

‘Narrowing the focus on to traditional knowledge for its own sake helps the already privileged.’

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## Equality does not come from letting subjects rule

**John White** argues that the Tories’ desire to wind back the clock will mean the end of hopes for a curriculum based on aims relevant to all children

‘We will reform the national curriculum so that it is more challenging and based on evidence about what knowledge can be mastered by children at different ages. We will ensure that the primary curriculum is organised around subjects like maths, science and history.’

So reads the Conservatives’ draft manifesto for education in the section headed ‘A rigorous curriculum and exam system’.

Does it hold water? Its brevity is a problem when assessing it. But since it reflects the things that Michael Gove, the party’s education spokesman, has been saying and writing recently, it is best taken along with these.

The sentence about the primary curriculum is a clear rebuff to the two recent reports, those of Jim Rose

and Robin Alexander, both of which want to replace the present structure of discrete subjects with wider learning 'areas' (Rose) or 'domains' (Alexander).

This attachment to a subject structure is wholly in line with Michael Gove's ideas. For him, education is an induction into an intellectual heritage based on academic disciplines. Gove says that he, an adopted child from an ordinary Aberdeen family, owes everything to his rigorous grammar-school education. He seems genuinely in favour of equalising opportunities in the interests of increasing social mobility. Why does he think a traditional curriculum of separate subjects especially valuable?

A talk he gave to the RSA in June 2009 revealed his belief 'that education is a good in itself – one of the central hallmarks of a civilised society'. His inspiration is philosopher Michael Oakeshott's argument that everybody is born heir to an inheritance of human achievements. But education also has extrinsic as well as intrinsic aims. First, says Gove, it is 'the means by which individuals can gain access to all the other goods we value – cultural, social and economic': it 'allows individuals to become authors of their own life story'. Second, the shared intellectual capital that education provides 'helps bind society together' and this strengthens our democracy.

What impedes a straightforward judgement on this is that, whenever Gove uses the word 'education', he equates it with a regime of learning within discrete, traditional subjects. Without that equation, much of what he says here strikes a chord with those of us who share a different politics from his. We can agree with him that school education should help individuals to acquire control over their lives, to become personally autonomous. We can also go along with the aim of promoting social cohesion and democratic citizenship. So, too, with education as a good in itself, if interpreted to mean that pupils are equipped for a fulfilling life by becoming fully and intrinsically absorbed in worthwhile activities.

Gove's aims are admirable. But what are we to say about the vehicles by which they are attained? As already stated, for him there is no question what these

should be – the discrete subjects of the grammar-school tradition. His stance here is odd. If there is only one sound way of forwarding these purposes, and this way is the academic route he favours, he has a watertight case. But why should anyone accept these premises?

Most human goals can be reached in different ways. We want to travel into town, and can go on foot, by bus, taxi, or in our own car. It is a mark of our peculiar intelligence as rational animals that we are flexible about what means best promote our ends. We upbraid ourselves for sticking to habitual patterns when a bit of imagination would have suggested other routes. We see as pathological the behaviour of people who become dispositionally rigid in this way, victims of what we call 'tunnel vision'.

Gove does believe that there is only one way of realising his educational aims. He calls his curriculum 'rigorous', but 'rigid' is nearer the mark. This is evident from his uncompromising opposition to any alternative. He sets his face against interdisciplinary collaboration, against themes and projects, against areas like media studies that he sees as purveying 'soft' rather than 'hard' knowledge.

Gove has a propensity to let his wishes get between him and reality. This comes out in his characterisation of those who do not see the traditional curriculum as the one and only way forward. He believes that for four decades educational policy has been dominated by, in his words, 'a small, self-replicating group of academics and bureaucrats who have been in thrall to one particular ideology' – progressivism. This ideology holds that 'children should be left free to discover at their own pace, to follow their own hearts', and 'should be protected from any attempt to regiment, educate or otherwise guide their development'. What has united the ideologists 'has been hostility towards traditional, academic, fact-rich, knowledge-centred, subject-based, teacher-led education'.

This is bizarre stuff. Where, outside possibly Summerhill School, do any academics or bureaucrats think that children should not be guided, but left to their own devices? What evidence could this aficionado

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of knowledge and fact-richness provide for his claim? Gove is a black-and-white thinker. If you are not a traditionalist, you must be a progressive (as he understands this). But this ignores the huge swathe of the educational world that is neither. There are plenty of people who do not think everything should be taught in discrete subjects, seeing these as appropriate on some occasions, and cross-curricular work on others. The belief that education is not only about knowledge does not reject, but affirms, its importance. An enthusiast for themes and projects can readily agree that these should be teacher-led... These points should not need labouring. What is alarming is that the man who may be about to run our schools gives them no credence.

