Towards a subject-based curriculum

A policy response from the IoI’s Education Forum, April 2012
This document is both a response and a contribution to the National Curriculum Review from members of the IoI’s Education Forum.

The Education Forum was founded in 2004, when a range of teachers, academics and researchers came together through a common concern that education policy was failing to reflect the intellectual ambition they shared for new generations.

Then, the main barrier within education was a tendency to instrumentalisation, or an expectation that the National Curriculum be responsible for fulfilling social policy objectives.

Today, there has been a nominal shift back towards placing subject knowledge, at the heart of education. This is a welcome development, but far from complete.

This set of responses articulates a critical path forwards towards a subject-based curriculum.
Summary

The return of subject-knowledge to the National Curriculum is to be welcomed, along with the emphasis that all children can be taught.

However, it is misguided to place personal 'development' on a par with the intellectual pursuit of subject knowledge.

What the new report mistakenly presents as 'development' in fact distracts from the genuine intellectual growth that comes from subject knowledge.

A committed subject-based curriculum strives to teach all children the best that has been thought and said.

An educational renaissance is long overdue.
Introduction

A country’s National Curriculum is a statement of the knowledge that all pupils attending school from five to 16 years should learn. As recent research by Tim Oates has shown, alongside that by John Meyer and his associates at Stanford University, the highest achieving systems - almost without exception - express this entitlement in the form of subjects.

It is subjects which give stability to a curriculum and provide the boundaries within which teachers establish their professional identities and pupils develop their identities as learners. This does not mean that all such curricula are the same: they vary in content to reflect different countries’ history and culture. However, it does mean that they all share an underlying subject-based conceptual structure, where the boundaries between the different subjects are relatively clear and stable. It is by embodying the relationship between subjects and disciplines that a National Curriculum guarantees that all pupils have access to the most reliable knowledge that society possesses. Whether this guarantee is realised in all schools and for what proportion of pupils depends on many factors, but primarily the availability of teachers qualified in the different subjects in each school.

These were the assumptions of those launching the National Curriculum in England and Wales in 1988. However, for all its achievements, this first attempt to set out a National Curriculum was never clear about the Curriculum’s structure or purpose. As a result of this original ambiguity, some subjects have since been made optional and others dropped entirely. The compulsory component has been made smaller, while new compulsory study areas such as citizenship have been introduced. In particular, the 2008 revisions expected the Curriculum to fulfil a highly generalised set of social and economic - as well as educational - goals. To some at least, the idea that the National Curriculum expresses an entitlement to knowledge had been lost, at least for many pupils.
It was to address these problems and to reassert the fundamental educational purposes of the National Curriculum that the National Curriculum Review (NCR) was launched by the present government. The first outcome of this Review is the interim report of the expert committee, to which this paper is an initial response. For these respondents, members of the Institute of Ideas' Education Forum, the report is a deep disappointment.

The report fails to grasp that the NCR provides an opportunity to break away from the confusion and incoherence that pervades education today. Yet in ways that make it very little different from the existing National Curriculum revised in 2008, the concepts of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are blurred, as are the distinctions between the logic of subjects and the intellectual development of pupils.

The argument in this set of responses is that, at both national and school level, the curriculum should be based on a number of principles. Firstly, its purpose must be the intellectual development of pupils in the range of core subjects. Secondly, the National Curriculum should be subject-based because for schools, progression in subjects is the most reliable way of defining the individual development of students. Thirdly, it must stipulate each subject's core concepts and only the content related to these concepts. Fourthly, it must clearly distinguish the curriculum - at both national and school levels - from pedagogy, or the activities of teachers and the teacher-led activities of pupils. Fifthly, it must clearly distinguish the National Curriculum from the experience that pupils bring to school, and from how students are assessed and schools are evaluated. This will enable the National Curriculum to be the guide that teachers need in establishing the curriculum of their own particular schools.

The IoI Education Forum respondents find elements to applaud in the Report. However, they feel that its remit has been misdirected, if not betrayed.

