Education 3–13

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

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To cite this article: Denis Hayes (2010) The seductive charms of a cross-curricular approach, Education 3–13, 38:4, 381-387, DOI: 10.1080/03004270903519238

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004270903519238

Published online: 09 Nov 2010.

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Education 3–13
Vol. 38, No. 4, November 2010, 381–387

The seductive charms of a cross-curricular approach

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(*Received 5 November 2009*)

The Rose Review has been published to sort out all those nasty curriculum and pedagogical problems that have bewildered, frustrated and exhausted so many primary teachers over the recent past! This article addresses one aspect of the recommendations, namely, the role of cross-curricular approaches to strengthen teaching and learning. Perhaps this is the 'Holy Grail' for which we have eagerly waited. On the other hand, perhaps it is a 'poisoned chalice' to corrupt the sanctity of subject divisions and impose a modern version of project work on unsuspecting teachers and learners. Hopefully, it is a welcome flash of warm sunlight beaming through the dark clouds of curriculum prescription and government 'recommended' teaching methods. In this short article I offer a variety of perspectives on the place of the cross-curricular proposals and suggest that whatever our viewpoint, a curriculum review of any sort is an opportunity to interrogate the purpose of education for children and young people, who deserve every chance to be happy and fulfilled.

Keywords: cross-curricular; integration; subject boundaries

Preamble

The Rose Review (Rose 2009) was commissioned to address concerns that the current National Curriculum is too prescribed and content-heavy – a condition that has led to teacher fatigue and compelled them to meet impossibly tight deadlines. A central requirement of the review was therefore (a) to decrease this prescription and (b) to reduce the curriculum overload. The committee also considered how the content and teaching of the curriculum should change to foster children's varied and developing abilities. The task was therefore a 'root and branch' one and not for the faint-hearted! The committee concluded that although 'subjects will remain in their own right', the current National Curriculum subjects ought to reside within six areas of learning:

(1) Understanding English, communication and languages.
(2) Mathematical understanding.
(3) Scientific and technological understanding.
(4) Historical, geographical and social understanding.
(5) Understanding physical development, health and wellbeing.
(6) Understanding the arts.

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ISSN 0300-4279 print/ISSN 1475-7575 online
© 2010 ASPE
DOI: 10.1080/03004270903519238
http://www.informaworld.com

As other contributors to this edition have noted, the *Independent review of the primary curriculum* (Rose 2009) under the chairmanship of Sir Jim Rose focuses solely on the curriculum and not on primary education as a whole; most notably, it does not take account of issues relating to assessment, which is deemed by most commentators as a regrettable omission. Indeed, it can fairly be stated that a curriculum without the assessment criteria contradicts all the evidence (and not a little rhetoric) that has issued from government in recent years about their inter-connectedness.

The findings from countless reports, studies and anecdotal evidence over the past decade or more reinforce a perception that a great deal of teaching has been geared towards ensuring pupils' success in formal examinations. It is certainly undeniable that the work of most teachers of children aged 7 and (especially) aged 11 in England has necessarily been overshadowed by concerns over the children's ability to succeed in the National Curriculum Tests (formerly referred to as 'Standard Assessment Tests'; before that known as 'Standard Assessment Tasks' or SATs). The latest inspection framework in England takes account of many factors, including effective liaison with parents, extended provision (outside the normal school day) and safeguarding children; even so, test results dominate the agenda and schools have to provide mountains of statistics to (supposedly) demonstrate that pupils are making academic progress. One way and another, assessments that measure standards of attainment – and formal test results in particular – simply cannot and should not be ignored in any curriculum review.

Significantly, *cross-curricular teaching* is to be fostered 'to strengthen' the six areas; and it is with this particular aspect of the Rose Review that the remainder of this article is principally concerned. It should be noted in passing that the National Primary Strategy in England of 2003 (DfES 2003) stated that subjects did not have to be taught discretely and could be grouped or taught in projects – an option that has been received with varying degrees of enthusiasm in schools across the country. See, for example, Jeffrey and Woods' description of creative learning in school (Jeffrey and Woods 2009).

Cross-curricular

Most definitions of cross-curricular work – also known as curriculum integration – emphasise how combinations of subjects are used within project or thematic work, incorporating a wide range of sources, related concepts and flexible schedules. A cross-curricular approach is referred to as 'interdisciplinary' because it incorporates more than a single subject area; the subject disciplines may be related through a central theme, issue, problem, process, topic or experience (Jacobs 1989). It is therefore closely associated with thematic teaching and synergistic teaching (synergy means 'combined interaction'). Arguments in favour of an integrated curriculum have their basis in the work of theorists who advocate a constructivist view of learning; that is, children finding out by direct experience – often jointly with other pupils – rather than by being told. Fogarty (1995) describes 10 levels of curricular integration (cross-curricular work):

(1) Fragmented: separate and distinct disciplines.
(2) Connected: topics within a discipline are connected.
(3) Nested: social, thinking and content skills are targeted within a subject area.

