

2 Curriculum: content and focus

The first issue for any teaching has to be the choice of content or focus. This is central to a teacher's professional decision-making, and everything else depends on it.

It is unwise to rush from one topic to another to cover all listed content in the National Curriculum or an examination syllabus. It is widely recognized that there should be a greater emphasis on in-depth learning. This means it is important to have some criteria by which to make decisions, and as a basis for reflecting, observing and evaluating.

What follows is not meant to be exclusive – you may well generate others –and it is not intended that you will use all of these ideas: you will need to decide which, if any, is helpful for a particular situation.

Key aims

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the details of outcomes and objectives and content, and to lose track of educational aims. The following extracts from Department for Education webpages on the National Curriculum articulate the fundamental aims of school learning.

The National Curriculum has three broad aims. It should enable all young people to become:

- successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve
- confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives
- responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society.

Because they are so open, they are also capable of different interpretations. For example, 'responsible citizens' could be seen by some as a summons to dutiful obedience and by others as an invitation for involvement in radical campaigning; it stretches from helping the old lady next door to care of the planet. Good guidance is provided on government websites, but this still needs discussion in real contexts, involving a focus on particular issues and the value of particular teaching approaches.

Linked to these aims is a statement of values:

The curriculum should reflect values in our society that promote personal development, equality of opportunity, economic wellbeing, a healthy and just democracy, and a sustainable future.

These values should relate to:

ourselves, as individuals capable of spiritual, moral, social, intellectual and physical growth and development

our relationships, as fundamental to the development and fulfilment of happy and healthy lives, and to the good of the community

our society, which is shaped by the contributions of a diverse range of people, cultures and heritages

our environment, as the basis of life and a source of wonder and inspiration that needs to be protected.

A sense of educational aims is crucial in deciding what to prioritise and how to pursue this in greater depth, so that young people engage fully.

Central cognitive principles of a subject

It is often worth asking how lesson content contributes to developing a particular way of understanding the world. The successful *Cognitive Acceleration in Science Education* project (Adey and Shayer 1994) identified around ten key concepts or principles in learning science, including classification, equilibrium, correlation, variables and deduction.

These may not fit all sciences, of course: for example, a central point in Biology is the relationship between organism and environment. A central principle in Chemistry is that compounds have different properties than the elements they consist of.

Establishing, through discussion, the major principles in a subject is important for teachers in their planning and conduct of lessons, and in observation and evaluation, but it is also important for pupils to see the connecting threads so that they can gain more independence in looking at new material and situations. It is helpful if they understand the centrality of (for example) causality, power relationships, evidence, conflict and ideologies, in History, or of settlement, climate, development and inequality in Geography. There are also key concepts that overlap, and which can be studied in a more multidisciplinary way, such as migration or forms of production.

It is also important to discuss the importance of these key concepts with learners, rather than simply to announce at the start of each lesson what will be covered.

Exemplary learning

A curriculum is always a selection of human knowledge, and there is never time to cover everything.

One of most famous German curriculum experts Wolfgang Klafki used the term *Exemplary Learning* to argue that the particular examples and illustrations that teachers choose to cover must have a more extended purpose: they must be examples of something of wider significance. He developed these principles:

- 1) What wider or general sense or reality does this content exemplify and open up to the learner? What basic phenomenon or fundamental principle, what law, criterion, problem, method, technique or attitude

can be grasped by dealing with this content as an ‘example’? Following on from this question, how can it be picked up and used at a later date?

- 2) What significance does the content in question or the experience, knowledge, ability or skill to be acquired through this topic already possess in the minds of the children in my class? What significance should it have from a pedagogical point of view? (This is not only its significance in terms of school learning but in terms of the child’s lifeworld. Klafki argues ‘Within the child’s mental world, school should be understood as a place of clarification, purification, consolidation, expansion, stimulus.’)
- 3) What constitutes the topic’s significance for the children’s future? (and this should be for everyone’s general education, not only as knowledge for specialists)
- 4) How is the content structured? (This can only be answered when you have thought about questions 1-3)
- 5) What part of the knowledge you have introduced *must* be retained (the ‘minimum knowledge’) if the content determined by these questions is to be considered ‘acquired’, as a *vital, working human possession*?

Point 2 particularly needs to be read in terms of significance for different groups of learners, for example girls, pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds, and young people disadvantaged by poverty. Connecting with their lifeworlds, culture and experience is vital both in terms of recognition and respect, and in order to establish a bridge between what is familiar and what has yet to be learnt.

Bloom’s taxonomy

This provides a way of checking whether, for example, the questions you use or the tasks you set are restricted to the relatively basic or whether they also include more challenging thinking.

Benjamin Bloom’s original version was a ladder of six steps (please read from bottom to top):

- Evaluation
- Synthesis
- Analysis
- Application
- Comprehension
- Knowledge.

