimes in the background (pp31-2).

Ross’s (2000) garden design metaphor proved a useful way of thinking with heads about the wider context in which such decisions are taken. Of his four models, neither the baroque, stylised, classical curriculum (p3) nor the individualised, landscaped model (p4) was much in evidence. Ross’s insightful observation about the 1989 decision that

The approach – which was to be used repeatedly over the next 18 years – was to describe an academic, subject-based curriculum as though it was a skills-based, utilitarian curriculum. (p38)

was reflected in the outcome-focused answers given, most often in relation to performance in particular subjects. The productive ‘Dig for Victory’ model of the curriculum (p5) may have much to commend it in these straitened times. The ‘cottage garden’ model of a ‘higgledy-piggledy mix’ of heritage, landscape and utilitarian elements is also useful to demonstrate Ross’s dictum that ‘the arbitration is very often unseen’ (pp6-7) and that a lack of expressed theoretical principles should not hide the philosophical choices being made.

e. *Something coherent*

Newman’s understanding of the unity of knowledge lay at the heart of his *Idea of a University* (1931) and is a remarkably powerful insight for our times, in which certain subjects are unashamedly privileged as ‘core subjects’ and others relegated to ‘options’. Newman explained:

I lay it down that all knowledge forms one whole, because its subject matter is one; for the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together, that we cannot separate off portion from portion and operation from operation, except by mental abstraction ... ’ (p50, cited by Robinson, 2004).

Scott (2017) similarly finds that the ‘Judaeo-Christian testimony to the creation of everything by God alone signals that the same intelligence stands behind all things’ and therefore that “knowledge in one area of science must make sense and correlate with another” (p257).

In recent writings it is otherwise only Edwards and Kelly's idea of an 'adjectival curriculum' which hints at this kind of underlying unity, although in their case the unifying factor is the experience of the individual pupil:

The main significance of employing adjectives rather than nouns to delineate the several dimensions of such a curriculum is that they can be seen as describing different aspects of what is essentially a single entity, the developing experience of the individual, rather than as discrete elements to be kept apart. (Preface: p xv)

Otherwise it is hard to find as strong a basis in contemporary writings for the breadth and balance of which official documents speak and to which headteachers are actively committed. And yet, if each subject is one segment of a whole orange, then every subject matters equally. If the lack of theoretical engagement with the curriculum (see c. above) tells anywhere, then it is probably most evident in a lack of overarching vision for the curriculum as a whole and for each subject within that whole.

5. How is the curriculum best organised?

a. From a pupil's perspective

Different writers concur (Ross, 2000 quotes Tomlinson, 1993, p83) that *Curriculum Matters 2* (1985) remains 'the best professional commentary on the school curriculum yet written'. The HMIs took the view that the curriculum is best understood from two essential and complementary perspectives: 'areas of learning and experience' and 'elements of learning'. In addition to cross-curricular themes, the nine areas of experience were to constitute a 'rounded education' (para 32) between them, to be 'a planning and analytical tool' (para 33) and 'not equated with particular subjects'. The aim was for each single activity to 'contribute to several areas of learning' (para 34). No one may refer to this now, but it continues to be a useful mapping and evaluation tool for any serious curriculum planner.

b. According to subject disciplines

Standish and Seghal Cuthbert (2017) have produced a compelling argument for the role disciplinary knowledge has to play in the school curriculum. They build on Young's argument (Young & Muller, 2015) about the difference between experience and knowledge, between theoretical and everyday knowledge, between the different knowledge domains and between school and non-school knowledge. They explain through several worked subject examples how school subjects grow out of recognised academic disciplines. This leads into an important justification for the value of the different disciplines and the related subjects. Wheelahan's work (2010) on this same argument in the completely different context of tertiary vocational education in Australia strongly supports this argument for the value of specialist knowledge within a recognised disciplinary framework. Wheelahan argues that:

Knowledge is central to curriculum regardless of whether the purpose is to prepare students for the academic disciplines or to prepare them for occupational fields of practice, even though the orientation and focus of knowledge in curriculum will differ in each case. (p155)

And the argument continues:

The purpose of academic pathways is to induct students into academic disciplines (p155)

Whilst all headteachers interviewed assumed a strong focus on subject disciplines in their thinking about the curriculum, I wondered to what extent this was for pragmatic reasons. Only a few did so with a real conviction about the value of this form of curriculum organisation.

