

## UPDATE on the rise of the curriculum

### Summary

- The government puts the spotlight on curriculum by pledging a £7.7 million Curriculum Fund in January 2018
- In July, there is a further DfE announcement of grants worth up to £2.4 million for schools to pilot curriculum programmes in science, history and geography.
- The IoE hits back with a blog expressing concern that the DfE's promotion of a knowledge-rich, teacher led approach is blurring the lines between curriculum and pedagogy.
- We see conflicting ideologies emerge between the DfE, which favours a knowledge-rich curriculum, and Amanda Spielman, whose speeches over the past year insist that Ofsted will not require schools to follow a particular orthodoxy.
- Meanwhile, the Policy Exchange publishes a paper which argues that unless the government promotes coherent curriculum programmes developed by publishers and other 'learned societies', the national curriculum may fail due to poor implementation.
- The DfE's support for high quality, published programmes is ambivalent: over the past years we've seen match funding for phonics and Singapore maths schemes (while noting that the process of accreditation has left many publishers feeling aggrieved). Government rhetoric has also supported schools' use of high-quality textbooks. But in spite of the evidence-based results seen by many schools using publishers' schemes, the squeeze on school budgets has all but put a stop to purchasing. The DfE is currently working with publishers to develop a textbook 'quality mark' to inform teachers about the 'high quality' resources available to them, but without budgets schools will at best be able to buy a few specimen copies for teachers' use only.
- Ofsted will be launching a new school inspection framework in September 2019. Schools will be scrutinised on the quality of their curriculum, while data takes a backseat.
- The EYFS curriculum is also under review, with 25 schools currently piloting new ELGS which will be released for consultation in 2019.

### Ofsted's position: an overview

Amanda Spielman has made it clear that there will not be a single 'Ofsted-endorsed' expectation of the curriculum. Instead, based on good practice in schools, they are looking for:

- A coherent, well-structured curriculum which develops and builds both knowledge and skills.
- A local curriculum that reflects the range of pupil needs.
- Curricula which stress the importance of the subject as a discipline with subject-specific progression models in place
- In primary schools, a key focus will be early reading and teaching phonics.
- Providing pupils with subject-specific vocabulary and knowledge that allows them to build links and enhance their learning across other subjects
- Strong leadership, and particularly forms of distributed leadership, when developing and implementing a curriculum. This will include justifying decisions such as offering a two-year KS3 curriculum in order to allow longer for GCSE courses.

"Ultimately, the curriculum is the yardstick for what school leaders want their pupils to know and to be able to do by the time they leave school. Knowledge and skill are intrinsically linked: skill is a

performance built on what a person knows. That performance might be physical or cognitive, but skills matter and they cannot be separated from knowledge.”

Amanda Spielman discusses the findings from Ofsted’s curriculum research and what this means for designing the new inspection framework here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmci-commentary-curriculum-and-the-new-education-inspection-framework> [Published 18<sup>th</sup> September 2018]

### The DfE’s position: an overview

In July, the DfE published a research paper called: “Use and perceptions of curriculum support resources in schools”. The key findings (none of which will come as a surprise) are that teachers are spending a disproportionate amount of time finding and adapting resources from online resource banks, and would value an independent, low cost, quality-assured central resource bank, along with additional time to tailor resources. Read the full paper here:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/722313/Use\\_and\\_perceptions\\_of\\_curriculum\\_support\\_resources\\_in\\_schools.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/722313/Use_and_perceptions_of_curriculum_support_resources_in_schools.pdf)

Notwithstanding the findings of this research, at the same time the DfE publishes the announcement over grant funding for curriculum programmes that are:

- Knowledge-rich
- Based on teacher-led instruction
- Have whole-class teaching at their core

The specification stipulates the requirement for a complete package of resources including a long-term plan, along with all the resources and training required for teachers to deliver the programme.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/730258/Curriculum\\_Programme\\_Pilot\\_Specification.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/730258/Curriculum_Programme_Pilot_Specification.pdf)

### From the wider education community: a roundup

**December 2017:** Cambridge Assessment’s Publication ‘A Cambridge Approach to Improving Education’ lists ‘curriculum coherence’ as a key feature of high performing jurisdictions. “A system is regarded as ‘coherent’ when the national curriculum content, textbooks, teaching content, pedagogy, assessment and drivers and incentives all are aligned and reinforce one another.” It goes on to say that this coherence doesn’t have to be top down, citing the example of Finland which emphasises teacher training in ensuring adherence to curriculum goals. See chapter seven of the following PDF journal: <http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/cambridge-approach-to-improving-education.pdf>

**March 2018:** The Policy Exchange publishes a paper arguing that the National Curriculum is at risk of failing due to poor implementation by schools, and unless the government promotes the ‘coherent curriculum programmes’ developed by publishers and other ‘learned societies’, children will be let down by the unregulated ‘mishmash’ of resources currently used.

