



Education 3-13

International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education

ISSN: 0300-4279 (Print) 1475-7575 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rett20

Why the humanities are an essential element of the curriculum for young children especially in uncertain times

Tony Eaude

To cite this article: Tony Eaude (2025) Why the humanities are an essential element of the curriculum for young children especially in uncertain times, *Education 3-13*, 53:7, 1114-1126, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2025.2519478](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2025.2519478)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2025.2519478>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 17 Jun 2025.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 4436



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 2 [View citing articles](#)

Why the humanities are an essential element of the curriculum for young children especially in uncertain times

Tony Eade 

Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

This article provides a rationale for the humanities as an essential element of a broad, balanced, holistic curriculum for young children which matters especially given many children's limited social skills, lack of engagement and the uncertain world they face. The humanities are conceptualised as the broad, interlinked areas of learning which enable children to understand human lives and cultures, rather than discrete subjects. It is argued that the practical ways of working involved motivate most children and help develop procedural and personal/interpersonal knowledge and a sense of agency, strengthening dispositions associated with active citizenship such as sensitivity, empathy and critical thinking. This requires inclusive environments which enable children to explore issues related to identities, beliefs and values, celebrate diversity and encourage respectful discussion at an age-appropriate level. Policymakers must address the aims of education, assessment and accountability mechanisms and professional development opportunities, as well as the written curriculum.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 March 2025

Accepted 6 June 2025

KEYWORDS

Young children; broad and balanced curriculum; humanities; inclusivity; citizenship

Introduction

This article argues that the humanities, and the associated ways of working, are an essential element of the curriculum for young children, based on an inclusive vision of education which reflects the challenges which all people, including children, face now and in the future. It elaborates on the 2017 special issue of *Education 3–13* to provide a theoretical rationale for this argument. In particular, it considers significant changes and challenges since 2017 and the extent to which the concerns highlighted in Eade et al. (2017) have been addressed. Some key principles and considerations for practice and policy are set out, without being prescriptive, recognising that these have to be adapted in different contexts.

It is argued that the curriculum should be broad and balanced, enabling children to develop the many types of knowledge, skills, concepts and dispositions needed to enhance their ability to cope with an uncertain future. It must be exciting and motivating for all children and their teachers; and enabling for teachers, providing sufficient flexibility so that they can exercise professional autonomy. In countering the view that provision for young children should concentrate mostly on literacy and numeracy, the article calls for more emphasis on other areas, especially the humanities and the arts and the ways of working associated with these. This would counteract the narrowing effect of neo-liberal approaches and help to 're-humanise' how young children are taught.

CONTACT Tony Eade  tony@edperspectives.org.uk

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

While the content of the written curriculum, especially in areas related to humanities, may reasonably reflect particular national and cultural priorities, the overall structure of the curriculum should take account of, and enhance, how children learn. Therefore, a curriculum similar to those adopted in the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum in England (see DfE 2024) and in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and the International Baccalaureate, is advocated where this structured by areas of learning rather than separate subjects.

After studying history as an undergraduate, I became a teacher of young children and then head-teacher of a school for 5–9 year olds in Oxford, UK. I then completed a doctorate exploring how teachers of young children understand spiritual development and have subsequently worked independently and written especially on a range of themes related to how young children learn. In around 2012, my concerns – and those of a group of colleagues – about the narrowing of the primary curriculum and an interest in the humanities grew. This led to the 2017 special issue of *Education 3–13* and the formation of Humanities2020, an initiative to promote the humanities in primary schools. More broadly, this reflected a serious concern about how the primary curriculum fails to meet the needs of many young children, such that a significant minority are disengaged from school learning by the age of 11. While these concerns are mostly related to the context of England, similar views related to ‘schoolification’ are evident in other systems (OECD 2017).

The next two sections highlight key issues in the current social/cultural and educational contexts and challenges and dilemmas in curriculum design. How the humanities should be understood when working with young children and the associated ways of working are then discussed. This is followed by sections on the contribution of different subject disciplines, the implications for teachers of young children and for policy.

The social/cultural and educational contexts

Recent decades have seen considerable social and cultural changes, many resulting from globalisation and new technologies. Some have been beneficial but others more worrying, such as:

- the evidence related to sustainability, climate change and environmental degradation resulting from increased consumption of natural resources;
- greater inequality and increased polarisation, individualism and loss of social cohesion, where people rarely interact with those from different backgrounds and cultures, with the danger of ‘echo chambers’ where one only listens to those with similar views;
- a rise of disaffection with democratic governments and support for authoritarianism; and
- the impact of social media and advertising, for instance in terms of immediacy, disinformation, aggressive discourse and children being commodified (see Sociology Institute 2023; OECD 2025 and Eade 2020, 56–60).

