

Traditional school subjects versus progressive pedagogy

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Traditional school subjects have been a feature in some countries' school curricula for more than 150 years. If we were to include education in Ancient Greece, and particularly the curriculum of Plato's republic which placed music first and gymnastics second, then we could say that some traditional subjects have been a feature for more than 2,000 years. In modern times the appropriateness of traditional subjects as a way of structuring a curriculum has faced repeated critique and defence. One of these critiques has been that learners' thinking does not reflect the ways in which traditional subjects structure the knowledge in curricula. It is argued that thinking is more theme-focussed, drawing across multiple subjects, disciplines and areas of knowledge, in seeking understanding of any aspect that is the focus for learning.

Another feature of the debates about how curricula should be structured has been the tendency for traditional subjects and their knowledge bases to be seen as important in relation to secondary education but their legitimacy contested in relation to early years and primary/elementary education. The contestation has resulted in alternatives to traditional school subjects being proposed: e.g. cross-curricular study; topic work as a more appropriate vehicle for holistic learning; and the organisation of whole curriculum into areas of learning rather than traditional subjects. Perhaps one of the most successful practical outcomes of organisation by broader areas of learning has been the curriculum of the *International Baccalaureate* (IB).

Of course one of the problems with the binary opposition of traditional subjects versus progressive pedagogy that we set up in the title to this editorial is just that, its binary nature, as the papers in this edition illustrate. Nearly all the papers have a curriculum subject focus, and there is an even split between papers focused on primary education and those focused on secondary education. Irrespective of the phase of education it appears that cross-cutting issues are in the end more important than the subjects of the curriculum that in most papers are the context for the research.

The first of four papers that have secondary education as their focus addresses student choices of subjects, in preparation for the subjects they will be examined in. Drawing on the world-leading cohort study data, the Next Steps (formerly the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE)), Morag Henderson, Jake Anders, Alice Sullivan and Vanessa Moulton found that clear socio-economic, gender, ethnic and school-level differences in subjects chosen could not be accounted for by prior attainment. This study contributes to the growing evidence that education systems struggle to

address the societal inequalities that many people expect education to alleviate.

The subject focuses for the second paper, contextualised in secondary education, are Design and Business. The focus of Andrew Withell and Neil Haigh's study was partly teachers as researchers. An action research design was coupled with theories of critical realism to explore design and business processes. The thoughtful exploration of issues reflects many similar studies where the research is *Close to Practice*. Close to Practice (CtP) research is a subject for which in 2018 the British Educational Research Association (BERA) is to report findings and recommendations aimed to enhance the quality of CtP research: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/project/close-to-practice-research-project>.

One of the many interesting aspects of the paper by Lisl Fenwick is the focus on not one but two cross-curricular areas in the context of secondary education: literacy and metacognition. And like the previous paper the focus is on teachers, including the main finding that supporting pupils' metacognition will not happen unless teachers have appropriate guidance and professional development. It is well known from research that curriculum initiatives that do not include sufficient professional development for teachers are unlikely to have the positive effects intended (Temperley, et al., 2007).

In the final paper focused on secondary education, although the subject focus is history, the main interest is in the cross-cutting understandings that underpin knowledge of history. The concept of 'historical literacy' is used to represent the important processes of discriminating appropriately between different sources of data. A notable aspect of this paper is how hard some students find the uncertainty of so-called historical 'facts'.

The final four papers in this issue focus on primary education. Like the first four papers, traditional subjects are a focus but the emphasis once again is on the cross-cutting aspects that are so important to learning. Stefan Karolcik, Elena Cipkova, Natalia Dudova, Sona Nagyova explore biology, in the context of concerns about pupils' motivation for studying science. In this case the pupils were motivated by the ways in which the study of living organisms was presented. Although also about science, the cross-cutting theme of the next paper, by Kostas Dimopoulos and Spyridon Sagiannis, is the ever-present one of communication and discourse (see our editorial about language in Vol. 28 Issue 4 about the ground-breaking discovery of a new translation <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09585176.2017.1378463>). The authors' emphasis is on primary teachers' knowledge of science and particularly the differences between discourse and syntactic elements of scientific knowledge.

Reasoning about multiplication is the topic for Mike Askew in his study of primary education. The rote learning of times tables is a perennial topic so it is interesting to read this theorised account of the topic of multiplicative reasoning. Askew argues that appropriate pedagogy requires an orientation towards model-eliciting, and teacher appropriation of pupils' models, as

pedagogic tools, with the subsequent re-appropriation of refined models by pupils. The progressivism implied by this approach is subtle and based on evidence.

The final paper in this issue brings us firmly back to knowledge, and a view of the whole curriculum. The context is Sweden's curriculum which Carl-Henrik Adolfsen argues emphasises disciplinary knowledge with fixed knowledge boundaries. This paper adds to other critical accounts suggesting that countries' popularity in international league tables is not all that it may seem. The author notes a consequence that the structure has resulted in an overload of content at the expense of deriving learning from pupils' questions and experiences. This is a failure that has been repeated around the world in national curricula. In the paper we see empirical evidence of the ways in which traditionalism and progressivism are so often in tension rather than binary opposites. Indeed, overall the rigour of the papers reveals the value of subjects as convenient labels for areas of knowledge but also the need for teaching which draws across subjects and disciplines. The lessons for pedagogy in the papers in this issue lie in the important understandings that are required for nearly all teaching and learning.

One of the hallmarks of our work as editors of the Curriculum Journal has been attention to knowledge in the curriculum. Our first editorial and special issue proved to be popular (Wyse, Hayward, Higgins & Livingston, 2014), resulting in its re-publication in book form (Wyse, 2017 - we are grateful to our readers for the thousands of downloads including more than 7,000 for Michael Young's piece). In addition to the ways in which the papers in this current issue deal with knowledge, it is also good to see the final response from Oren Ergas to William Pinar's review of Ergas' book which Pinar sees as a risky psychological argument to answer the canonical question, 'what knowledge is of most worth?'

In December 2018, we will have reached the end of our second term as editors of the Curriculum Journal. One of the things we are proud to have supported in the six years of our work is an increase in the international appeal of the journal. This is evident in the wider range of countries that are represented in research published in the journal. The papers in this issue are no exception, featuring as they do research and researchers from Australia; England; Finland; Greece; New Zealand; Slovakia; South Africa; and Sweden.

References

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