**Professor Michael Young**, Institute of Education, University of London
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What we need 1: More confidence in teaching knowledge

Dr. Mark Taylor, History teacher and Head of Humanities, Addey and Stanhope school

The National Curriculum should reassert a confident focus on teaching knowledge to children, rather than worrying so much about child development. Doing any less means failing to educate the minds of new generations. Unfortunately, the Review only advocates maintaining a balance between teaching 'essential knowledge' (p23) and supporting 'personal development and empowerment' (p16) in schools. This supposedly parsimonious approach fails to deal with the important distinction between purely personal development on the one hand, and the genuine intellectual development that comes from subject knowledge on the other.

In making personal empowerment an explicit educational goal, the report limits our intellectual aspiration for new generations. Likewise, emphasising psychological development as a separate aim in itself reflects a crisis of confidence about what and how much we can teach. In truth, it's time to challenge our students with more of the best that is thought and known, whether the international evidence supports this or not. Education should seek to shape a flourishing public culture, energised by children who know a lot more than they do now.

Indeed, the authors recognise uncertainty about the National Curriculum, noting: 'it is not the totality of what is taught but should be the core of essential knowledge' (p7). Yet they claim the solution is to provide 'discursive statements of purposes' rather than the current 'statements of standards' (p9). They offer the idea of 'ready to progress' against the tyranny of levelling, which they rightly observe leads to detrimental rote learning (p9). However, 'ready to progress' will lead to a new tyranny of assessment for learning. This tyranny of assessment still avoids doing what we should (a dirty word in modern educational thinking) be doing: aspiring to teach all children.

The report states that ten salient dimensions contribute to high expectations for all; the most crucial is the presumption of capacity for improvement. This capacity is even footnoted as 'a statement of educational commitment to the capacity of all humans to develop further both by themselves, and with the support of others. Whilst acknowledging nature, it asserts the role of nurture' (fn 111, p48). But why not use this belief in nurture to push the demand for subject knowledge, rather than simply 'complementing subject knowledge with understanding of pupil learning' (p56)?

Modern experts should stop making evidence their master rather than their hearts. Their call for more thinking time and to postpone decision-making only wastes teaching time. Education is an intellectual battle against ignorance, time wasted and time wasters. We must fight hard against those who don’t want knowledge because they think they don’t need it. We must get these uncertain experts off the fence, and reinvigorate a demand for teaching of knowledge in the best and fullest possible sense.
What we need 2: A real vision for education

Dr. Alex Standish, Associate Professor of Geography, Western Connecticut State University

The new report makes several worthwhile suggestions. The authors are right to propose teaching some foundation subjects to 16 years and to emphasise that all children can be educated. Overall however, the experts have shied away from the very idea of the National Curriculum.

In upholding a firm distinction between local school curricula and the National Curriculum, the report refuses to take a lead on what schools should teach and why. When this is coupled with the fact that many new academies are opting out of government regulation, we seem left without much of a meaningful National Curriculum at all.

This maybe shouldn't be too surprising: ministers today have some understanding of what a good education looks like, and a nominal commitment to teaching subjects. However, following the decline of traditional conservative justifications for a subject-based education over recent decades, current policy-makers lack any strong rationale for why subjects should be taught in schools.

Hence, in Could do better: using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England, Oates argues for 'breaking the tendency towards introspection' (2010: p1). Instead, both Oates and the new report mine for 'evidence' and international 'best-practice' on which to base the Curriculum. This grasping for evidence reflects a real lack of substantial vision or sense of purpose for education.

Without a moral case for education, policy-makers are incapable of articulating why a subject-based education is better than any other. Instead, they grapple towards any number of disparate perspectives: personal and therapeutic, social, cultural, economic and even environmental. This sidesteps the important issue of what it is that society is educating children into through their school education.