Let’s go back to Gove’s aims. As I have said, taken by themselves they are unexceptionable. They are also in the territory where sensible thinking about the curriculum should begin: first, decide what our wider purposes of education are; and then work out the most suitable means of attaining them. If Gove agrees with this, he needs reasons why his traditional curriculum is a suitable vehicle, and one more suitable than others.

Don’t get me wrong. Like Gove, I’m in favour of extensive knowledge and understanding when talking about the equipment people need to lead their own lives and be good democratic citizens. But I’m not assuming from the outset that this knowledge must fall neatly and exclusively under the headings history, geography,

science, a modern foreign language, and so on. Perhaps a course in social studies that acquaints children with the main features of the society in which they probably going to live out their lives is likely to be helpful to them. So is knowledge about sex, about relationships, money management and community involvement.

Again, if you are really serious about aims, you do not assume that the transmission of knowledge is the only way of furthering them. A non-tunnel-vision thinker considers other possibilities. Personal qualities are the most obvious. If we are to become authors of our own lives, we need persistence, imagination, a willingness to take sensible risks. As democratic citizens, we need to be cooperative, wary of attempts to pull the wool over our eyes, concerned that people are treated fairly. Schools do much to develop these and a host of other such dispositions. Gove seems insensitive to these wider aspects of education.

All this makes me wonder how attached he is to his aims, after all. The truth is that, from his perspective on schooling, he has no need of them. This is because he already knows, or thinks he knows, what the curriculum must be.

One of the bright spots in the often dismal story of the national curriculum since 1988 has been moves to base it on a set of aims. In 1988, strange to say, the complex apparatus of 10 foundation subjects, programmes of study and attainment targets came about with next to no indication of what these were for. An attempt in 2000 to lay down basic aims foundered because nothing was done to see that curriculum subjects were in line with them.

The then Qualifications and Curriculum Authority had a second go in 2007. This did more to bring the subjects into line. Its three overarching – and now statutory – aims are that pupils are helped to become ‘successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens’.

Since these three objectives seem close to Gove’s intrinsic aim and his two extrinsic ones, you might think he would welcome them. But no. He upbraids the QCA (now the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency) because it ‘does not make its principal aim a

guarantee – entitlement if you prefer – that each pupil will have access to a body of knowledge’.

Gove says: ‘I am sure all these goals are admirable, in their own way, but they reflect my underlying concern – that in making schools institutions which seek to cure every social ill and inculcate every possible worthwhile virtue – we are losing sight of the core purpose, and unique value, of education.’ And he adds: ‘The shift away from seeing education as a process of acquiring knowledge and towards more broadly-sketched “outcomes” is actually a regressive move.’

All this strongly suggests that, if in power, Gove will reverse recent moves towards an aims-based curriculum by removing the new statutory aims. If so, this will take us back towards 1988 and the original, literally aims-less, national curriculum. Once again, it will be taken as read that knowledge, as traditionally carved up, is the focus. Why it is important teachers and parents will not need to ask. Its worth should be self-evident.

Why is Gove, as was Ken Baker before him, so chary of aims – at least, any that go beyond the intrinsic value of knowledge? A plausible answer takes us back 50 years, to the days of the 11-plus and a sharply divided secondary system.

Before the 1960s, the only kind of schooling that could lead to higher education and a professional job was the highly academic regime of the grammar school. Although the scholarship system enabled some children from lower social classes to benefit from this, the

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grammar-school population tended to be drawn from more affluent families.

With the ending of the 11-plus, such families naturally continued to want their own children to be well-placed for higher education and an interesting career. The preservation of the grammar-school kind of curriculum, first in the ‘better’ comprehensives, and after 1988, as the standard for all pupils, has been to their advantage. Children whose upbringing has prepared them for academic pursuits, those who read and write early, for whom geometry and French verbs hold no terrors, and who have been unfazed by unseen exam questions on *Macbeth* in key stage 3 Sats, are likely to fare better under this curriculum than many of those from different backgrounds.

It is not surprising that Gove’s party wants to wind back the clock. Spelling out wider aims draws attention, as we have seen, to the multiplicity of possible ways of realising them. More individually-sensitive ways of learning can help those pupils who fare worst if an academic education is all that is on offer. Narrowing the focus on to traditional knowledge for its own sake helps the already privileged. The more these pupils get absorbed in the intrinsic delights of simultaneous equations, late medieval history, Milton’s poetry, and the handling of the preterite, the more they up their chances of getting into a good university.

All of which raises the question: what is the real aim behind the pursuit of knowledge of this sort? Is it indeed intrinsic? Or extrinsic?

The last thing we need is to go back to a system where official aims are sidelined and covert ones allowed to flourish. What we require instead is a fuller and more considered set of aims than we have at present, one backed by a public rationale, and enabling us all to see how the most specific of curricular prescriptions are legitimated by reference to wider goals. All the indications are that Gove is not the man for this job.

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