It is interesting to me as a secondary headteacher that the Expert Panel (2011) in their review of the National Curriculum wanted to resolve a perceived lack of pace and ambition at Key Stage 2 with more subject specialist teaching in Years 5-6, whilst recognising that this was 'organisationally difficult to achieve' (para 5.4). In more general terms, their observation that:

International evidence is unequivocal that the most effective teaching combines subject knowledge with understanding of pupil needs and the resourcefulness and creativity to combine the two in the provision of high quality feedback (para 6.13)

seems to argue for a subject-based curriculum, albeit with strong pedagogy.

c. With aims in mind

White (2004) makes the case for moving in a different direction, starting with two mutually reinforcing aims – opportunities for all pupils to learn and achieve; personal, social, moral, spiritual and cultural development and preparation of pupils for opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life. This is the destination, and

‘School subjects are, after all, only vehicles to achieve certain ends; they are not self-justifying entities.’ (p1)

White would agree with Ross (2000) that “disciplines are themselves socially created and in flux” (p76). Reiss and White (2013) even argue that a subject-led curriculum ‘starts with, and so is constrained by, the availability of teachers capable of teaching certain subjects’, whereas an aims-led curriculum ‘starts with the needs and wants of the students’.

White (2004) understands that ‘curriculum planning cannot sensibly start with the curriculum’ (p6). For

... in the new school curriculum overall aims come first, subjects second. Schools’ first duty is not in the preparation of specialists, but with providing a sound, general education in line with subject-transcending aims (p14).

At this point it is worth pausing to consider these two very different approaches: subjects and aims. My judgement is that in the end White’s approach lacks substance and does not give us enough of a strong, conceptual framework for pupils’ learning. Oates (2011), for example argues the case for organising concepts which facilitate retention, develop economic mental processing and support analytic reasoning. Otherwise ‘the specific information embedded in concepts can decay into mere “noise” ‘.

White’s point about the inward tendency of subjects is well made; Schleicher (2010) similarly warns against ‘silos’; but this is more of an argument for a coherent framework within such subjects belong (see 4.e. above) than against subjects per se. Furthermore, White’s proposed approach cedes too much ground to a Kantian approach (Scott, 2017; Wheelahan, 2010), according to which our knowledge shapes reality rather than being responsive to it. Building on Philoponus’ definition of science as ‘the knowledge I come to of something under the compulsion of its independent reality’ (p41), Scott explains that:

The Christian educational tradition is to learn from what is taught, that knowledge comes from outside the learner, who is also taught to cogitate, process and manipulate what has been learned. (p86).

Wheelahan is concerned that knowledge should not be seen as ‘a finished product’ (p150), seeing disciplinarity as the tool for testing it as well as applying it with understanding. It is essential to her argument about the link between access to knowledge and social participation that knowledge is both securely and deeply founded, but also actively owned.

Robinson (2004) highlights Newman’s similar understanding about the provisionality of human knowledge and the humility involved in teaching:

There is other way of teaching or learning. We cannot teach except by aspects or views, which are not identical with the thing itself which we are teaching. Two persons may each convey the same truth to a third, yet by methods and through representations altogether different. (taken from *A Holistic Approach to Education*, 1826)

6. How should the curriculum be developed?

a. Practically

Schwab (1969) argues strongly for a very careful ‘deliberative’ approach to curriculum change, sceptical of the misuse of theory which is ‘unconcerned with the success and failures of present doings’. He wants alterations which are ‘piecemeal’, whilst ‘the functioning of the whole remains coherent and unimpaired’ and argues for ‘sensitive and sophisticated assessment’ to inform this process. Most of the changes which headteachers and principals described to me in the interviews were of this type, even if some of the changes made were bigger in scope than others.

b. Collaboratively

Marsh (2009) provides a comprehensive view of all those who can helpfully be involved in decision-making about curriculum change, including: teachers, who ‘have a major interest in their craft; principals, who ‘are the critical change agents’(p211); school boards, which provide ‘an ideal vehicle for parents & teachers to work together on curriculum decision-making’ (p210); or students, who ‘affect curriculum policy by mediating it’ (p212). He also identifies those outside the school, noting that academics are ‘less influential since 1996’ (p213), but that writers of popular textbooks remain ‘extremely influential about what is taught and how it is taught’ (p214). These examples point to a revealing aspect of the interviews, namely that the wider the involvement in the decision-making, the deeper the discussion went.

c. With attention to key principles

William’s booklet on principled design (2013), already referred to above, identifies how decisions can be made in a balanced, rigorous, coherent, vertically integrated, appropriate, focused, relevant way.

- ‘Balanced’ implies that: ‘Important elements have to be left out in order to create time for the even more important elements’ (p19).