The government wants to talk about aims and objectives, so a critical response is vindicated. So far, what they have is a broad church of utilitarian objectives, without any explanation of what is distinctive about education. A better approach would not shy away from embracing a measured introspection: we should challenge ourselves to develop a much broader and more meaningful vision for education, which places subject knowledge at its heart.
What we need 3: Less about aims

Alka Sehgal Cuthbert, English teacher; Postgraduate researcher in education, University of Cambridge

The report begins by stressing the importance of aims in education. The authors state clearly: 'we believe defining curricular aims is the most effective way of establishing and maintaining coherent provision' (p7). The report also notes how specific educational aims can shape our general understanding of the National Curriculum and be a basis for selecting its content.

Yet however important individual aims are, they lack substance and coherence without being shaped by a deeper understanding of the nature of education. Without a firm grasp of what education really means, aims simply become imposed on it in a piecemeal fashion - and tend to take on an extrinsic, instrumental character.

In particular, the aims imposed on education can become non-educational. The current aim to develop physical health, coordination and attendant skills using practical subjects such as PE or Art and Design, for example, features in this category. This aim seems legitimate insofar as it expresses wider aims about which there is broad social agreement.

The problem lies, however, with the way the aim is articulated in an isolated way, suggesting that developing physical health is the only aim of PE. A more confident approach would understand that, if PE and other practical subjects are taught properly as part of a subject-based curriculum, physical health and co-ordination would probably develop along the way.

Meanwhile, other aims such as making sustainability a principle of education, are much more problematic. 'Sustainability' is a term from contemporary discourse. It lacks the scientific or political consensus necessary to be legitimately considered as an independent, consistent principle. To impose it on the National Curriculum to strengthen the epistemological claims for sustainability or to create a consensus lacking in society is to fundamentally misunderstand what education is. The overall effect is likely to be further trivializing and moralizing of the work being undertaken by both scientists and educationalists.

It is important to first develop a clear, coherent idea of what education is. Education should be a way of developing children’s curiosity and understanding of the world through teaching them a degree of subject-specific knowledge. Without engaging with this underlying sense of purpose, aims will continue to be simply imposed on education in a piecemeal fashion.
What we need 4: Knowledge, knowledge, knowledge

Kevin Rooney, Politics teacher; Head of Social Science, Queens School, Bushy

A liberal humanist education regards children as the rightful heirs of the accumulated wisdom and achievements of past generations. How this body of knowledge is prioritised and transmitted should always be open to discussion. While the nuts and bolts of the National Curriculum may vary according to historical circumstances, the commitment to a knowledge-based education should not. In this, the report’s reference to the importance of knowledge in the Curriculum should be welcomed. However, it is concerning that the supreme importance of a subject-based education is not definitively spelled out. For example, the Framework outlined gives equal weight to learning how to learn (p12). This section in particular repeats the mistaken idea that the dichotomy between subject knowledge and development, skills and competencies is not such a definitive one.

Over the past decade, New Labour education policy contributed to the erosion of subject knowledge and privileged ‘process’ over ‘content’. To ignore this political attack on subject knowledge from many in positions of influence in the educational establishment is an abdication of responsibility. The Curriculum Framework must tackle this problem head on. Does it regard the transmission of the cultural and intellectual heritage of humanity to children as its defining mission or not? If yes, then its intention should be welcomed. If not, then there is a fundamental flaw at the core of contemporary education policy.

It is imperative that we strip away rhetorical ambiguities and contradictions from the Review’s proposals. The expert panel has produced a report which is all things to all people and open to multiple interpretations. The focus on ‘evidence-based' proposals makes sense when assessing certain strategies. However, it is troubling when an evidence-based approach is substituted for a moral and political discussion about the aims of the National Curriculum. In the absence of such a debate, the danger is that the evidence-based approach functions to evade a public discussion.