He goes on to describe a coherent curriculum programme as one which is:

- is rooted in the knowledge and discipline of the relevant academic subjects, where explicit reference is made to the research evidence in these areas;
- provides the knowledge and skills children need to access a decent education, both academic and technical;
- is defined clearly through rigorous schemes of work, lesson plans, textbooks and lesson resources such as worksheets;
- includes assessment of both relevant prior learning and learning achieved by studying the curriculum;
- provides training,

both in the substantive subject knowledge taught by the curriculum, and also in the effective use of the resources provided. Read the full paper here: <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Completing-the-Revolution.pdf>

**August 2018:** The IOE (UCL) expresses ‘disappointment’ over the selection criteria set by the DfE for the grant funding of curriculum programmes, accusing the department of confusing curriculum with pedagogy: “The main thing that seems to be lacking is a proper understanding of what teacher knowledge means. This is rather ironic given the claim that the project aims to build it. The proposal is designed to reduce teacher workload by developing road-tested materials and an associated pedagogy for teachers to adopt – the materials that the fund will generate must be “**knowledge-rich**, and have **teacher-led instruction** and **whole-class teaching** at their core”. The schools that apply to develop these materials must also subscribe to this orthodoxy. This confuses *curriculum* – what is to be taught – and *pedagogy* – how it is to be taught – suggesting that the Curriculum Fund’s custodians have a worryingly shaky grasp of, well, curriculum.” Read the full blog here: <https://ioelondonblog.wordpress.com/2018/08/07/until-the-dfe-understands-curriculum-its-well-meaning-pilots-will-run-off-course/>

**September 2018:** the OECD publishes “How to build a 21st Century School System”. It touches on the knowledge versus skills debate that is dividing our policy makers, arguing that both are important: “As much as “learning-to-learn” skills are important, we always learn by learning something. However, success in education is no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge creatively in novel situations; it is also about thinking across the boundaries of disciplines.”

The publication also identifies coherence, in terms of alignment of policy and practice, as one of the features of high performing systems. See page 232 of [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/world-class\\_9789264300002-en#page231](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/world-class_9789264300002-en#page231)

Watch this space, as we see the following themes play out:

- The DfE favours particular orthodoxies around curriculum design and delivery, while Ofsted remains agnostic.
- The supposed tension between Ofsted’s position on the curriculum, and that of senior figures in the DfE who are pushing back on this.
- Mixed messages over funding for the development of coherent curriculum packages: on one hand, funding has been made available to schools (to reinvent the wheel?) while in the past, the DfE has released match funding for publishers’ programmes which support specific initiatives (phonics and a Singapore approach to maths).
- The extent to which the DfE adopts policies from high performing jurisdictions to drive up England’s performance in international studies.

Overall, the shift in Ofsted’s focus has been welcomed by education leaders, Heads of Unions and the research community, but many schools will see this as a significant challenge. Will this fuel the next wave of PD courses, resources and initiatives?

Further reading

<https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2018/09/18/curriculum-research-our-findings/>

<https://teacherhead.com/2018/06/06/what-is-a-knowledge-rich-curriculum-principle-and-practice/>

<https://debrakidd.wordpress.com/2018/06/11/a-rich-curriculum/>

<https://www.tes.com/news/there-battle-brewing-over-ofsted-curriculum-plans>

GA receives DfE funding for teacher CPD <https://www.geography.org.uk/Announcements-and-updates/ga-receives-dfe-funding-for-teacher-cpd>

Government textbook quality mark: The DfE said it was “speaking with publishers on how best to inform teachers about what high-quality resources are available across the curriculum”.

<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/government-textbook-quality-mark-could-ease-workload/>

Towards a Twenty-First Century education System

[http://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/edge\\_future\\_learning\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/edge_future_learning_report_final.pdf)

### About this document

Compiled by Melissa Mackinlay, an independent strategy consultant with eighteen years experience of working in the education publishing sector, this draws on documents in the public domain, in an attempt to make sense of key issues shaping the education landscape.

I'd love to hear your feedback. Please email [melissamackinlay@btinternet.com](mailto:melissamackinlay@btinternet.com) or call me on 07426709505.