- ‘Rigorous’ means that subject matter is taught ‘in a way faithful to the discipline or field from which it is drawn’ (p19).
- ‘Coherent’ complements this ‘internal logic’ by making ‘explicit connections between the different experiences young people encounter in school. (p25)’
- ‘Vertically integrated’ promotes progression in learning, showing how ‘material taught at one point in time builds on materials taught earlier and feeds in to what is taught later’ (p28).
- ‘Appropriate’ relates to the level of challenge for students.
- ‘Focused’ means being clear about ‘what the big ideas of a subject are’ (p36).
- ‘Relevant’ is about connecting the curriculum to the interests of the students, even creating such an interest where it does not yet exist, such that ‘good teachers get students interested in things they never knew they were interested in’ (p39).

The implementation of curriculum change is demonstrably a strength of the schools whose headteachers I interviewed. It is not clear, however, that those of us who lead schools are aware of this kind of systematic thinking as a basis for the decisions being taken.

7. What is the curriculum for?

Its purpose is accounted for in terms of what pupils should know, what sort of people they should become, how they should best be prepared for their life after school, what kind of society we want them to shape in the future and how it will prepare them for a lifetime of learning.

- Knowledge** – ‘the essential knowledge and understanding that all children should acquire’ (National Curriculum Review, 2014)
- Personal development** – ‘a new kind of person, ... actively enquiring, flexible, creative, innovative, tolerant, liberal ... able to face uncertainty and ambiguity’ (*Postman & Weingartner, 1971, as quoted by Moore, 2012, p165*)
- Preparation** – ‘to equip children ... for a lively, constructive place in society and also ... to do a job of work. Not one or the other, but both’ (Callaghan, 1976); or, more recently, Schleicher (2010) observed that ‘in the world of Google no one will pay you for knowing things’ and that ‘educational success is no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge to novel situations’.
- Society** – ‘though people can think for themselves, they cannot think by themselves. They think within cultures, associated with human societies.’ (Stenhouse, 1967)
- Learning for life** – ‘The test of a successful education is not the amount of knowledge that a pupil takes away from school, but the appetite to know and capacity to learn.’ (Livingstone, 1941, p 29)

William (2018) observes that: ‘Much of the time, these different aims do not conflict overmuch, and, indeed, can support each other’ (p13). The best descriptions of purpose combine the different elements in one, as Moore (2012) does:

‘such a curriculum seeks not simply to impart knowledge and skills for their own sake or to meet some functional end, but to produce informed, responsible citizens with a

capacity and an opportunity to live life to the full within a perspective that prioritises social justice both ‘at home’ and around the world’ (p165).

When, however, different understandings of the curriculum’s purpose become just an area of theoretical, social or political contention, with one purpose set against another or someone else’s emphasis caricatured, a genuine and fruitful dialogue is no longer possible.

In practice, the schools I visited were all engaged in all five aims, often at the same time. Where they disagreed was in terms of the sequence, with some schools talking specifically about Key Stage 3 or Year 9 as an opportunity to develop skills for future learning and others talking explicitly about a foundational knowledge which was needed. Reference to particular writings clarified what was meant in some cases, but not all.

8. Conclusions from this review

In concluding this Literature Review with this question we are able to see the value of the academic work done to give us a clear overview of the field, but also its ability to crystallise the issues in a balanced, yet pertinent way. It is not possible to neglect the curriculum or to relegate it with respect to teaching and learning. It is necessary to know why we are teaching what we are. It is important to understand the curriculum as a whole, to organise it correctly and to develop it fully. It is also good to have a broad understanding of our curriculum aims, whilst not neglecting any single, significant purpose. In terms of this research, the review strongly confirmed my understanding that there are good reasons for a well thought through curriculum being a critical part of any school at Key Stage 3.

APPROACHING THE INTERVIEWS – METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Having established the importance of thinking about the curriculum carefully, and also taking account of the different views of it and its purpose, I wanted to find out what decisions are being made about the curriculum in secondary schools, by whom and on what basis, as well as which factors are significant for their implementation and which criteria are being used to judge their success.

One reason for the focus on Key Stage 3 was that this area of the curriculum gave most scope for schools and headteachers to develop their own thinking and distinctive approach. Another was that the change to the National Curriculum in 2014 actually required schools to make their own decisions about how to plan and assess for this age group. A third reason was that in the brief review of literature I was able to do Key Stage 3 featured very little in its own right. There seemed to be strong evidence for this Key Stage being ‘forgotten’.