These have led to worries, especially in societies in the global North, about children:

- spending too much time on screens and having reduced opportunities for play and physical activity;
- being overprotected and living in a bubble where they are shielded from what may upset them and interact mostly with people from similar backgrounds; and
- showing growing levels of unhappiness and mental health difficulties (Children’s Society 2024).

Since 2017, these trends have become more pronounced, with increasing evidence of the effects of climate change, increasing polarisation and the rise of ‘fake news’ and developments in artificial intelligence (AI). The global pandemic and associated lockdown and social isolation, and the increased cost of living, has had a significant and, in some cases long-term, detrimental effect on children’s well-being, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ghosh et al. 2020;

Meade 2021). Worries about how many children have worse physical and mental health, with greater levels of obesity, stress and anxiety, reflected in less engagement with, and absence from, school have increased. Growing numbers of children are identified as having special educational needs and disabilities and being neurodiverse. This is accompanied by concerns about delayed language development and reduced attention spans (Zuniga-Montanez et al. 2025). The reasons for these trends – and how worried one should be – are complex and disputed. While one should be cautious about attributing causes, these seem likely to result at least partly from more sedentary, individualised lifestyles and more use of, and reliance on, screens with almost all adults, and increasing numbers of even very young children owning smartphones and having fewer interactions with real people.

I suggest that these challenges mean that children must learn from an early age to cope confidently with complexity and uncertainty and be more critical of what information they can trust. Despite this, neo-liberal approaches which have become dominant in many schooling systems world-wide focus mostly on a narrow range of subjects and what can be measured. The strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills – often out of context – and measurable outcomes means that the humanities and the creative arts – what Alexander (2010) calls Curriculum 2 – are frequently marginalised and seen as desirable but inessential. Similar considerations are true, though to a lesser extent, of physical education and science despite the widespread concern about children not taking enough exercise and the reduced number of older children studying STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects.

These trends have been accompanied – and arguably encouraged – by a written curriculum that is very content-heavy with a considerable emphasis on prescribed methods of teaching, notably in reading, especially for children aged 5–7. Despite calls for the curriculum to be ‘decolonised’ and more inclusive, historically marginalised groups remain under-represented and the curriculum fails to engage many children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (see Reay 2022). The emphasis on performativity has resulted in pressure on teachers and children to achieve high scores and reduced the autonomy of teachers to decide how to teach (see Ball 2016), though the extent to which teachers feel able to exercise autonomy varies considerably between schools. Teachers feel obliged to cover large amounts of content and to demonstrate children’s progress through high stakes assessment. Increasingly, schools and teachers have come to rely on published material rather than designing a curriculum offer appropriate to their own context. Moreover, as Pring (2001) argues, while education must, and indeed can, not be value-free, recent trends have led to the actual practice of education becoming detached from a moral perspective.

It is depressing that the concerns raised in EAUDE et al. (2017) – and many other places – especially about curriculum narrowing and the lack of professional development opportunities in the humanities have not been addressed in the English system. The situation has arguably worsened, notably in relation to teacher education and continuing professional development. It has been exacerbated by changes to initial teacher education, based on the Core Content Framework (DfE 2019) with a strong emphasis on a prescribed approach to how to teach, especially reading. As a result, even less time than previously has been allocated for those preparing to be teachers to gain a solid grounding in how to teach other curriculum areas including the humanities and the arts – or design and teach a broad and balanced curriculum. This has been accompanied by a reduced level of professional development opportunities for in-service teachers, especially in areas other than literacy, numeracy and behaviour management. It seems from the recent (March 2025) Interim Report of the Curriculum and Assessment Review (DfE 2025) that little change to the primary curriculum or assessment and accountability mechanisms is proposed.

The rationale for the focus on literacy and numeracy skills, especially for young children – and those who find reading, writing and numeracy difficult – seems to be that children must learn these skills before experiencing a broader curriculum. In contrast, this article argues that children can, and should, learn these skills more indirectly by applying them in a range of contexts and that radical changes to the written curriculum – and how it is taught – are required. To understand why, one must consider what curriculum design involves.

Challenges and dilemmas in curriculum design

Designing a curriculum which is appropriate for children and their teachers is not easy. There is a tendency to start from a particular structure, usually based on what is familiar, and content which is deemed important for children to know; and to add content, but only rarely to reduce it, which leads to an overfull curriculum. In contrast, as the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2010, 180–183) suggests, one should start by identifying aims, whereas too often aims are added as an afterthought, and aims must include both individual and collective ones.

A curriculum is not just a syllabus. The written curriculum interacts with the informal and the hidden curriculum each of which exert a strong influence on children's learning. The curriculum should not be seen in isolation from pedagogy – how it is taught – or from assessment and accountability mechanisms – how success is judged. Too often these constrain how children learn and teachers teach, whereas the written curriculum should be enabling, of children's learning and of teachers' pedagogy. As Bruner wrote,

[w]e have learned that there is no such thing as *the* curriculum, there is only *a* curriculum; it is very specific to a particular situation and a particular student, and it will vary. For, in effect, it's an animated three-way conversation between a learner, someone who is somewhat more expert in an area of study and a body of knowledge that is difficult to define but that exists in the culture. (*emphasis in original*). (2006 vol. 2, 141)

Therefore, teaching involves curriculum-making, not simply delivery.

