

The essentials of balanced and broadly-based primary curriculum

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Why is a balanced and broadly-based curriculum essential for all young children?

The Education Act 2011, in line with previous legislation, states that the school curriculum should be balanced and broadly-based. The current emphasis in assessment and inspection on measurable outcomes in literacy and numeracy discourages such a curriculum. Ofsted's new School Inspection Handbook highlights that 'some schools narrow the curriculum particularly in key stages 2 and 3' and that 'this has a disproportionately negative effect on the most disadvantaged pupils' (2019, para 174).

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In future, the expectation will be that 'a broad range of subjects ... is taught in key stage 2 throughout each and all of Years 3 to 6'; Ofsted state that 'in key stage 1, inspectors need to check that pupils are able to read, write and use mathematical knowledge, ideas and operations so they are able to access a broad and balanced curriculum at key stage 2.' (2019, para 197).

Few recent books or articles explore why the primary curriculum should be balanced and broadly-based and what this looks like, though Ogier (2019) tries to fill this gap. Richards (2019) sees balance and breadth as vague, rhetorical and contested terms which acquire meaning only when 'translated into clearer, less abstract ideas'. He argues that the appropriate level of breadth depends on judgment and context and that what a balanced curriculum entails is even more problematic.

This bulletin considers why a balanced and broadly-based primary curriculum is so important and what this should entail, arguing that all children, especially very young ones and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, should experience such a curriculum.

Why is balance and breadth so important for young children?

Let us consider distinctive aspects of how young children learn. First, they find it difficult to deal with, and internalize, abstract information and decontextualised tasks. As Donaldson (1992) demonstrates, the context, especially tasks being seen to be meaningful and the relationship with adults, affects significantly whether, and how, young children understand and are engaged.

Second, as Pollard et al. argue, 'it is essential that learners exercise a significant degree of control over the (learning) process. In particular, they must feel both motivated by the subject matter and able to try things out and make mistakes in an atmosphere of security and support' (1993: 34-5). Third, if learning is to become embedded, young children benefit from using different modes of representing experience, especially kinaesthetic and visual ones, and opportunities to articulate their thoughts, rather than being expected to listen for long periods of time.

Bruner (1996: 39-40) distinguishes between logical-scientific and narrative modes of thinking, with the former best for understanding physical phenomena; and narrative thinking more appropriate for human beings to organize and manage their knowledge of the world and structure their experience; and to understand people and their plights. A balanced curriculum implies children being enabled to use logical-scientific and narrative modes, as well as expressing themselves through the arts.

In arguing for breadth, one must recognize that all people have many abilities and talents, though young children's may be not yet discovered or well-developed. Therefore, as Reed (2001: 122) suggests, 'even the youngest children should be exposed to a broad and ambitious curriculum in the hopes of identifying one or more areas at which each child excels or is motivated to learn.'



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In learning the knowledge, skills and ways of working associated with different disciplines, young children need opportunities, gradually, over time, to follow their interests, to experiment and to make mistakes and try again, as well for re-inforcement.

The teaching of different values and traditions is especially important in a world of diversity and change. If children are to understand, and empathize with, those who are different, they must encounter and respond appropriately to a wide, often unfamiliar, range of experiences and people.

Breadth and balance is not just about the time allocated, but about the priority ascribed, to different areas of learning and to procedural (know-how) and personal/interpersonal, as well as propositional (know-that), knowledge.

To thrive, young children have to learn skills associated with reading, writing and mathematics but far more than this. A holistic curriculum entails many different areas of learning, including physical activity, the arts and the humanities, being given time and priority. Physical activity is increasingly recognized as vital for both physical and mental health. The arts play a crucial role in enabling children to explore, and enjoy, different ways of expressing themselves. Eade et al. (2017) argue that the humanities provide the basis of democratic citizenship and an enjoyable, engaging context in which to apply skills. The former

If primary education is to help establish secure foundations for later development - though it must also meet children's current needs - such foundations must be multiple and broadly-based, just as a table with several legs is stronger and better balanced.

One may argue that the skills associated with literacy and numeracy are so important as the foundations for later learning that they must be acquired as soon as possible. However, this does not recognise that a constant focus on these may fail to engage or motivate many young children and that such skills are embedded most deeply by applying them in meaningful contexts. A balanced and broadly-based curriculum provides many such opportunities, adopting a holistic approach. The next section considers what this looks like in practice.

What should a balanced and broadly-based curriculum for young children entail?

All Our Futures (NACCCE, 1999: 52-3) argues for balance:

- between different fields of study and disciplines;
- within all disciplines between tradition and innovation;
- the teaching of different values and traditions, reflecting and responding to cultural diversity.

NACCCE refers to fields of study and disciplines rather than subjects. While children need to learn the knowledge and ways of working associated with many disciplines, to teach these as separate subjects risks artificial, often unconscious, fragmentation of the curriculum and missing opportunities for cross-curricular learning.



is predicated on children learning to grapple with complex, contested issues and the latter on ways of working such as fieldwork, observation, interpretation and being encouraged to think and respond critically. The recently launched campaign Humanities20:20 aims to improve teaching and learning in the humanities, with the website www.humanities2020.org.uk describing why these are an essential part of a balanced and broadly-based primary curriculum.

Conclusion

Legal requirements mean that all children should experience a balanced and broadly-based curriculum. However, educational

reasons are even more cogent. To engage children and make tasks meaningful, the primary curriculum should offer a balance between:

- personal growth and 'academic' learning;
- mathematics and science, the arts and the humanities; and
- different types of knowledge and ways of working, including chances for children to follow their interests and exercise their imagination, as well as learning and practising skills.

It should be broadly-based to provide varied activities to discover and develop talents and abilities and embed strong foundations for later learning. Young children must not be expected to focus narrowly or

specialize too soon. Teachers should try to ensure that skills and concepts are learned and applied in meaningful contexts, through practical activities and experiences which encourage different modes of representing experience (including plentiful opportunities for children to talk). Such an approach is vital, especially for very young children and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as others are more likely to experience a wider range of opportunities out of school. Assessment and accountability mechanisms must encourage a balanced and broadly-based curriculum. What this entails in practice must remain a matter of professional judgement but such a curriculum is essential throughout primary education.

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Pen Portrait

Dr Tony Eaude was a primary school teacher and headteacher, before studying for a doctorate at the University of Oxford. He has written a wide range of articles and books related to young children's learning and the implications for teachers. Details of his work are on www.edperspectives.org.uk

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