The particular questions were chosen for their place in the natural sequence of decision-making. I considered it important first of all to gain an overview of all relevant decisions taken, to ask headteachers to select the one they found to be most significant and then to probe the reasons for this. By asking about who took the decision, I wanted to find out how personally involved they were in this aspect of the school, but also how genuinely collaborative the decision-making was and how wide the ownership of the decision by other members of the school community. Asking about the basis on which the decision was taken gave an indication of any principles which informed it. The question about the factors influencing its implementation was to test my hypothesis that certain things would be common to any well implemented curriculum decision. The last question on success criteria was expected to be more of a formality in some ways, but actually turned out to be the most revealing.

A qualitative approach was adopted as being most suitable for this kind of enquiry, in which personal and institutional aspects of decision-making were being explored and quantitative data (about hours given to each subject in each year, for example) would have been of minimal interest. Given the limits of time for conducting the interviews, it was decided to use convenience sampling. In practice this meant that face-to-face interviews were possible in almost all of the schools in the Borough of Croydon which took part, accounting for 12 out of a possible 22 other secondary schools and giving me a good starting point. To this I was able to add a number of telephone interviews and one face-to-face interview outside the Borough, which provided a strong complementary view. The personal nature of the interviews allowed for a rich range of material to be gathered. The now relatively unusual context in schools of an in-depth conversation which allowed a headteacher to talk without being inspected in some way proved helpful and fruitful for both this research and for gaining a personal understanding of the priorities in different schools. Knowing some of the interviewees personally did not seem to prevent a well-focused, purposeful conversation, with an appropriate balance and objectivity. Not knowing others was equally not a barrier to an open and honest engagement with the questions.

In collating the data, I considered four different ways of presenting it, from (1) a factual review by topic to (2) a more considered reflection on the key themes and even as far as (3) particular case studies which would provide the anatomy of individual decisions. My preferred mode of reporting might have been a combination of all three approaches, but space and time dictated that it should be the second. This has produced a brief summary of the answers to each question, grouped in broad categories, accompanied by evaluative reflections.

It is my conclusion that the trends observed in this qualitative data fit with the concerns being articulated in current writing about the curriculum and what this writing suggests that we should do differently from now on, particularly if we wish the curriculum as it is now to cater for the needs of disadvantaged pupils as well as of others. For the challenges pupils face now, their schools must offer them a literate, knowledgeable, disciplined, holistic curriculum, in which expectations are explicit, progress well guided by accurate assessment and the path into adult education well signposted.

WHAT THE INTERVIEWS REVEALED

19 interviews with Headteachers of secondary schools were conducted during May and June 2018. In almost all cases I spoke directly with the Headteacher or Principal in person and in every case developing the curriculum at Key Stage 3 was a priority for that school. There was no evidence that the Key Stage 3 curriculum was not being thought about seriously. There was much evidence of it being a critical part of the school's agenda. I cannot speak, of course, for those who declined my invitation to be interviewed.

What decisions are schools taking about the Key Stage 3 curriculum?

When asked to identify the changes made to the Key Stage 3 curriculum over the last three years, headteachers came at the question from different angles: overall planning, certain innovations, time allocations for subjects, re-organising subjects or groupings, strategies for improving pupils' literacy and numeracy or new forms of assessment and reporting.

Once these changes were summarised, the conversation focused in on one particular decision, identified by the head as particularly interesting. Some were wide in scope: one principal was engaged in a full review of the whole secondary curriculum, starting with Year 7; six heads were concerned with the nature and purpose of Key Stage 3, including its length and relationship to the new GCSEs; two schools were moving to longer lessons for the whole school as a way of minimising movement and making time for more applied teaching. One Head was conscious that the change was certainly not to the 'broad-based curriculum, which we will always have here', but it was to the assessment processes, to ensure a greater challenge at Key Stage 3.

Others took the question particularly in the direction of changes to subjects: how they had been combined, or re-introduced, or given more time. A third group of responses related to questions of organisation: making classes mixed ability, for example. This was not considered an insignificant development in these cases. Five heads were particularly preoccupied with the development of literacy, numeracy and EAL provision. One highlighted the introduction of a programme for building pupils' emotional resilience. A visionary head explained how her school had constructed a values-driven approach to pupils' personal and social development which started in Key Stage 3, took on a different form at Key Stage 4 and then built into a much respected academic project at Key Stage 5.

Who is making these decisions?