In Kumar's words, 'a child needs to learn through the whole body and all senses; through touching, and smelling, and feeling, and hearing, and seeing. Head, heart and hands; knowledge with experience. Knowledge without experience is only half the story' (2021, 18). Education involves more than learning factual information or acquiring a set of skills. The lives of human beings are often 'messy' with no easy answers and education should reflect and enable children from a young age to explore how people live and the cultures in which they do so. Children need factual information but also to know how to assess whether such information is accurate. Skills have to be contextualised and applied, especially for less experienced learners. Learning is deepened more by representing, and reflecting on, experiences than trying to memorise information (Bruner 2006 vol. 1, 69).

Engagement and motivation are essential, with young children learning more and usually more engaged through being active, doing and talking rather than just listening (see Oracy Commission 2024). In particular, they require a secure social and emotional grounding and dispositions such as confidence and resilience to enable them to be fluent and discriminating readers, writers and mathematicians and more broadly to flourish now and in future (OECD 2024). However, as Gruitjers, Raabe, and Hübner (2024) argue, initiatives designed to promote social and emotional learning, while useful, are unlikely to reduce educational inequality substantially. A more holistic approach is required.

As indicated by reports such as the Rose Review (DCSF 2009) and the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2010), structuring and teaching the curriculum as discrete subjects is inappropriate for young children, since this tends to interrupt their trains of thought and of interest and to hinder them from recognising different ways of solving problems. Therefore, one should view the curriculum holistically and the boundaries between different subjects, or disciplines, should be fluid, especially for young children. To see the importance of the humanities within that, the next section considers how this area of learning can be conceptualised in appropriate ways for young children.

How the humanities can be understood in ways appropriate to how young children learn

This section and the next consider the arguments set out in more detail in Eade (2017) which argued that how 'the humanities' is understood depends on how the aims of education are seen

and varies significantly in different contexts and age groups. For instance, in Higher Education, the term has fairly porous boundaries including disciplines such as literature, languages, history, philosophy and often music, whereas in secondary and primary schools, it usually refers to History, Geography and Religious Education (RE), and sometimes foreign languages and/or citizenship. However, Small's description that 'the humanities study the meaning-making practices of human culture, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity' (Small 2013, 23) provides a different, more helpful starting point.

Seen this way, every subject discipline contains aspects related to the humanities. EAUDE (2017) argues for areas such as literature, foreign languages, drama, philosophy and music, as well as History, Geography and RE to be considered as part of 'the humanities'. These all enable children to understand and appreciate how humans live and think within different cultures and become more sensitive to the perspectives of different people and cultures, so enabling them to become, over time, responsible, thoughtful citizens.

As Nussbaum (2010) argues, the humanities, and the knowledge and qualities associated with its associated disciplines, provide a foundation for how children become active and engaged citizens in a democratic society. The values which underpin how democratic societies function are learned not only as children learn about civil and social structures but as they participate in processes which contribute to (or at least consider) collective well-being and fairness. Articulating their own views and hearing those of other people increases children's awareness of and consideration for other people's views. This helps to develop children's oracy skills by providing opportunities to speak openly about what matters to them and enhances their sense of self and responsibility towards other people and the planet. An emphasis on rights, for instance using the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC n.d.), can help to develop children's understanding of social justice and participation in democratic processes. Such an approach helps ensure that pupils leave primary school empowered to recognise the importance of creating a more compassionate society and skilled at presenting, and responding to, informed arguments. Yet, where such an approach to citizenship education fits in a subject-based curriculum is not clear, exemplifying the need for a broader approach to curriculum rather than one based on separate subjects. This is similar to how concepts such as creativity or imagination should be treated, since they can and should be nurtured in all subject areas or disciplines, though this may be more important and/or easier in some.

The rationale for an approach suitable for young children to meet the challenges which the world, societies, communities and individuals face is set out in the Humanities2020 manifesto (see www.humanities2020.org.uk) stating that:

Put simply, the humanities matter because they enable children to:

- consider questions about the meaning and purpose of their lives
- explore their own identities, values and beliefs and concepts such as time, space and faith
- develop skills and habits associated with critical and creative thinking
- extend their cultural and imaginative horizons
- learn to empathise with people who are different, as well as those who are similar, thereby celebrating diversity and challenging stereotypes
- learn about democracy, global citizenship and sustainability
- strengthen a sense of care for themselves, each other and the planet in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

This indicates that the humanities help to develop a broad range of types of knowledge, skills and dispositions and provide opportunities for children to consider their rights and responsibilities to other people and to recognise how shared understandings, values and beliefs – and respecting different ones – enrich societies. As such, they are vital elements of provision for what legislation in England and Wales calls children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and the

holistic development of the whole child. However, it is the ways of working associated with the humanities which contribute most to how children learn.

