



# OUT WITH THE OLD

HOW WILL YOUR SCHOOL MAKE SENSE OF THE NEW CITIZENSHIP PROGRAMMES OF STUDY? LEE JEROME EXAMINES THE WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF A SLIMMED DOWN CURRICULUM, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PUTTING 'KNOWLEDGE' INTO CONTEXT...

**O**n the face of it the new citizenship programmes of study (our third since 2002) encourage us to cut out some old topics, for example migration in KS3 and civil and criminal law in KS4, and introduce some new ones, such as the monarchy at KS3 and pensions at KS4. However, this curriculum also shows us something more profound about contemporary education debates and presents a deeper challenge to teachers.

## Back to basics?

After years of developing curricula to embrace a wide variety of skills, values and experiences, we seem to be caught up in a resurgence of knowledge. In a speech to the Social Market Foundation on this issue, Michael Gove stated:

*"Unless you have knowledge... all you will find on Google is babble. And unless that knowledge is imparted at school... then many children will never, ever, find it. No matter how*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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*long they search across the borderless lands of the internet"* (Gove, 2013).

Inspired by E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Curriculum, there is debate about whether this approach constitutes a Gradgrindian trudge through self-evidently important facts, or whether, *"it is about acquiring knowledge to make analysis and critical thinking possible"* (Green, 2013). However, there is a distinction to be made here between the general proposition that knowledge is important, and the specific

assertion that one can describe that knowledge as a list of facts. Hirsch (1987) himself provides a list of thousands of items of knowledge, which he takes to constitute what every literate *American should know – it starts: "Aaron, Hank; Abandon hope, all ye who enter here; abbreviation; Aberdeen; abolitionism; abominable snowman; abortion..."*

Taking a rather different approach, Einstein is reputed to have said *"education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school,"* but he wasn't simply being facetious. The facts and case studies from year 7 may have been long forgotten when our budding young citizens come to cast their first vote but we have to hope that our teaching has instilled a deep sense of citizenship, an interest in public life and an enquiring mind seeking answers and capable of political reasoning. As Bruner argued in 1960, if we structure our teaching around the core concepts and principles of a subject then we build a framework for understanding and engaging with the world and an appreciation of the



contribution of each subject. By contrast, the list of bullet points in the new curriculum represents knowledge as though it is one single thing, but it is not. This list provides a series of of mid-range content headings (monarchy, parliament, elections) but says nothing about the deeper structure of the subject. That structure was provided in the old programme of study by the core concepts (rights and responsibilities, justice and democracy, identity and diversity) and the idea was that when, like Einstein, pupils had forgotten facts such as how many MPs sit in Westminster or the difference between criminal and civil law, they would have a sound framework based on these core concepts which they could use to interpret a whole variety of citizenship issues.

Whilst a shorter, simpler programme of study for citizenship might be welcomed by some, we have to recognise that this brevity and simplicity is just a presentational trick. It appears simpler because it ignores the complexity of subject knowledge.

### Core concepts by any other name

As an example, let's think about the peculiar addition to KS3 of the phrase:

*"The precious liberties enjoyed by the citizens of the United Kingdom."*

This can only really be read in the context of the Conservative Party's increasing hostility to the notion of human rights. I do not want to minimise the importance of this issue, nor to question the legitimacy of contemporary political debates about the nature of rights. There are clearly tensions inherent in all rights frameworks about balancing specific rights of individuals against others' rights and the collective interests of society as a whole. There are also important issues about sovereignty and the extent to which international bodies should seek to influence interpretations of rights in the UK. The problem with this bullet point of knowledge is that it gives young people no access to these debates. It side-steps the important issue of the nature of rights, fails to offer a framework of knowledge that young

people could use to understand and participate in these debates, and simply asserts that we 'enjoy' a set of 'precious liberties.' There is no indication here about what that means, where those liberties come from, how we might ensure they are protected or how we might struggle to expand them. In short it is a meaningless assertion in the context of citizenship and political education.

What this means for teachers is that they have to provide an element of continuity themselves by setting up an overarching system of organising principles or concepts to provide the spine of the curriculum. This is where it is important to read the whole programme of study and not become overly focused on the individual bullet points. The introductory paragraphs are not 'preamble' they are also part of the curriculum. In KS3, this section includes: *"Teaching should develop pupils' understanding of democracy, government and the rights and responsibilities of citizens."*

This is actually very close to the old three key concepts (the glaring omission is identity and diversity but I would argue this could be accommodated within a pluralistic vision of democracy) and so I would urge teachers to interpret those knowledge bullet points through these conceptual lenses. When teaching knowledge about 'rules and laws and the justice system' we could consider it from the conceptual perspective of the nature of democracy (e.g. right to freedom of speech), the codification of rights and responsibilities in law and the resolution of tensions through the courts (e.g. religious freedoms) and the relationship between the judiciary, legislature and executive in interpreting rights.

### Don't forget the skills

Of course a subject is much more than 'simply' subject knowledge. All subjects also entail the development of skills and one of the greatest victories of the campaign for citizenship education was the retention of core citizenship skills in the curriculum. These skills should be instantly recognisable to teachers familiar with the old three 'processes'.

In KS3 pupils should:

- *"use and apply their knowledge and understanding while developing skills to research and interrogate evidence,"* which is pretty much the same as critical thinking and enquiry in the old curriculum;
- *"debate and evaluate viewpoints, present reasoned arguments,"* which is much the same as the old advocacy and representation; and
- *"take informed action,"* which is the same as the original taking informed and responsible action.

Whilst the structure of the new programmes of study is different and some of the specific content is new, it is important to recognise that, interpreted correctly, this new curriculum embodies continuity more than it does change. At the heart of the purpose of study statement is the idea that *"teaching should equip pupils with the skills and knowledge to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, debate and make reasoned arguments. It should also prepare pupils to take their place in society as responsible citizens."* This is what citizenship teachers have always aimed for – and I hope those in charge of developing your school curriculum for 2014 place it at the heart of their planning.

Please keep an eye on ACT's website for updates on how to implement the new curriculum: [teachingcitizenship.org.uk](http://teachingcitizenship.org.uk)