(4) Sequenced: similar ideas are taught in concert, although subjects are separate.
(5) Shared: team planning and/or teaching that involves two disciplines focuses on shared concepts, skills or attitudes.
(6) Webbed: thematic teaching using a theme as a base for instruction in many disciplines.
(7) Threaded: thinking skills, social skills, multiple intelligences and study skills are threaded throughout the disciplines.
(8) Integrated: priorities that overlap multiple disciplines are examined for common skills, concepts and attitudes.
(9) Immersed: learner integrates by viewing all learning through the perspective of one area of interest.
(10) Networked: learner directs the integration process through selection of a network of experts and resources.

Fogarty's schema alerts us to the fact that adopting a cross-curricular approach requires close scrutiny because the concept can be allocated a variety of legitimate meanings. As it does not have a single identity, it cannot be assumed that there is a consensus among educators over its definition, its implications for curriculum planning or its significance for teaching and learning. (Other examples of similar assumptions can be applied to terms such as 'creativity', 'special needs', 'non-fiction' and 'high expectations', all of which are in common usage without an agreed definition.)

Setting aside concerns over definition, advocates of cross-curricular work agree that it is a means of establishing links across the humanities (history, geography, RE); or between the natural sciences and mathematics; or between music and art (see, for example, Lake 1994). Similarly, Claire (2004) provides suggestions about ways in which teachers can incorporate citizenship into different subject areas. The Nuffield Primary History website (2009), in addressing 'cross-curricular learning', confidently asserts that this approach offers a creative way to develop children's knowledge, skills and understanding, while motivating them to learn through stimulating, interconnected topics. Thus, crossing subject boundaries allows for investigations that engage children's imagination and encourages pupils to undertake active enquiry, to show initiative and to discuss and debate issues.

The integration of knowledge process emphasises a fusion of ideas and concepts within and across subject areas and broader life experiences in an attempt to make education more relevant and meaningful for children. It is seen as a way to support the transfer of learning and skills from one situation to another, teach pupils to think and reason, and provide a more relevant curriculum to engage their interest (see for example, Marzano 1991). Advocates argue that by teaching the curriculum as an integrated whole, pupils' view of learning is likely to be more holistic ('rounded'), whereas if teachers emphasise the separation and discreteness of subjects it can establish artificial barriers in the minds of younger children and they may fail to make secure connections between knowledge components. The validity of this claim is seminal in judging the appropriateness of Rose's assertion that cross-curricular work can and should be used to strengthen the six areas of learning.

It is noteworthy that an integrated curriculum has been linked with the theory of multiple intelligences, popularly associated with Howard Gardner (see Fogarty

2007). Thus, the knowledge and skills that pupils learn and apply in one area are used to reinforce and expand their learning in other areas, thereby dissolving subject barriers and combining relevant parts of each subject into a composite whole. For example, an understanding of the geography of a region might help to explain the reasons for the location of a key battle in history; again, play activities using building bricks offer opportunities to introduce the names and properties of three-dimensional shapes. Similarly, Wallace, Cave, and Berry (2009) suggest that scientific investigations can be located in stories, role-play, drama, history, geography, maths, literacy and cross-curricular projects.

Concerns about a cross-curricular approach

Although there seems to have been a broad welcome for Rose's official commendation of cross-curricular teaching, enthusiasm might diminish somewhat when the practicalities of planning and implementation have to be addressed. Sceptics warn that learning needs the clearly delineated boundaries provided by single-subject teaching – though it is only fair to point out that Rose does not advocate eliminating such boundaries. They argue that an integrated approach is insufficiently rigorous, especially in ensuring that children have regular opportunities to gain fundamental skills in key subjects. Opponents insist that too much pupil choice – a feature of topic and thematic work – allows children to avoid areas of learning that they find hard, thereby inculcating poor work habits and attitudes. Furthermore, cross-curricular links between some subjects are more natural than they are between others; for instance, links between music and geography are likely to be more difficult to create naturally than those between science and design and technology.

There is also a degree of unease about the danger of resurrecting some of the less satisfactory elements of project work from the 1960s and 1970s, such as ubiquitous colouring, tracing and copying chunks of text from a book. In pursuit of balance, however, it should be noted that effective project work also necessitates collaboration between pupils, organising and managing time and resources, mastering specific skills (including the use of computer software) solving problems and summarising findings. Poorly planned project work is as unwelcome as any other poorly planned approach to learning; no more, no less!

Adopting a cross-curricular approach also has implications for practitioners. For instance, Grenfell (2002) argues from a modern languages perspective that cross-curricular teaching makes demands upon teachers in terms of their own professional development in at least two ways. First, it brings them up against the limits of their knowledge and understanding of the world, as they move outward from their favoured subjects. Second, it challenges them to move forward in ways that will support their effective teaching of languages through other topics and subject areas. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI 2008) in Ireland recommends that, as far as possible, links should be made between what occurs in modern language lessons and the curriculum programme in other areas of the curriculum. The thinking behind this belief is that it sends a positive message to the children; such connections result in the language becoming more absorbed into the general curriculum and not being perceived as a 'fringe' subject. Thus, the MLPSI approach of linking non-core subjects with more prominent areas of

the curriculum has the potential to enhance the reputation of more 'minor' subjects.