The ways of working associated with the humanities

The humanities do not provide children (or teachers) with easy answers to difficult questions so much as the tools with which to investigate these. These include, in particular, practical ways of working and fieldwork such as visits outside the classroom where children are active learners, based as much as possible on first-hand experience. Such an approach requires, and encourages, enquiry skills and habits such as observation, analysis, interpretation and synthesis associated with critical thinking (O'Reilly, Devitt, and Hayes 2022). These ways of working help to deepen procedural and personal/interpersonal – rather than only propositional – knowledge. They do so by enabling children to relate abstract ideas to their own, often rather limited, experience and to engage with complexity, recognising that many questions do not have black and white answers. These are crucial elements of how children learn at a level beyond memorisation and are particularly relevant with the increasingly easy availability of information and use of AI (see OECD n.d.). I suggest that they can also help moderate children's dependence on technology, with AI being seen as a tool which can help humans to solve problems rather than providing definitive answers.

Working in these ways helps to strengthen dispositions such as curiosity, imagination, empathy, kindness and resilience, in ways to be discussed, and children's sense of agency and voice. While there is no agreement on the exact definition of terms such as agency (Murray 2025) and voice, agency is usually considered as involving the 'capacity to act'. However, Thomson and Maloy (2022, 27) nuance this to suggest that agency is 'the capacity to act, and to make choices and decisions about matters that concern you'. Children need not only agency but a sense of agency, to feel able to influence what happens in their own lives and the communities in which they live, whether individually or collectively. Murray (2019) argues that too often children, especially young ones, are not listened to and that 'if we do not listen actively and attend to each child's voice, we convey to the child and others that we do not value the child's perspective, and ultimately, that we do not value the child' (2019, 2). So, adults must not only hear what children say, but attend and respond with care to their feelings, beliefs, thoughts, wishes, preferences and attitudes.

This suggests that a curriculum in which the humanities have a prominent place is more inclusive in at least two senses, that it is more engaging and motivating and that it encourages children to be respectful of the background and opinions of those different from themselves. The extent to which the active ways of working associated with humanities, based on a wide range of experiences, can help to engage a wide range of children and to ignite a lifelong passion for learning should not be underestimated in a context where a significant number of children are bored by, or disengaged from, school learning by the age of 11. This is partly because these ways of working tend to engage children's interests in ways that more directive methods of teaching do not.

By learning to think and act as historians and geographers – and members of other disciplines – with an increasingly nuanced understanding of human cultures, children can see how their own stories are part of the larger and longer story of humanity in all its diversity. This enables children to explore similarities and differences between people and cultures and issues such as those related to sustainability, migration and conflict, which may be difficult and controversial, but should not be ignored. It offers children what are sometimes called mirrors and windows – the former to see and understand themselves better, the latter to observe and empathise with other people and the wider world. In these ways, the humanities help children to make sense of themselves, their own, their families' and other people's stories and where they belong – and where they do not – which is particularly important when so many children have led fragmented lives. This approach also encourages children and teachers to bring a 'lens' of values to their thinking and has a key role in reinjecting a moral and ethical element into the currently ethics-light

curriculum, as they encourage children to consider how other people feel and think and to empathise with them.

Such an approach can help especially to motivate and empower children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who find literacy and numeracy difficult. Many children from disadvantaged backgrounds have had a more limited range of opportunities than those from more privileged ones and come to school with less experience of the reciprocal interactions and dialogue essential to school learning and can easily become disheartened and demotivated. Teachers should therefore build on the 'funds of knowledge' which children especially those from disadvantaged communities bring, but which are often not seen as valuable in schools (see Volman and 't Gilde 2021).

There is a risk that using a term such as 'the humanities' will lead to a loss of focus on the knowledge, skills and concepts associated with particular subject disciplines. But there is also a danger in separating what and how children are taught into separate silos, as they may not see the connections between different areas of learning. So, a significant challenge for teachers is to enable children to learn the knowledge, skills, concepts and ways of thinking and working associated with specific disciplines while also encouraging thinking across disciplinary boundaries.

The contribution of different subject disciplines

This section considers briefly the contribution of various subject disciplines. Given what has been said above, this includes not only History, Geography and RE but also mentions others briefly. However, one should remember that young children tend not to recognise these distinctions and that their learning is frequently enhanced by cross-curricular approaches, as discussed in the next section.