In every case the head or principal was intimately involved in the decision described, in almost all cases as the person who made the decision. One Head acknowledged taking the decision against his own conviction as a way of recognising the professional expertise of two heads of department. In another school the role of the two deputies in making the evidential case to the headteacher was seen as important. In four schools there was a collective decision by the whole leadership team. In one case this meant debating the pros and cons in that team and then with the whole staff. In another case there was an impressive involvement of the wider school community, including parents and active consideration by Governors, as well as looking at internal and external research data, with one department taking particular responsibility for this process. This high level of collaborative decision-making reflected the fact that the school was agonising over the

decision about how to provide the best support curriculum for a large number of pupils with considerable difficulty accessing the school curriculum and that everyone knew ‘we have not got it right yet’. Perhaps most intriguing was the Head who set up a series of staff working groups to look at key areas of curriculum change and absented herself from them on the basis that she wanted staff not to be second-guessing what she wanted to hear.

On what basis are these decisions being made?

In almost every case the rationale for the decisions about Key Stage 3 curriculum began with the benefit for the pupils. For one principal this meant ‘who the students are when they finish here’ as ‘well-rounded, independent people who make a difference to the world’, but for most interviewees the focus was more tangible, more immediate and more practical. This benefit to pupils was in some cases emotional or connected with their mental health – ‘they are crying out for this’. In some cases it was above all things about increasing their engagement with their schooling, particularly their ability to learn, but also their enjoyment of individual subjects or of school as a whole. In at least half the cases, however, an explicit link was made to their performance at GCSE, whether in terms of giving them the skills to tackle the new exams or in reducing the anxiety they experience in taking them. Core subjects were specifically mentioned in this connection.

At the other end of the spectrum there was a strong focus on the improvement of the school, reinvigorating one type of subject, increasing uptake in another type, building on strengths in a third. Such a decision could have been driven by staff or leadership development at a significant time of change, or, more prosaically, by the need to save money, clear the deficit or conveniently cover gaps in staffing. Striking under this heading was the principal who wanted to ‘fulfil our vision of comprehensive education’ in this way. One head wanted ‘to establish the principle of fairness’, both ‘being fair and being seen to be fair’ in a way which meant a more equitable distribution of staff workload and access to the curriculum as well as more inclusive attitudes towards certain groups of pupils. This one set of decisions about the curriculum had very far-reaching consequences for the school, the teaching staff and the pupils. Given that this particular school was entering a period of substantial change, it was significant that curriculum change was the key vehicle for it.

Mentioned in passing, usually after some prompting and with less depth of analysis to support them, were the reasons rooted in the nature of the curriculum itself. One principal did refer directly to his vision of ‘a more rigorous, subject-based curriculum, which sets pupils up for life’, articulating the understanding that this is the reason why these subjects have been ‘around for generations, even for centuries’. One head grounded his decision to stick with a three-year Key Stage 3 in the offer of a breadth of subjects, taught by specialist teachers, ‘who love their subject and want to share it’ in a way distinctive from their experience at Key Stage 2. He saw the purpose of these three years as giving pupils ‘time to work out what their talents and skills are’, something which he saw as even more important now that GCSEs are harder and students are back down to three subjects for A Level. But the one-dimensional answers of making subjects work better for pupils and even ‘increasing their vocabulary’ did not seem to answer the deeper question of the vision, content, purpose or even organisation of a school curriculum adequately.

There was one headteacher who proved the exception to this trend, in identifying how departments in his school assessed pupils at Key Stage 3 as the most interesting decision made. In his description of the redesigning of the curriculum in terms of core concepts and defining what a pupil at that school should know, do and understand by the end of Key Stage 3, there was evidence of a compelling and coherent curriculum vision, which informed departmental planning, individual teaching and pupil progress. Behind this lay a genuine concern with the academic transition from Key Stage 2 and the provision of good information for the Key Stage 4 teachers. When this head also talked of making the language of these concepts explicit for pupils and of evaluating how far this was happening, then it became clear that this kind of thinking was well embedded in that school. There was another headteacher who could describe this process, having experienced it in a previous school, but was yet to make it a reality in his current school. There was also a third headteacher whose motivation was articulated in the phrase that ‘our curriculum was not sufficiently values-based’. She wanted more thought to go into what was being taught, because she wanted staff to work less hard and with more impact, and for departments to have ‘permission’ not to teach what they did not think important.

Which factors were significant for the implementation of this decision?

Planning was immediately highlighted in almost all cases as critical for successful implementation. One head observed that, with, for example, the challenge of differentiation, ‘it all comes down to the planning’. The more impressive the thought being given to the decision-making process, the greater the level of collaboration in this planning and the greater the emphasis on both ‘staff buy-in’ and ‘lead-in time’ – one head commented that they increased this lead-in time as a result of listening to the staff. In some cases this planning went back a long way, to include the school budget, staff appointments, or, even in one case, the reduction of staff in particular subject areas, whilst in another it meant establishing a whole new department. In another school it meant a complete restructuring of pastoral responsibilities, as a way of giving those closer to the decisions a greater responsibility for making them work. In many cases it involved staff training, the most striking example of which was insisting on other subject specialists taking a GCSE exam in a subject they were going to have to teach as part of a new course in Year 7. Good subject leadership also featured strongly under this heading.