Despite this, much in the report should be welcomed. For example, the proposal to move away from the currently confused curriculum levels will be embraced by many teachers. The authors are right to note we have often produced young students more aware of their levels than actual subject knowledge. That the approach to attainment targets is confusing and formulaic is another perceptive observation. The desire to free teachers from prescription should also be applauded. However, at a time when education has lost its way and more external instrumentalist objectives are imported into the classroom, the Review has failed in what should have been its key objective. This is to spell out clearly and unambiguously what education is for. The document is unable to find a language to express, with absolute clarity, the fundamental importance of subject knowledge as the key to a liberal humanist education. Education, education, education was the mantra of the nineties. Let the mantra of the new National Curriculum be knowledge, knowledge, knowledge.
What we need 5: An irrelevant education

Sally Millard, Founding member of the IoI Parents Forum

Throughout the New Labour years, the National Curriculum buckled under increasing strain to deliver political rather than educational objectives. For example, citizenship education was deployed to increase people’s engagement with politics. A new emphasis on healthy eating was expected to solve the perceived problem of obesity. The National Curriculum became used to promote environmental awareness. This trend went hand in hand with the idea that the Curriculum should be ‘relevant’ to the lives and experiences of children today.

As a result, the National Curriculum has become overloaded and confused. There is a growing cleavage between schools who retain a sense of the importance of imparting subject knowledge to their students, and those that have prioritised teaching young people things they deem more ‘relevant’ to them: the right behaviours, attitudes and ‘skills for life’.

In this context, one of the report’s central principles is to develop the National Curriculum ‘in line with the principles of freedom, responsibility and fairness - to raise standards for all children’ (p6). One aspect of this standard-raising involves giving all pupils access to ‘powerful knowledge’. This vague term describes subject knowledge that represents ‘the accumulated experience of the past and the representation of this for the future’ (p11).

In general, this primacy afforded to subject knowledge should be welcomed. However, the Review holds back from promoting subject knowledge in clear educational terms. The appeal to phrases such as ‘powerful knowledge’ indicates that the place of knowledge in the National Curriculum is not educationally justified. Rather, knowledge has become emphasised in social terms, in particular as part of the principle of fairness. This is a worrying move, which falls short of saying why subject knowledge in general is worthwhile.

We need to open up how we think about knowledge, both in terms of education and more broadly as a society, and challenge children with the academic subjects we know are important rather than patronising them with what we suspect may be ‘relevant’ to them.
What we need 6: To understand the logic of subjects

Professor Dennis Hayes, Professor of Education, University of Derby; Visiting Professor, Oxford Brookes University

The report is a response by members of the academic educational establishment to a new government broadly committed to a subject-based education system. It is also a statement of the status quo in academic educational thinking. The key paragraph is 1.6:

Some educationalists emphasise subject knowledge and discount the significance of more developmental aspects of education. There are also many who foreground the development of skills, competencies and dispositions whilst asserting that contemporary knowledge changes so fast that 'learning how to learn' should be prioritised. We do not believe that these are either/or questions. Indeed, it is impossible to conceptualise 'learning to learn' independently of 'learning something'. Our position is therefore that both elements – knowledge and development – are essential and that policy instruments need to be deployed carefully to ensure that these are provided for within education. (p12)

This is a sleight of hand. The 'development' the report defends is not mere child development; it is a peculiar view of education where subject matter is displaced by the processes of learning. This undermines knowledge by empowering the child and giving the learner unnecessary and harmful involvement in pedagogic processes. What is not discussed is how the logic of the subject might determine what is to be learned at each developmental stage. This should take priority over any useful secondary information about the various stages of child development.

Yet what is presented to parallel subject knowledge is not personal development, which requires subject knowledge, but a new educational ideology that emphasises process over content. 'Learning how to learn' is precisely not learning 'something', but only a process prior to learning. There is a philosophy behind the document, evident in the footnotes that refer to works about 'assessment for learning' and 'learning to learn', which advocates using assessment to let learners determine how they learn. The assumption is that understanding the aims of learning makes learning 'deeper' for children. In fact, what has been created is a new subject: 'learning'. This concerns personalisation, personal learning and self-esteem. Striving to be a successful learner has replaced learning anything.

