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Policy

Why The 'Instructional Core' Is Key To Curriculum Reform

David Hopkins sets out how any debate about the nature of the curriculum needs to be carried out in the wider context of its links to the fundamental nature of education and overall school improvement strategy.

CURRICULUM REVIEW

As someone whose overarching goal as an educationalist has been to occupy that space bounded by the vertices of policy, research and practice, my enduring view of debates on the curriculum is that they have been far too restrictive.

I believe that any view of the curriculum must accommodate both the development of student autonomy and learning skills, together with a view on how both content and skills are acquired through what is termed the

instructional core. When I was in Government in the second New Labour term, we used the phrase 'Personalised Learning' to describe this approach to the curriculum.[1]

What does it mean to be educated?

One way of both pinpointing the curriculum issue and drawing the argument together is to pose the question 'What does it mean to be educated?' at any particular phase of education. Being educated at any phase of learning has four central elements:[2]

- **a breadth of knowledge gained from a curricula entitlement;**
- **a range of skills on a developmental continuum that reflects increasing depth at ages 7, 11, 14, 16 and, in many cases, 18;**
- **a range of learning experiences; and**
- **a set of key products, projects or artefacts.**

It also means that students are sufficiently articulate to:

- **sustain employability through basic skills;**
- **apply their knowledge and skills in different contexts;**
- **choose from and learn in a range of post-14 study (assuming an entitlement curriculum up until then);**
- **draw on wider experiences to inform further learning and choice.**

Personalised curriculum at all stages of education

Most National Curricula do not meet these desiderata. Although the following proposals were originally based on my original work on the Key Stage 3 (11-14) curriculum in England, they represent a broader attempt to imagine a structure that enables schools and teachers to personalise the curriculum across all stages of education.
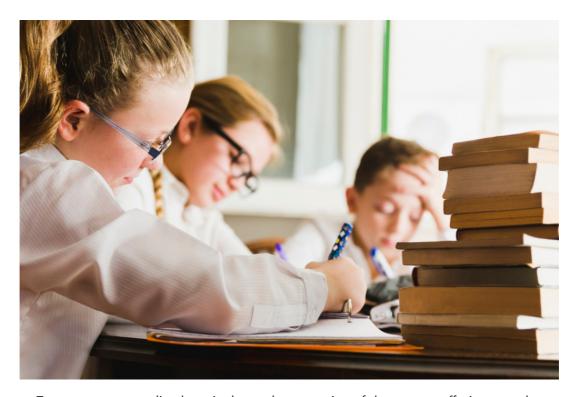
The first is to **focus on core study**. Functional literacy, numeracy and communication could be clarified as expected attainment at the end of the KS3 curriculum. ICT would also need to be explicitly added to a suggested core of mother tongue, maths and science. Functional skills would similarly need to be embedded across the curriculum.

The second would be a **condensed statutory curriculum in non-core subjects combined with an optional entitlement**. In many countries, this is referred to as the 'essential curriculum'. This means that the statutory curriculum content and processes in non-core subjects would be reduced.

As a rule of thumb in most national systems, this would mean that the content removed would be approximately 20-25% of current specifications. The reduction could be re-designated as an optional entitlement. The entitlement would make up a number of components in the breadth of study currently set out for each subject. Schools would be required to teach a minimum number of components.

Third, the flexibility of an **optional entitlement** would allow schools to guarantee time to:

secure essential knowledge and teach common learning skills through the curriculum;

organise the curriculum to meet the needs of a range of abilities, tailoring support for underachieving and underperforming students, and stretch gifted and talented students.

To create a personalised curriculum, a large portion of the current offering must be made optional.

Fourth, there needs to be **clarity on common learning skills**. This requires that a common framework of skills be identified across the whole curriculum.

As is seen later, this would include enquiry, problem-solving, creative thinking, information processing, reasoning, evaluation and communication. Students would develop each skill to a deeper level as they progressed through each stage of the curriculum.

It is also necessary to look systematically across non-core subjects to consider how the spread and transmission of skills could best be improved to develop learning and raise attainment.

Finally, there is a need to **champion effective pedagogy**. There needs to be external support to help schools organise the curriculum to meet the needs of a range of abilities. It must also help teachers bring curriculum knowledge and common learning skills together in the classroom.

The clear prize from pursuing these actions would be a curriculum tailored to the needs, talents and aptitudes of all students. This would ensure that every student had the core and common skills required to learn at each stage of education and that the best students were properly stretched.

What has been written so far is probably consistent with many of the contributions to this special issue of Professional Development Today (PDT). It also underplays, as I said at the outset, two of the most vital features of how curriculum delivery positively affects student progress: (i) the importance of the curriculum in promoting the learning skills of students, and (ii) its role in delivering the 'Instructional Core', in particular the setting of the instructional task.