The debate about the efficacy of cross-curricular learning is nowhere better illustrated than in the area of 'spontaneous play'. Arguments for its importance as a vital element of learning in developing children's social, emotional and practical skills saturate the literature, especially in the case of the youngest children – not least, the value of play in enabling children to roam freely across subject boundaries. For example, Broadhead (2009) argues that playful activity can be cognitively challenging through problem setting and problem solving and through complex uses of language, though these behaviours may be 'hidden' within the more boisterous activity associated with young children's play. Nevertheless, Cohen (2006) insists that if learning is to occur, it is necessary for play to translate from the 'pretend' (or 'playful') state to a 'serious' state. He argues that play is not always beneficial, such as when 'messing about' initially can turn into something more aggressive. Cohen views all play as a state of mind rather than a series of behaviours. He therefore distinguishes between a *playful* state of mind, in which the individual is able to explore and elaborate a variety of skills and test them to the limits in a free and imaginative way, and a *serious* state of mind, which is goal-orientated. The synergy between the two states, he argues, is where real learning takes place. So, even the apparently straightforward claim that play is a means of eroding subject boundaries and creating holistic learning is subject to interrogation.

Summary

The Rose Review's recommendation that cross-curricular work should be used to strengthen the six areas of learning has many attractions for practitioners and as a means of enhancing children's learning; it may, however, raise as many difficulties as it purports to address. If such an approach provides an effective method of organising learning and enables pupils to view their experience in a more meaningful way, educators should and will embrace it wholeheartedly. It undoubtedly serves a valuable purpose in drawing children's attention to the links that exist between components of subject areas – a well-established practice beloved of all primary practitioners down the years. On the other hand, it is not being unduly pessimistic to predict that if the 'areas of learning' (with cross-curricular additives) are adopted as the norm, the organisational and timetable demands might prompt a slow regression to the familiar subject structure for English, maths and science, together with ICT and PE, with the other 'non-core' subjects being relegated to the sleepy slots late in the afternoon, either as distinctive subjects or the familiar 'topic work'. I hope that I'm wrong … but we've been here before, haven't we?

Postscript

Whatever our perspective on the Rose Review, subject areas, cross-curricular approaches or any other education issue that provides the focal point for the latest (and oft-times convoluted, tiresome and even whimsical) idea from education policy-makers, Barnes (2007) sends us a timely reminder that any curriculum changes have to take account of the fact that children are growing up in a world where moral and social boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred. We live in a time where

communication opportunities abound, one result being that young people are faced by a bewildering kaleidoscope of ideas, opinions and pressures. Old certainties are being replaced by an unparalleled variety of options. Barnes summarises the position neatly:

> Today's children are already living in a century of unparalleled, rapid and global transformations, which will, quite literally, change our minds. What is our education system doing to address this? How can we establish a curriculum of hope? (18)

Endless fiddling with the curriculum, however well intended, will do little to ease such confusion unless teachers, parents and other keenly interested parties rekindle the spirit of providing a *good education*. That is, as Blenkin and Kelly insisted more than 25 years ago (in 1983), to value things for their own sakes, to think beyond the immediate context, to examine issues critically, to put matters in perspective and, above all, to think independently and question what is taken for granted. Educated people are independent learners who have the confidence to communicate effectively their understanding and awareness of the environment around them and realise that they may not succeed at everything straight away. As part of this search for understanding, children learn that it is acceptable and necessary to ask thoughtful questions, as this will reinforce and embed learning.

Regardless of the way in which the curriculum is organised, it is the quality of teaching and motivation level of pupils that has the greatest impact on children's involvement in their learning – not least the way they perceive the lesson's relevance. Designing and enacting responsive curriculum and pedagogies which are also seen to be rigorous and appropriate within the school takes time (Comber and Nixon 2009). There are many teachers who devise specific learning objectives, insist on compliant children who listen attentively and obediently carry out the set tasks, and focus the lesson on achieving the desired outcomes; they will doubtless boast of an orderly classroom and their pupils will, perhaps, gain good test results. However, such a learning climate is unlikely to offer pupils opportunities to express the sorts of opinions, reservations, perspectives and questions that act as the spur for so much serendipitous but stimulating classroom interaction and deep learning. Orderliness is fine; enthusiasm is better!

Finally, there is a spiritual element to being truly educated. As children are continually on a self-discovery tour, it is essential for them to know who they are, how they should best relate to others and their role as 'world citizens', rather than just being able to reach academic targets. The concept of developing 'character' has almost become outmoded in recent years, yet Ryan (2008) makes the point that character development is an essential element of education and that educators have a responsibility to provide guidance and example in helping to shape it. Educated children are, therefore, highly complex, well-rounded individuals with an emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social understanding of themselves and others, who are able to interact with people of different backgrounds, ages and ethnicities. Such a child can formulate ideas and feelings and communicate these to others, adapt to different environments and accept constructive criticism; they can reflect on their actions and how their actions affect other people (Hayes 2009). The Rose Review's cross-curricular approach may not provide all the answers but it should be welcomed if it assists learners of all ages to engage with a curriculum of understanding and hope.

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