Subjects and 'development' as presented in the report are mutually antagonistic processes with mutually antagonistic outcomes. Arguing for both allows the academic educational establishment to continue to promote the 'learner' over the 'knower'. 'Development' in terms of personal and psychological development, effectively reduced to manipulating children's emotions, detracts from teaching knowledge. It is a reassertion of a therapeutic orientation. This failure to see the overriding importance of intellectual development retards the progress towards a properly subject-based education.
What we need 7: A focus on debate

Helen Birtwistle, Resources and Communications Manager, Institute of Ideas national Debating Matters competition

The report’s emphasis on oral language as an important aspect of education should be welcomed, while the suggestion that improvements would raise attainment levels is persuasive. However, there is a danger of privileging process over content. The authors argue that oral language is essential in helping teachers to structure learning, and enabling students to receive comments on their ideas and understanding (p53).

But language - and more specifically, the use of language to debate ideas - is the very essence of education. It needs more explicit recognition. Oral language is an important appendage to basic reading and writing skills, as the authors suggest (p52). However, debate is what distinguishes education from mere training. A critical engagement with subject knowledge necessarily means interrogating and debating the basis of that knowledge with students in the classroom and beyond.

The authors recognise that ‘subject knowledge represents the accumulated experience of the past and the representation of this for the future’ (p11). Yet they neglect to understand that it is through debate and the ‘critical element’ of education that knowledge itself can develop.

More than encouraging oral language to raise attainment then, what is required is an implicit understanding that debate and discussion is itself central to the project of education.
What we need 8: Teaching for learning

Shirley Lawes, Lecturer in MFL, Institute of Education, University of London; Chevalier de l’Ordre des Palmes Académiques for services to French culture

Assessing learning has become an obsession within secondary schools. The integration of formative assessment procedures in all National Curriculum areas in every lesson, in the form of Assessment for Learning, has had a number of unintended consequences.

The imposition of a set of procedures to assess the learning process has become formulaic and counter-productive. The expert panel’s report expresses concern about ‘the ways in which “levels” are currently used to judge pupil progress’ (p44). It notes that pupils are led to ‘label themselves in these terms’ (p44). This is an accurate observation. The preoccupation with National Curriculum levels on the part of both teacher and pupils has shifted the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment.

More broadly, it seems that in many classrooms what is learned is considered less important than how it is learned. Pupils and teachers focus their attention on mechanistic techniques that rely on pupils’ perceptions of their own learning. Is this an unfortunate misinterpretation or ‘dumbing down’ of the principles of Assessment for Learning, or is it an inevitable consequence of an abandonment of the transmission of knowledge as central to teaching?

Perhaps it is both. However, Assessment for Learning is more a symptom than the cause of the relentless pursuit of ‘evidence’ of learning as a process, supplanting the imparting of knowledge of a subject to pupils as the primary goal of teaching.

Teachers should re-focus their efforts on teaching their own subjects. They should have the confidence to rely more on their own professional judgements, knowledge and store of teaching skills to find out what their pupils actually know, rather than what their pupils think they know.
What we need 9: Teachers to be scholars

Rania Hafez, Director of Muslim Women in Education

‘In freeing schools from prescription, it is crucial that they are able to rise to the new challenge’ (p57). The report recommends a minimalist approach to prescription but raises a note of caution.

If schools and teachers are to rise to the challenge of freedom and autonomy, how do we ensure that a profession steeped in a culture of compliance can cope with unfettered autonomy? If teachers are free to teach, how are they to know what to teach?

Firstly, teachers should be experts in their subjects. There has been a subject-light approach in education for a while, where teachers have not been required to know and understand their subject in depth. Consequently, they have failed to perceive how the logic of their subject determines its pedagogy.

Furthermore, teachers entering the profession must not merely show contemporary knowledge and understanding. They must also have an understanding of their subject’s history. This gives their teaching breadth and depth.

In other words, teachers should become scholars. This means not only having a thorough grasp and understanding of subject knowledge, but also engaging with the foremost thinkers and theorists of their subject. Master classes in subject knowledge given by leading experts from the different disciplines should be on offer to all teachers.