Heads and principals seemed very much at home in answering this question. When they had finished with planning, they moved seamlessly on to teaching. Most were highly concerned with who was teaching this new curriculum. An executive principal defined ‘the right staff’ neatly as those who are ‘strong in the classroom, have status in the school and status with the staff’. She was not alone in knowing that her curriculum change would stand or fall in the teaching of it. Another principal exuded a palpable excitement about the prospect of the curriculum change described being implemented by a strong team of new staff starting in September. One of the strongest examples of curriculum change was a course which involved trained primary teachers teaching nearly a third of the secondary curriculum in Year 7; the principal of that school explained how the increased expectations of the teacher, who knew what these pupils could do, the quality of engagement with the pupils, the clear direction and purposeful questioning and the tight organisation of the classroom all contributed to its marked success.

Most of those interviewed, however, needed to be prompted to give an insight into how the pupils themselves contributed to the implementation of the decision. Once prompted, however, they acknowledged this as an important factor: ‘the pupils love these subjects’; ‘there is a level of anticipation and excitement amongst our pupils about better teaching and more access to GCSE subjects’; and, for that principal excited about his new team of staff, an admission that: ‘Stability is important to our pupils, so their reaction to fresh faces and their confidence in these new, very experienced staff will be important’.

Which criteria will you use to decide whether or not this decision was a successful one?

Unexpectedly, the answers to this question proved quite predictable and superficial. It is true that there were quite frequent references to attendance, behaviour, engagement, progress in particular subjects, reading ages and even quality of drama and music performances, but the default answer was somehow inevitably GCSE results, as though this was the only thing which mattered and the only possible way of knowing whether the curriculum in the first two to three years of a pupil’s secondary education was as good as it could be. This included those of their subjects which would not be directly assessed at GCSE.

As already indicated above, there was one headteacher with a very clear vision of how assessment at Key Stage 3 could, should and, in his school, does link to the design of the curriculum in each subject. Most impressive here were the processes of self-review, involving both staff and pupils, which accompanied this thorough assessment. This head described the conversations held with Heads of Department to make this evaluation sufficiently qualitative. In terms of pupils’ understanding what he was looking for was the language of concepts being made explicit, as a sign that these were being clearly taught and genuinely understood.

One other principal also expressed a clear vision of what assessment would look like throughout the school and of how this would link specifically to the school’s own regular, systematic and confident review of its own curriculum at Key Stage 3. A third referred to a system of assessment which would give the school good progress data with which to work, but was at the same time sceptical of the reliability of any internal data. A fourth head was genuinely troubled by the problems of Key Stage 3 assessment, how to achieve parity, how to identify effectively where a child was and how to provide the appropriate intervention at the right time. His solution to this was imaginative: periodic assessment weeks, assessment grouped by subjects to reduce their number, a set of eight wide-ranging assessment criteria to be used across the whole curriculum. Since this was only at the planning stage, it was yet to be seen how feasible this was in practice.

More subjective criteria did prove more interesting, such as the idea that staff enjoyment of their teaching of the curriculum could be a significant success indicator. For some Heads staff well-being was an important sign and for others their willingness to take responsibility for the change. In an honest response to staff endorsement of the change, the head welcomed this, but asked: ‘What are their motivations?’ Pupil responses to the change, too, were judged important. These heads and principals were often pastorally minded and motivated, wanting to see good signs of increased confidence and happiness in the faces of their pupils and less stress and anxiety about their later exams. They expected to see this in the corridors and on the playgrounds, in the way they looked at their books together at

lunch-times and in their contentment in the classes in which they were placed. The Head who affirmed that ‘I have seen what happens to pedagogy when you don’t get the curriculum right’ was not alone in taking this view of things. The effect of making good curriculum choices is indeed not to be underestimated.

This also emerged from the more long-term success criteria which were mentioned. Getting the Year 7 curriculum right had, in the view of inspectors, given pupils in one school ‘a flying start to secondary school’. In another case a Head who had taken a particular view on the length of Key Stage 3 was going to wait two years for national data on the relative success of schools with different models of the Key Stage 3 curriculum before he could assess whether his belief was, as he thought, the right one. An ambitious third principal wanted his school’s revised curriculum to give students from the lowest social deprivation index access to ‘middle class values of support and encouragement for developing the person’ which would then enable them to succeed, achieve and contribute as ‘independent, resilient students’. Such broad aims were refreshing to hear; it is less clear how they could be effectively (and objectively) assessed.