While History is often thought of in terms of dates, chronology and a particular narrative of the past, this is a limited view. As Davison (2010) suggests, history can help to develop a sense of empathy for people from different times (see also Brooks 2009). Children need to hear a range of stories to understand how people and societies have lived and changed over time and to recognise how they and their family fit into these narratives. Young children are capable of asking pertinent questions and deciding why events happened and people acted as they did and so extend their knowledge and range of skills. As children approach adolescence, they can gain a greater understanding of more complex concepts such as chronology, change, continuity and causation, but it is essential to engage their interest first. One main way in which children learn to act and think as historians is through first-hand experience, for instance by handling artefacts and visiting historic sites and using skills such as observation and interpretation. Such experiences can help to bring abstract ideas about the past alive and make it meaningful in a way which children find harder if teaching concentrates on events which are distant from their own experience (see Cooper 2014).

Geography is usually associated mostly with place, but it has three overlapping elements: physical, human and environmental. A geographical perspective is useful in understanding all three – and how humans fit in and have influenced, and been shaped by, their environment. Maps and digital data reveal key patterns and distributions which illuminate our understanding of both the physical and the human environment. In relation to issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and migration, geography empowers children by helping them make sense of what is happening around them and in the wider world. At a local level, the study of place and fieldwork contribute to children's sense of belonging and identity in their communities which in turn helps to build their resilience and sense of well-being. As Scoffham and Owens (2024) suggest, it is hard to see how children can be equipped as active and engaged citizens of the future without a secure grounding in geography.

RE, in systems where it is taught in schools, is often associated with what members of faith communities believe and their practices – and often in the case of schools with a specific religious foundation includes instructing children in their own faith. However, since many children are not members of faith communities and most religions are diverse, such an approach is limited and

often not inclusive. Through Religion and Worldviews approach (Pett 2024), children begin to identify and understand their own worldviews, whether religious or not, in conversation with those with different experiences and beliefs. They learn about the influence of faith and non-faith on personal, family, cultural and social attitudes and activities and do so best by direct experience, for instance of places of worship, artefacts and rituals. Such an approach to RE enables children to engage with a range of religious and non-religious beliefs and values; and to understand the role of beliefs in the development of human societies and relate this to their own and their families' beliefs and values. Taught in this way, RE makes an important contribution to 'the humanities' by encouraging openness and criticality and by broadening children's appreciation of what it means to be human and live as responsible citizens in a complex and diverse world.

There is not enough space to do more than touch on how other subject disciplines can be taught to achieve the aims set out in relation to the humanities. However, learning a foreign language is not just about memorising vocabulary and the rules of grammar, or being able to communicate, but can also help children to gain a greater understanding of the people who speak it and the culture(s) in which they live. This helps children to recognise similarities with, and differences from, their own cultures and assumptions. Reading literature and poetry and participating in play and drama (Winston 1998) helps children to explore questions related to identity and belonging, especially through imagining and entering into how other people – whether real or fictional – feel and respond and so becoming more empathetic.

Philosophical discussion, for instance using the Philosophy for Children approach, can enable children to think about and discuss complex questions which do not have easy answers and may require regular revisiting. These can be engaging even for young children, especially when related to their own experience and questions (see Kizel 2016). Listening to and performing music and looking at, and creating, different art forms can obviously be a source of enjoyment, but at a deeper level also help children to understand and appreciate different cultures. In learning mathematics and science, children should learn about the contribution of different cultures and how these disciplines enhance human wellbeing, or otherwise. So, the types of knowledge, skills and dispositions associated with the humanities can be developed in all areas of learning. Many are hard to measure in any meaningful way but considering how each child responds to different experiences and areas of learning can help to inform more holistic ways of monitoring and assessing progress.

Implications for teachers of young children

However they are conceptualised in theory, the humanities need to be well-taught in ways appropriate to the age and level of experience of a particular group of children. Enabling children to engage in sustained thinking matters more than covering every detail of the written curriculum. Achieving this may take longer but leads to more embedded learning. This and the next section consider both how teachers can do so if the curriculum is structured flexibly as areas of learning and how those working within current constraints can adopt a more engaging and inclusive approach. In both cases, this is less about the delivery of information and getting caught up in a frantic struggle to memorise a huge stockpile of factual information than how children are encouraged to think deeply and sensitively.

There are many different ways of enabling children's learning – and part of the teacher's expertise is to discover and encourage the most appropriate ways for particular children and groups to learn. Expertise consists more in enabling children to work independently and interact thoughtfully with others than relying on and delivering published material. Such an approach requires professional judgement more than detailed knowledge of each subject. While some content knowledge of a range of subject disciplines is required, even more important is what Shulman (2004) called pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), the ways in which knowledge is structured and presented to make it accessible and comprehensible to children, and enthusiasm.

Much of what constitutes good teaching involves subtle ways of acting and responding to children, seeing even very young children as capable if inexperienced learners and by modelling appropriate ways of acting and thinking. This requires teachers to watch and listen more and to talk less. While each discipline has particular types of knowledge, skills and concepts, these are usually best learned by being exemplified, drawn out from children's experiences and questions and contextualised rather than taught in the abstract.