Teachers should also be experts in education. They should know the philosophy, history and sociology of education. Such knowledge should develop over a teacher’s career and not merely be restricted to initial training. Reading, thinking and debating the major educationalists are essential features of being an educator. Just as we can expect students to be scholars of their subject through reading, thinking and debating, so should teachers be scholars in education.
What we need 10: A proper primary education

Katie Ivens, Vice-Chairman, Campaign for Real Education; Education Director of the literacy charity Real Action

A subject-based education should begin at primary school, just as children become independent readers. Well taught children can reach a reading age of eight years by the end of their first year of full-time schooling. From this moment, they are ready to be taught the best that is known and thought. A whole world of learning, properly presented in subject disciplines, is open to them. Yet this opportunity is perversely denied children by the current primary school curriculum.

The new report is posturing when it refers to 'powerful knowledge' while failing to set out what a cultivated society would expect its children to learn. It is further wrong in opposing subject teaching with shallow notions of personal development and empowerment.

The best way for children to develop into adults is through imbibing subject knowledge. Indeed, the failure to educate properly stunts a child’s intellectual development, prolongs infantile behaviour and frustrates responsible maturity. This is particularly evident in schools that cannot let go of the play culture they believe fosters 'development'. A child who is constrained to play, for the gratification of an 'early years' curriculum, may end up playing forever - at considerable personal and social cost.

It is humbug to suggest, as the report does, that marking and grading children's work can exacerbate social differentiation. Marking and grading work informs the child, his peers and his parents what he has achieved. This is good. What hurries on social differentiation is the prevailing yet rarely articulated assumption that, for a child to receive a subject-based education, they must have parents who pay separately for it. The idea of teaching young children a full curriculum of discrete subjects perished shortly after the National Curriculum was introduced following the 1988 Reform Act. The idea had been to overturn the child-centred, mid-twentieth century tradition of 'enabling' learning through topic work and fashionable themes.

Yet when it was confirmed primary schools were failing to teach children to read, they were let off the subject-teaching hook. The entire course of primary education was restricted to 'literacy', 'numeracy' and science. History, geography, art, music and even English lessons could be safely forgotten, leaving schools free to do circle time, citizenship, sex education and ICT, classes to promote 'well-being', self-esteem and other fads and fancies.

Schools became swamped with computers to prepare children for a 'knowledge-based society', to equip them for 'personalised learning' and give them an 'education fit for the twenty-first century'. And still, in so many cases, children could not read. Today, illiterate and
ignorant children are issued with laptops to 'empower' them to 'learn how to learn'. This is, of course, improbable. It is of dubious value even if it were meaningfully achievable. Children learn when they are taught, preferably as straightforwardly as possible.

So how should we proceed? It must be made clear that children should be reading independently by the end of their first year of schooling. Is this possible? Certainly. Teachers have only to employ an excellent synthetic phonics method, taught to whole classes, preferably sitting in rows facing the teacher. Literacy is the foundation of children's education, and they will now be ready to enjoy quality literature and be taught subjects. Computers do not feature. The technology required for teaching subjects is as simple as the pedagogy: pencil and paper, whiteboard and marker pens, good books and direct instruction.

Once literate, children should receive daily English and arithmetic lessons, and - over the school week - history and geography, science and so on. To these we could add Latin and a modern foreign language. By the time they reach secondary school, children should have the reading age, vocabulary, spelling ability and overall command of English required of an educable teenager. They should have a solid grounding in the range of academic subjects and good habits of serious study. Knowledgeable, confident and motivated, they should be unlikely to court exclusion and be keen to absorb more of the subjects they have tasted.