Is there anything else you would like to say about the Key Stage 3 curriculum?

The breadth and balance of the curriculum matters to Heads. They may take different views, for different reasons, of the right length for Key Stage 3, but they almost all valued its distinctive contribution to a child’s education. This was either as a foundation for what comes later or as the arena in which important choices are made and pedagogical relationships formed or simply as the make-or-break time in which pupils gain lifelong access to a literate life. One head expressed her dismay at the overpowering effect of the Key Stage 4 curriculum on Key Stage 3, making it almost impossible to keep some subjects going because of the reduction of later choices. Another described it as his moral duty not to let children down by making it too easy for them to reject Arts and other such subjects too early in their education. One Principal regretted deeply the loss of a national benchmarking system at Key Stage 3 – ‘it was the silliest decision to take away levels and not replace them’ – although he was a lone voice on that count.

CONCLUSIONS

One initial conclusion from these interviews

The Key Stage 3 curriculum is high on the agenda for secondary headteachers. Taking decisions about it means very different things to different school principals in their different school contexts, but they are united in acknowledging that what pupils learn between the ages of 11 and 13 or 14 has a decisive effect on at least the quality of their educational outcomes at 16 (and possibly also at 18) and at most on the course of their lives as a whole. There is no evidence of the subtle external constraints found by Harris & Burn (2011); rather, heads seem free to make their own decisions about this aspect of their schools.

Headteachers are thinking about the aspects of the curriculum in these years both holistically and in finer detail. They are not doing so alone, but often in close collaboration with their senior colleagues and, in the best examples of good practice, in discussion with members of the wider school community. Evidence is a welcome part of such decision-taking, but there is rarely a wider conversation about this with other secondary schools, even those in similar circumstances. There is little awareness of or reference to what has been written about the school curriculum academically in recent years. The thinking about this vital area of schooling is being done mostly by schools and heads in isolation. The exception to this is perhaps the growing conversation with local primary schools about transition between phases, especially as a part of Multi-Academy Trusts, but, here too, there is no evidence of academically informed reflection about curricular content, organisation and purpose. Changes are made, but in a temporary, reactive way.

A second, more tentative conclusion, which needs further exploration

What is happening at Key Stage 3, away from the spotlight of external examinations, national data comparisons, exhaustive analysis of educational outcomes and all the preoccupation this creates with the survival and reputation of a school, is probably a far better indicator of curriculum health than in any other phase of secondary schooling. For here, since 2014, schools have been broadly at liberty to set their own curriculum standards for their own pupils and to develop their own expertise. It is telling, therefore, that they both take this freedom seriously, but also that they broadly abdicate responsibility for evaluating for themselves whether the curriculum they are offering is the right one. They are equally reluctant to use their own forms of assessment and self-review to determine this. From this small and very limited sample of interviews it is possible only to infer a more general conclusion. If one were to do this, one would say that we have schools with a strong and genuine concern for the young people in their care and that this pastoral concern exercises a positive influence on the decisions they make about the school curriculum. These schools also leave no stone unturned to give these young people access to the good teaching necessary to make this policy a success; they know well how to implement carefully taken curriculum decisions wisely and effectively. But these same schools also lack the academic tools and opportunities for the wider discourse which would enable them to reflect more deeply on what they are doing in this respect. They therefore do not have the confidence to assess and evaluate their provision in these two to three years accurately on its own terms. This means that properly thought through assessment and evaluation is left until after their GCSEs have been completed and is too late to inform the preparation of young people for these exams during Key Stage 4. Given the importance of these exams for

both pupils and their schools, it is deeply ironic that the undue predominance of those exams in the secondary school imagination should have precisely this effect.

A positive way ahead

What would it look like if we as schools, and as headteachers and principals, were to enter into a wider conversation about the curriculum at Key Stage 3? What would happen if we took our places around the academic table as informed, respected and responsible decision-makers, eager to listen and to learn from recent research and time-honoured principles and able to contribute to shaping future discourse, research and development?

Here is what I think, from my limited reading, would emerge:

1. A literate curriculum

Recent research strongly indicates the prior importance of a high level of literacy for accessing the secondary school curriculum. More work needs to be done by and with schools about what it means to be literate and how we can best enable that development in all young people from the first day of their secondary schooling (and in the primary phase, too). Excellent work has been done on how to increase pupils' vocabulary and awareness of language (e.g. Beck, McKeown and Kucan, 2013), but to be literate means far more than this. Steiner (1971), for example, links literacy to the Bible (Authorized Version), the Book of Common Prayer, culture, hymnody, habits and, above all, memory, bemoaning both the 'catastrophic decline of memorization in our own modern education and adult resources' and the 'organized amnesia of present primary and secondary education' (p84).