Enabling children to think and act as historians and geographers (and as scientists, appreciators of art and music and philosophers) – but more basically as makers, enquirers and interpreters – is helped by sustained study and fieldwork based on a key issue, approaching it from different perspectives. Suitable issues might relate, for instance, to a particular community or society, a historical period or the role of women or people of colour but are usually most fruitful when related to how humans act and think and which encourage children to approach and consider these from more than one angle (see Kidd 2020 for several examples). This can help to avoid fragmentation and becoming too constrained by definite subject boundaries and enable children and teachers to create and take advantage of opportunities for cross-curricular learning.

Drawing on different disciplines can enable children to make associations with their prior learning more easily. As Barnes (2015) suggests, cross-curricular learning occurs when the skills, knowledge and attitudes of different disciplines are applied to a single theme, problem, idea or experience. This reflects his insight that 'our experience of the world is cross-curricular. Everything that surrounds us can be seen and understood from multiple perspectives' (2015, 1). For instance, to contribute to a sustainable future, children need to learn not only from science and geography, but other areas such as literature, drama, art and mathematics, which all potentially help them to acquire a greater depth of understanding. And practical activities usually deepen children's commitment and empowers them to act on what they have learned.

One familiar but effective method of introducing new ideas and enriching children's thinking is to tell stories, from both familiar and unfamiliar cultures. Stories help to humanise characters who may otherwise seem too unlike them to be interesting to children. They make abstract ideas more easily comprehensible and are a vital resource in opening the windows of the imagination and enabling children to see themselves reflected in the mirrors created. They broaden children's horizons, encouraging emotional engagement and enabling them to recognise similarities and differences even when the cultural context may be unfamiliar and strange (see EAUDE 2020, 101–105 on the importance of stories).

Creating inclusive environments

A key feature of teaching the humanities is to create inclusive environments which offer time and space for considering the questions and adopting the ways of working described above. Inevitably, and rightly, given the complexity of many of the issues, teachers have a tendency to generalise and to oversimplify, especially for young children. They need to keep things simple but not too simple. For instance, to encourage critical thinking, children from a young age should be enabled to distinguish between matters of fact and those of opinion or interpretation on which people do not agree or cannot be absolutely sure. To help strengthen their sense of agency and voice, children should be encouraged to ask questions, wonder and speculate, to explore and make mistakes, and to question their own and the assumptions of other people and cultures. But children must feel able to do so. Therefore, teachers must ensure that the environment feels, and is, safe. They must exert control in some respects such as correcting misconceptions and challenging discriminatory behaviours but not overprotect children, which requires a gradual transfer of agency from teacher to child. So, teachers need to be positive and hopeful (Kidd 2020) but without avoiding or overlooking issues which may be difficult and upsetting.

Many important issues in the humanities are linked to values and beliefs which can make it difficult to be inclusive, especially in diverse groups. Nussbaum (2010, 33–34) suggests that being

afraid of ‘the other’, what is alien or threatening to us, is part of our basic instincts and that all human societies have created ‘out-groups’ who are stigmatised as shameful or disgusting or both. However, children – and adults – must listen and learn to disagree respectfully; and for children to work in diverse groups usually helps to avoid stereotyping and othering. But this raises the problem of how adults should help children to generalise without oversimplifying – and possibly encouraging stereotypes. Teachers have a responsibility to challenge discrimination and stereotypes, but also to avoid indoctrination while trying to open up and enable thoughtful discussion. This requires them to be open-minded which, in Bruner’s (1990, 30) words, implies ‘a willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives, without loss of commitment to one’s own values’.

In considering whether young children can work and think in the ways discussed, I suggest not only that they can do so, with sensitive guidance and support, but that this is necessary if they are to be, and become, active and engaged citizens, caring for other people and the environment. Young children have many of the qualities and dispositions, such as curiosity, imagination and flexibility, needed to deepen their understanding of themselves and other people and address the challenges which they face now and will face in the future. Such dispositions need to be strengthened by regular practice rather than constrained by an over-emphasis on memorising information.

Such an approach to teaching the humanities – and a broad and balanced curriculum – is not impossible in a context – whether at school or system level – which prioritises factual information; and demands compliance whether directly or through high stakes summative assessment and accountability. But it is much harder. I suggest that teachers need to act ‘beneath the radar’ as they often do, adopting strategies such as:

- using a range of subjects to develop and apply the skills associated with literacy;
- enabling children to have first-hand experiences where possible;
- providing a good role-model of how to address issues to which there is no simple answer by talking less, listening more and not being too certain;
- creating and sustaining inclusive environments which provide time and space for children to ask and discuss, rather than just to listen or complete worksheets; and
- encouraging and looking out for cross-curricular opportunities, especially responding to children’s comments or questions which provide these.