We need a vision for the future of primary education where it is a veritable Villa d'Este garden of fountains of knowledge, where each subject discipline is taught generously, systematically and discretely, where process never trumps abundant content. Education is not safe in the hands of the educators. An educational renaissance is long overdue.
What we need 11: A philosophical framework

Toby Marshall, Curriculum Manager, Media and Film Studies, Havering College

Many aspects of the Framework outlined by the Review should be applauded. The primacy given to knowledge marks a welcome departure from the more typical trumpeting of skills, dispositions and values. Equally, the advocacy of greater National Curriculum breadth at Key Stage 4, specifically the proposals for bolstering the position of the arts and humanities, suggest a humane and well-rounded orientation to knowledge, even if the defence of these fields is a little timid and apologetic.

However, the report suffers from trying to be all things to all people. It fails to draw the sharp distinction necessary between education and politics. While it rightly argues that we must be clear about the aims of education, the document reflects a bewildering lack of clarity.

Education, the report suggests, has a great number of aims. It should ‘satisfy future economic needs’, while cultivating an appreciation of ‘national cultures’. Schools should encourage recognition of ‘diversity’ and ‘responsible citizenship’. Educators must promote ‘personal development’ and ensure that pupils are ‘healthy, balanced and self-confident’. And as if this were not enough, teachers must also ensure that the next generation has an appreciation of ‘sustainability’ in the ‘stewardship of resources’. At some point, in the little time that remains, schools should encourage the ‘acquisition of knowledge’ and an ‘appreciation in the arts, science and humanities’ (p16-17).

The last of these aims is properly educational; the others are not. For the most part, the various aims the report articulates are political, and as such relate to problems in the adult world. The Framework, like many educational documents before it, takes adult problems and mistakenly seeks to address them within the sphere of children’s education.

This casual and thoughtless politicisation of the Curriculum is deeply destructive. It undermines education by distracting teachers from their central intellectual and cultural responsibilities. It is also unlikely to be effective, as schools can provide no solution to our economic and political problems.

We need a better framework for understanding the National Curriculum. We must avoid the pitfalls of politicisation but also recognise that the solution is in fact more politics, not less. Schools need a new politics of education, which makes the case for their unique intellectual and social responsibilities. Equally, adults, teachers, parents and the wider community should demand grown-up solutions to grown-up problems. Politics is for politicking. Education is for educating.
What we need 12: An academic education for all

David Perks, Head of Physics, Graveney School; co-founder, The Physics Factory

The turn back towards a subject-based education should be defended vigorously by all of us who want education to have any meaning outside of politics. In the UK, mass education was born from the need to cohere the working class around an idea of what it meant to be educated and a part of society. However, the success of education depends on its separation from politics and the demands placed on it to solve political and social problems. It is the detachment of education from the here and now struggle for power that makes it worthwhile.

Education is a space for the intellect to grow. It allows a new generation to examine what we know and understand about the world, giving them a chance to change it if they so wish. By giving the next generation a clear foundation in the best that has been thought and said, we give them a stake in remaking the world in their own image. Without passing on this knowledge we will set the young adrift, making them hopelessly incapable of understanding the world they inhabit and powerless to change it.

It is through knowledge of the basic subject disciplines of a liberal education that we can best prepare young people to begin an enquiry into the realm of ideas. Anything else is a failure to educate our children. The attempt to confuse pedagogy - how we teach - with the subject of education - knowledge and understanding - has led to a collapse in the belief that teaching pupils to know something is either desirable or possible. Confusing education with counting qualifications has devalued both education and qualifications at the same time. This leaves us in danger of losing any notion of what is worth knowing.

The attempt to re-examine this question by the Coalition through their review of the National Curriculum, and the current request to debate the school curriculum, is a vital opportunity to turn back the tide. But we should not be naïve. There are few people who subscribe to a subject-based education wholeheartedly, and even fewer who can do so without using non-educational justifications. Too much ground has already been lost.

By standing up and speaking out we can give voice to a great many people out there who, working in education or otherwise, feel a great disquiet about the way the public's respect for education has been squandered for base political motives. By arguing for a good academic education for all pupils, we have a chance of salvaging a belief in the real worth of education.
For further reading:  A defence of subject-based education (Education Forum, 2010)

Members of the Education Forum can be emailed at: education@instituteofideas.com