2. A knowledgeable curriculum

Hirsch (1988) and Willingham (2009) have made a convincing case for a literate curriculum being a knowledgeable curriculum, i.e. that we are better able to read, talk and write about that which we know. Hirsch (2016) demonstrates persuasively that preparation for superficial literacy tests only achieves so much and that a broad and balanced formal curriculum is what really counts for all pupils, regardless of their immediate background, particularly at Key Stage 3.

3. A renewed appreciation of different subject disciplines

Rather than enter a superficial debate about knowledge vs. skills in the curriculum, it would be better to think again about the proper basis for a disciplinary approach to the curriculum, as Wheelahan (2010) and the contributors to Standish and Cuthbert's (2017) thoughtful volume advocate. Their helpful distinction between everyday and specialist knowledge is a good way into the recognition of the distinctive contribution which a school can make to a young person's education and which each subject can make to the whole. Understanding how a subject discipline is the best context for developing both literacy and knowledge, as well as a framework for applying such knowledge in a discerning way, addresses the concerns on both sides of the artificial knowledge-skills divide. This also provides an important corrective to the overemphasis on certain 'core' subjects at the expense of others and this could be the route back to greater parity of esteem for certain subjects at A Level, too, if this pattern is set from the beginning of secondary schooling.

4. Coherence

The curriculum at Key Stage 3, however, should not be viewed atomistically. It must cohere as one whole (Newman, 1852), allowing the significance of each subject to be seen and valued within the school community and giving the curriculum the breadth and balance which is so important to headteachers and at the heart of any concept of entitlement (Oates, 2011). As *Curriculum Matters 2* (1985), stressed, coherence is seen in the relationships between subjects horizontally, but also vertically, as pupils move through different phases and key stages.

5. Specialisation

Schools have to specialise in the teaching of their own pupils. This includes making the curriculum appropriate for them, in the light of both their previous experience and their particular gifts and talents.

First of all, this is about communication: a common language of pedagogy which allows pupils, from Year 7, to know clearly what is being offered to them and expected of them. Numerous theorists (Wheelahan, 2010; Ross, 2000; Young & Muller, 2015) pay tribute in this respect to Basil Bernstein's insistence on clear communication and organisational principles being vital, if socially disadvantaged pupils in particular are to enjoy access to this broad and balanced school curriculum. Leaving this concern until later (i.e. Key Stages 4 and 5) is a recipe for disaster. Secondly, it is about curriculum design: helping them to find those interests which they did not know they had (William, 2013) and hence allowing space for options, even at Key Stage 3.

Thirdly, it is about taking Key Stage 3 (and Key Stage 3 pupils) seriously. Somewhere within each subject there has to be the specialist, technical language and understanding which will give pupils a unique sense of progress and achievement and which will spur them on to further study. It could be on the sports field or in the art studio, in the literature class or the science laboratory, but it has to be there somewhere, if their particular gifts and talents are being recognised.

6. Progress

Our renewed focus in recent years on pupil progress must be retained.

Christodoulou (2016) has explained and demonstrated how a proper understanding of both formative and summative assessment needs to be part of the professional thinking of all classroom teachers and subject leaders. This is most critical at Key Stage 3, when it is the school's own responsibility to assure that any assessment is timely, well-informed and accurate.

7. A better understanding of the purpose of schooling

Necessary to all of the above is Livingstone's humility about schooling (1941). It is, after all, only the first part of the journey – and Key Stage 3 is only the first part of the first part, according to that analogy. We must hear again Livingstone's rallying call, echoed by William (2013), to cut back on curriculum content in what is only schooling. Pupils have to enjoy their learning at Key Stage 3. Then they will want to take their education further.

How can this be achieved? In the first instance, we should seek to develop some *worked examples* of what this looks like. The schools which I visited and whose headteachers spoke with me so hospitably all have their stories to tell. And they should be told more widely.

For a proper worked example of how tradition, action, reflection and change were incorporated into the practice of a particular teacher and community, I commend an example from a different educational phase and setting: Smith's (2011) exploration of how to teach students to read German texts attentively and with a Christian attention to what matters. All the elements are there of what a worked example of Key Stage 3 curriculum change could look like, incorporating the literacy, knowledge, disciplinarity, coherence, specialisation, assessment and enjoyment talked about here.

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