Policy implications

This article has argued that education needs to be ‘rehumanised’, with a greater emphasis on how different groups of people live, feel and relate to each other. Events in the few years since 2017 mean that a broad and balanced curriculum, providing more time for exploration, reflection and discussion, is even more important. The global pandemic seems to have had long-lasting adverse effects on children’s social and emotional development and mental health. Moreover, children and societies face significant challenges with the increased influence of technology, including AI, and the wide variety of sources of information, some of it of questionable reliability. Literacy and numeracy skills are important but they are, in most systems, accorded too much emphasis, leading to a narrow, utilitarian curriculum which fails to engage many children. The humanities, especially the associated ways of working and the dispositions which they can help to strengthen, are vital if children are to flourish and learn to cope confidently and compassionately with such challenges. Moreover, this area of learning can provide an enjoyable context for learning and applying in meaningful contexts the skills and dispositions associated with becoming confident speakers, listeners, readers and writers.

In considering the policy implications, one should recall that curriculum design should start from aims and how young children are motivated to learn. One needs to take account of how the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values such as those set out in OECD (n.d.) can best be developed in the

light of national and local priorities and circumstances, such as the number and quality of teachers. Some issues related to history and religion, and even geography, may be sensitive or controversial in culturally diverse societies. Therefore, there is no simple blueprint universally applicable and this section can only set out general principles to be adapted to different contexts.

This article has argued for a holistic, more expansive approach similar to that of *Bildung*, which recognises that all aspects of learning and of life are connected and is likely to motivate most children, especially those from less advantaged backgrounds, and strengthen their sense of agency. Such an approach matters even more in a globalised world which has experienced rapid social and cultural change and will continue to do so. Among the most influential factors in such an approach are the caring environments and relationships which teachers create and how they teach, modelling these and exercising professional judgement. This means that teachers, especially in primary education, must be flexible with a large repertoire of strategies, to follow children's interests and to change course where appropriate. An underlying assumption is that teaching, especially with young children, should be a relationship-based, holistic process which enables children to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, other people and cultures and societies: a moral, values-led enterprise rather than just a technical one focussed on factual information and skills (Warnock 1996).

Such an approach requires not only changes to the written curriculum, but also a broader view of the aims of education and a greater emphasis on professional autonomy than those in most educational systems currently. Prescribing in great detail the content of what children are expected to remember impedes this. The written curriculum should be a loose framework which steers and enables teachers to exercise their professional judgement, based on their knowledge of the children in their care. This is easier when the curriculum is structured in broad areas of learning, such as the humanities and the creative arts, rather than as discrete subjects. For policy to insist, whether explicitly or more subtly, on one particular method of teaching is too limiting and the curriculum must be unlocked from high stakes assessment and accountability mechanisms if young children are to thrive. A greater emphasis on formative teacher assessment and on accountability mechanisms which are developmental rather than designed to ensure compliance is necessary to enable teachers to exercise agency and professional judgment.

One may reasonably ask if this is all too difficult for young children and their teachers. The answer to the first part is no, as long as children are gradually introduced to the ways of working and thinking outlined above. This requires sensitive teaching, so the answer to the second part depends on how skilled and confident teachers are. Many teachers of young children may feel anxious about a lack of expertise and confidence in teaching in these ways resulting from a narrow approach in initial teacher education and continuing professional development. There are therefore significant policy challenges, at national, local government and school level, in terms of curriculum design, leadership and professional development and the resources required, all of which require further consideration and research.

These changes may seem difficult to achieve. However, they reflect a long, though often-forgotten, tradition as discussed in a wealth of research, advocated in several reports and adopted in other systems including recently Wales, Scotland and Ireland. It is time for a radical change of priorities to ensure a more holistic curriculum better suited to the needs of children and the societies and the uncertain times in which we live than the ones currently in place in systems dominated by neo-liberal thinking.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Tony EAUDE  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6242-1458>