The following was his former student Lorin Anderson’s adaptation (again, start at the bottom):

- Creating: building new ideas or perspectives; designing, planning, inventing
- Evaluating: justifying a decision or conclusion, hypothesising, critiquing
- Analysing: breaking into parts, comparing, organising, interrogating

- Applying: transferring to a different situation, implementing, carrying out
- Understanding: explaining, interpreting, summarising, classifying
- Remembering: recalling, listing, retrieving, naming, finding

It can be misleading to think that each step builds on the one below, as we often move backwards and forwards, but as a general guide it can be useful to help teachers avoid getting stuck on the lower rungs.

Productive pedagogies

This framework was developed in Queensland, Australia to help teachers focus on ways of improving the quality of learning. It recognises that it is easy to become creatures of habit, and that simple routines can lead to low-level learning such as closed questions, copying or filling in the blanks.

In order to raise the level, it proposes four key dimensions:

- 1) Intellectual quality
- 2) Connectedness to the world
- 3) Supportive environment
- 4) Working with and valuing difference.

Intellectual quality includes higher-order thinking, deep knowledge and deep understanding, as well as substantial conversation, problematic knowledge and metalanguage. This might include problem-solving rather than simply remembering, critical thinking, and more challenging questions; sustained dialogue rather than a succession of simple questions; and thinking about the learning process.

Connectedness to the world includes integrating knowledge from different fields or subjects, connecting school learning to pupils' background knowledge, considering the relevance to real-life contexts, and (again) identifying serious intellectual and/or real-life problems.

Supportive environment means establishing a good situation for learning: helping learners engage with the task and stay on-task; helping them direct and monitor their behaviour and learning; pupils making decisions on the direction, pace or outcomes of their learning; creating a climate for collation; and make criteria for judging success more explicit.

Working with and valuing difference can involve drawing on the knowledge of different cultural and social groups; encouraging the participation of minorities or less confident pupils; encouraging the use of narrative as well as expository explanations; building a sense of community and identity; and fostering active citizenship.

This provides a challenging framework to support planning and evaluation. There is too much here to think about all at once, so you will need to decide which parts best meet your needs as a starting point.

Progression and differentiation

These two issues should be considered together. We expect all pupils to make progress through our teaching, but they will inevitably have different starting points. This is partly because of previous success or difficulties in school learning, or specific barriers to learning, but also might be more random because of different personal experiences. For example, some pupils might have a personal interest, or have visited a significant place, or been fascinated by something they have watched on television. To try to summarise all this complexity as levels of 'ability' is too crude, and there is a serious danger of teachers mistaking a lack of such experiences for 'low ability'.

The National Curriculum is built around a clear and finely graded map of progression. However, learning is not always clearly linear.

Pupils may need time to strengthen and consolidate a particular aspect of their knowledge and ability, for example cognitive complexity, skills, ability to interpret, autonomy in planning, attitudes, accuracy of attention to detail, creativity, and so on.

There will also be cross-curricular issues such as engagement in debate, application of numeracy, collaboration etc. Not all of these will be in step with each other in each pupil.

It is important, in planning and evaluation, to focus on some particular ways in which progression is being promoted; attempting to cover everything is unmanageable.

Traditional ways of ensuring that pupils make satisfactory progress have included

- (i) division into different classes, and
- (ii) assignment of specific worksheets.

It is important to consider a third and fourth approach:

- (iii) setting a task which is broad enough to allow different types of engagement. For example, pupils writing about the same theme have different levels of accuracy, length, complexity of vocabulary, etc.
- iv) within the same topic, setting a menu of tasks, possibly ending with 'a response of your choice, in consultation with your teacher'.

(More on this in section 14.)

Inspectors regularly emphasize the need for 'pace and challenge'. This applies to all children. There is a danger that more advanced learners are not presented with opportunities to develop because they appear to be 'doing well'; there is also a tendency for pupils who are struggling with basic literacy and numeracy skills to be fed a diet of routine exercises which does not engage their interest or challenge them to perceive, think and debate.

Suggestions for discussion

- A) After seeing or hearing the outline of a recent lesson, discuss how it might strengthen one or more of the broad aims or values. What could be done to enhance this?
- B) What might these aims and values involve for teachers of particular subjects? (or groups of pupils?)
- C) Develop a list of 8-10 key principles or core concepts which underpin a particular academic discipline or school subject.
- D) Consider a lesson you taught yesterday, in the light of Klafki's advice.
- E) Which aspects of productive pedagogies do you think are positives in your own teaching, and which do you think you should use as a focus to improve the quality of a class's learning?
- F) Consider situations when it appeared inadequate to think of progression in terms of a simple ladder of levels, or when you felt the need to strengthen a particular aspect of learners' ability and engagement.
- G) Consider a recent lesson, in terms of the specific progress pupils were expected to make (e.g. content or skills) and its contribution to more general development.