

Will the DfE's New Institute Reflect what Teachers Need to Learn?*

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On January 2 [DfE announced](#) that a new Institute for Teaching will be set up in England 'to provide teachers and school leaders with prestigious training and development throughout their career.' It 'will become England's flagship teacher training and development provider, showcasing exemplary development of the Government's ambitious reforms.' Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said that the new Institute will equip all teachers to deliver an education combining 'high standards of pupil behaviour and discipline with a broad knowledge-based' curriculum. He added that the Institute, whose work will begin in September 2022 will add 'diversity and innovation to the existing teacher development market.'

I don't imagine that this is a belated response to [remarks made by HMCI Amanda Spielman](#) in her 2017 commentary on recent research into the primary and secondary curriculum. She said of school leaders and teachers

A striking conclusion that we have drawn from the findings is that, despite the fact that the curriculum is what is taught, there is little debate or reflection about it.

As to why this should be so, she suggested that

the most likely explanation is that this arises from a weak theoretical understanding of curriculum. This was confirmed by school leaders, who said that there was a time (long ago) when teachers were taught the theory that underpins curriculum planning. Over time, this competence across the sector ebbed away. This may be because it was generally not thought to be so important after the establishment of a national curriculum.

These two announcements differ in tone and substance. The 2017 one called for teachers to become more reflective on the basis of a grounding in curriculum theory and looked back wistfully to a past age when this occurred. The 2021 one proudly heralds an innovation that will train teachers in delivering the government's controversial 'knowledge-based' view of education.

As might be expected, I have more sympathy with Spielman's statement than with Williams's. But Spielman shows a shaky grasp of history in her last two sentences. The idea that the cause of the problem she identifies is wholly post-1988 fails to take into account the onslaught on teacher education under Thatcher and her supporters like the Hillgate Group between 1983 and 1986.

The theory-heavy PGCE courses of the 1960s and later had properly given way, as for instance at our own Institute by the early 1970s, to more

practical courses based on a spell of school experience, in which theory was introduced largely by cross-disciplinary discussion groups focusing on practical issues like mixed-ability teaching or inner-city problems. More searching in-service courses in educational disciplines flourished at Diploma, and MA levels, partly because teachers pursuing them had long their fees paid from 'the Pool' (a fund set up by Local Education Authorities acting collaboratively). The 1985 [White Paper Better Schools](#) (para 173) stated that

the system of 'pooling,' whereby LEAs are able to share among themselves a large part of the costs of sending teachers on certain types of courses, has serious defects. It favours relatively long courses, notwithstanding that shorter, less traditional activities may be more effective for many purposes; and it reduces the incentive to individual LEAs to satisfy themselves that releasing a teacher to attend a particular course is likely to represent good value for money.

It went on (para 176) to suggest replacing 'pooling' by giving new powers to the Secretary of State for Education to make grants to LEAs for in-service training in areas that he or she approved, e.g. national priority areas or those meeting specific local needs. This passed into law in 1986.

The effect on the kind of more theoretical courses that Spielman now favours was devastating. Since nearly all teachers on Diploma and MA in-service courses now had to pay their own fees, courses were decimated, sometimes merged with other struggling courses and sometimes axed completely. At the London Institute of Education we felt the impact

immediately – *before* the National Curriculum appeared in 1988. The change Spielman mentions began *not* because the National Curriculum led teachers away from theory because they were told in some detail what to teach, but earlier than this and for financial reasons.

Despite this misunderstanding, it is heartening to see an HMCI apparently endorsing a return to teaching teachers the theory underlying curriculum planning. Prospects for this are slim. This is partly because the Government's new plan is all about inculcating into teachers its own vision of education rather than encouraging them to think for themselves (it is noteworthy that it talks of 'teacher training' rather than 'teacher education'). It is also partly because its new Institute (again, UCLioe folk in particular note the terminology!) will clearly have the probably intended effect of siphoning teacher education away from universities. Let us hope now that Amanda Spielman re-enters the debate and reinforces her plea for greater reflectiveness among school leaders and teachers.

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