References

- Alexander, R. 2010. *Children, Their World, Their Education – Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ball, S. J. 2016. "Neoliberal Education? Confronting the Slouching Beast." *Policy Futures in Education* 14 (8): 1046–1059. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316664259>.
- Barnes, J. 2015. *Cross-Curricular Learning* 3–14. London: Sage.
- Brooks, S. 2009. "Historical Empathy in the Social Studies Classroom: A Review of the Literature." *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 33 (2): 213–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/235227982009033002004>
- Bruner, J. 1990. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. S. 2006. *In Search of Pedagogy: The Selected Works of Jerome S. Bruner (2 volumes)*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Children's Society. 2024. "The Good Childhood Report 2024. The Good Childhood Report." *The Children's Society*.
- Cooper, H. 2014. *The Teaching of History in Primary Schools: Implementing the Revised National Curriculum*. London: Routledge.
- Davison, M. 2010. "The Case for Empathy in the History Classroom." *Curriculum Matters* 6:82–98. <https://doi.org/10.18296/cm.0124>.
- DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families). 2009. "Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum: Final Report (The Rose Review)." Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum: Final Report.
- DfE. 2024. "Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework. Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework - GOV.UK."
- DfE. 2025. "Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report." Curriculum and Assessment Review: interim report - GOV.UK.
- DfE (Department for Education). 2019. "Initial Teacher Training (ITT): Core Content Framework." Initial teacher training (ITT): Core Content Framework - GOV.UK.
- Eaude, T. 2017. "Humanities in the Primary School – Philosophical Considerations." *Education 3-13* 45 (3): 343–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2017.1296922>.
- Eaude, T. 2020. *Identity, Culture and Belonging: Educating Young Children for a Changing World*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Eaude, T., G. Butt, S. Catling, and P. Vass. 2017. "The Future of the Humanities in Primary Schools – Reflections in Troubled Times." *Education 3-13* 45 (3): 386–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2017.1296926>.
- Ghosh, R., M. J. Dubey, S. Chatterjee, and S. Dubey. 2020. "Impact of COVID-19 on Children: Special Focus on the Psychosocial Aspect." *Minerva Pediatrics* 72 (3): 226–235. <https://doi.org/10.23736/S0026-4946.20.05887-9>.
- Gruitjers, R. J., I. J. Raabe, and N. Hübner. 2024. "Socio-emotional Skills and the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap." *Sociology of Education* 97 (2): 120–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407231216424>.
- Kidd, D. 2020. *A Curriculum of Hope: as Rich in Humanity as in Knowledge*. Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press.
- Kizel, A. 2016. "Philosophy with Children as an Educational Platform for Self-determined Learning." *Cogent Education* 3 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1244026>.
- Kumar, S. 2021. "The Primary Geography Interview." *Primary Geography* 105 (Spring 2021): 16–18.
- Meade, J. 2021. "Mental Health Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Adolescents- A Review of the Current Research." *Pediatric Clinics of North America* 68 (5): 945–959. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pcl.2021.05.003>
- Murray, J. 2019. "Hearing Young Children's Voices." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 27 (1): 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2018.1563352>.
- Murray, J. 2025. "Young Children's Agency." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 33 (2): 237–243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2025.2495432>.
- Nussbaum, M. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). 2017. *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). 2024. "Social and Emotional Skills for Better Lives - Findings from the OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills 2023." 35ca7b7c-en.pdf.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). 2025. *Trends Shaping Education 2025*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). n.d. *Future of Education and Skills 2030/2040*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Oracy Commission. 2024. "We Need to Talk - The Report of the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England." Future-of-Oracy-v23-web-13.pdf.
- O'Reilly, C., A. Devitt, and N. Hayes. 2022. "Critical Thinking in the Preschool Classroom - A Systematic Literature Review." *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 46:101110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2022.101110>.
- Pett, S. 2024. *Developing a Religion and Worldviews Approach in Religious Education in England: A Handbook for Curriculum Writers*. London: The Religious Education Council of England and Wales. 24-25698-REC-Handbook-A4-DIGITAL-PAGES.pdf.
- Pring, R. 2001. "Education as a Moral Practice." *Journal of Moral Education* 30 (2): 101–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240120061360>

- Reay, D. 2022. "Lessons From Abroad: How Can We Achieve a Socially Just Educational System?" *Irish Educational Studies* 41 (3): 425–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2022.2085766>.
- Scoffham, S., and P. Owens. 2024. *Teaching Primary Geography*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Shulman, L. S. 2004. *The Wisdom of Practice - Essays on Teaching, Learning and Learning to Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Small, H. 2013. *The Value of the Humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sociology Institute. 2023. *The Impact of Social Change on Society and Individuals*. Sociology. Institute.
- Thomson, P., and L. Maloy. 2022. *The Benefits of Art, Craft and Design Education in Schools: A Rapid Evidence Review*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham.
- UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). n.d. UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf.
- Volman, M., and J. 't Gilde. 2021. "The Effects of Using Students' Funds of Knowledge on Educational Outcomes in the Social and Personal Domain." *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* 28:100472. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2020.100472>.
- Warnock, M. 1996. "Moral Values." In *In Values in Education and Education in Values*, edited by J. M. Halstead and M. J. Taylor, 45–53. London: Falmer.
- Winston, J. 1998. *Drama, Narrative and Moral Education*. London: Falmer.
- Zuniga-Montanez, C., C. Davies, L. Ligoxygakis, D. Kaščelan, and N. Gonzalez-Gomez. 2025. "Annual Research Review: How did COVID-19 Affect Young Children's Language Environment and Language Development? A Scoping Review." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 66 (4): 569–587. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.14102>.