Learning Skills and Metacognition

The clear implication from the discussion so far is that:

> At the heart of personalised learning is its impact, not just on test scores and examination results, but also on students' learning capability. If the teacher can teach the student how to learn at the same time as assisting them to acquire curriculum content, then the twin goals of learning and achievement can be met simultaneously
>
> Hopkins (2010)[3]

There is now an increasingly sophisticated literature on how children learn[4], the different types of multiple intelligences[5] and the descriptions of a range of learning styles.[6] This fundamental work has also encouraged the development of programmes for building learning power, such as those captured in Guy Claxton's popular '4 R's' model.[7]

The deployment of such a range of learning strategies is commonly termed metacognition, which can be regarded as the learner's ability to take control over their own learning processes.[8] It is important to note the power of metacognition to impact student performance. In his meta-analysis, Hattie calculates an effect size of 0.69 for 'metacognitive activities (thinking about thinking) that include planning how to approach a given learning task, evaluating progress, and monitoring comprehension.'[9]

Even such a brief discussion of metacognition as this requires mention of the seminal contribution of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his articulation of the 'zone of proximal development'.[10] There are two key ideas here:

> **The first relates to the necessity to focus instruction at that margin between what the learner already knows and what they potentially can learn. Ensuring that teaching occurs within the learner's 'zone of proximal development' is a meta-principle for personalising learning.**
>
> **The second aspect of Vygotsky's theory is not just identifying the learning zone, but how to operate within the zone. It is here where the concept of scaffolding is so important. A scaffold is a temporary support that is used to assist a learner and is gradually withdrawn as learners become more competent. Providing scaffolds is a form of guided practice.[11]**

Many schools in our Laboratory School and Unleashing Greatness networks reinforce and articulate a consistent set of learning skills in displays around the school, within classrooms and in the rubrics that students use. As part of the Unleashing Greatness strategy, we have developed the Being a Learner Framework (which can be downloaded from [my website](#)):

Being Creative

Being a Participator

Being an Enquirer

Being Reflective

Being a Self-Manager

Being a Team Worker.

The framework also identifies the range of practical skills that constitute each element and then describes them at three levels of performance. Elaborating the range of learning skills in this way enables students to be more explicit and specific about their acquisition of metacognitive capabilities.

The Instructional Core

The argument of this article is that the curriculum should not be viewed as an isolated artefact but as an essential component within a dynamic educational infrastructure: hence the emphasis on learning skills above and now briefly on the Instructional Core. The phrase belongs to Richard Elmore – 'the instructional core is composed of the teacher and the student in the presence of content.'[12] There are three features of this definition that require particular emphasis.

The first is that one element of the instructional core cannot be changed without impacting directly on the other two. Yet most change efforts focus on only one. The core needs to be regarded as a whole if authentic improvement in student achievement is to occur.

It is the relationship between the teacher, the student and the content – not the qualities of any one of them by themselves – that determines the nature of classroom practice. In our own work, we have elaborated Elmore's original definition to include not just the curriculum, but also learning skills, assessment and teaching, as seen in **Figure 1.**[13]

Figure 1 – The Instructional Core (Hopkins 2024:131)

The second feature is more subtle and even more important. It is a realisation that the 'instructional task' is at the centre of the instructional core. The instructional task is the actual work that students are asked to do. It is not what teachers think they have asked students to do, nor what the prescribed curriculum says they should be doing, but what students are actually doing.

We must continuously remind ourselves that it is the tasks that students undertake that predict their performance.[14] Unless we focus on the instructional task, we can have no confidence that learning will be enhanced and, consequently, the outcomes of educational reform will remain capricious.

Thirdly, we need to locate the curriculum within an overall school improvement strategy. Elmore maintains that there are only three ways to improve student learning at scale – in other words, more than just one or two classrooms:[15]

1. Increase the teacher's knowledge and skill in pedagogy;
2. Strategically increase the level of complexity of the content students must learn over time;

3. Change the role of the student in the instructional process – by giving them more responsibility for their own learning.

Taken together, these principles have the potential to create a new culture of teaching and learning within the school, particularly when embedded within a school improvement strategy such as our Unleashing Greatness framework. [16]

Coda – Creating for and with our children

If we are serious about enhancing the learning outcomes and progress of all our students and ensuring both excellence and equity in our system then we need to locate the debate about the curriculum in a broader context. That is why in 'Models of learning: tools for teaching'[17] we said this:

> Learning experiences are composed of content, process and social climate. As teachers we create for and with our children opportunities to explore and build important areas of knowledge, develop powerful tools for learning, and live in humanising social conditions.
>
> Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins (2009)

This article is part of our series on curriculum reform edited by Graham Handscomb.

Professor Emeritus David Hopkins was Chief Adviser on School Standards to three Secretaries of State for Education during New Labour's second term. He is currently Executive Chair of the International Centre for Educational Leadership at the University of Bolton. He was recently ranked as the 16th most influential educator in the world by the America-based Global Gurus organisation. His latest book, '*Unleashing Greatness*' was published in Summer 2024.

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