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Speech

## Nick Gibb speech at launch of Midland Knowledge Hub

School Minister Nick Gibb marks another milestone in the drive to ensure children from all backgrounds reach their potential

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From: [Department for Education](#) and [The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP](#)

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It is a pleasure to be at the launch of the Midland Knowledge Hub. Today marks another milestone in the movement to ensure that all children benefit from a knowledge-rich curriculum.

This movement is driven by a desire to ensure all children – wherever they live and whatever their background – receive their entitlement: an education in the best that has been thought and said. In the words of E. D. Hirsch:

“ We will be able to achieve a just and prosperous society only when our schools ensure that everyone commands enough shared background knowledge to be able to communicate effectively with everyone else.

This is why the importance of assumed knowledge is vital.

Writing for Parents and Teachers for Excellence and ASCL’s ‘The Question of Knowledge’, Leora Cruddas summed up the roots of this movement, and what we hope to achieve:

“ The influence of E D Hirsch on educational thinking has been profound. At its heart is the idea that returning to a traditional, academic curriculum built on shared knowledge is the best way to achieve social justice in society. His work has also encouraged schools to focus on the concept of building cultural capital as a way to close the attainment gap.

Parents and Teachers for Excellence, as we’ve heard, is at the forefront of this movement. It started – in the words of The West Wing’s President Bartlett – by a small group of thoughtful and committed teachers

and headteachers, and this movement is changing education in England.

Teachers from all across the country have been inspired to put knowledge at the heart of their curriculum, which explains the popularity of the Midland Knowledge Hub's 'What does a knowledge-rich school look like' event, taking place this weekend. There are 180 people coming to that inaugural conference.

Writing in anticipation of the event, Chris Martin, headteacher of St Thomas Aquinas, described how his thinking has changed in recent times. Having grown frustrated with the endless additional sessions for Year 11 pupils before and after school, which added, of course, significantly to teacher workload, he realised that there must be a better approach. Writing in a recent blog, he described how he was influenced by what other schools have achieved. And I quote from his blog:

“ After visiting Michaela School, St Martin's, Mossbourne Academy, Dixons Trinity Academy and sending colleagues to Bedford Free School and others, and attending numerous ResearchED Conferences, I soon began to realise that there was an alternative approach out there.

He is now working to transform the curriculum at his inner-city Birmingham comprehensive. In conclusion to his blog, Chris Martin reflects that he is increasingly convinced that these changes will transform the life chances of his pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils. To quote again:

“ Once you go down the journey of a knowledge-rich school, I have found that you become more and more convinced it will transform the lives of disadvantaged students. Quite simply, they will get better GCSE grades as a result. More importantly, they will stand on the shoulders of giants they wouldn't have known existed.

So ensuring that every child – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – is endowed with the cultural capital they need for success is at the heart of the movement. A desire for social justice and equality of opportunity is why we want a knowledge-rich curriculum for all pupils. All pupils deserve a broad and balanced curriculum that introduces them to the wonders of physics, the majesty of music and the great works of literature.

And Clare Sealy, a primary headteacher working in Bethnal Green, made clear the link between the curriculum and children's cultural entitlement in a blog late last year, writing, and I quote:

“ The curriculum is the means by which we ensure that all our children get their fair share of the rich cultural inheritance our world affords.

And in schools across England, a desire to ensure that all pupils benefit from a knowledge-rich curriculum is driving headteachers to consider how school culture best allows pupils to thrive. Whether in rural Leicestershire or inner-city Birmingham, headteachers must set and help maintain a school culture in which teachers can teach and pupils can learn. And in the words of Clive Wright:

We are not facilitators at Saint Martin's, we teach, we are experts whose job it is to convey our expertise to pupils and enable pupils to remember.

So providing children with an introduction to the canon requires teachers to deliver their expert subject knowledge, without fear that their careful sequencing of the material will be interrupted by low-level disruption.

Creating and a culture where all pupils can thrive allows teachers to focus on developing their teaching, reading research and refining their curriculum. Reflecting on what had already begun to change in his

school, Chris Martin wrote the following:

“ Since January, with the improvement in behaviour, our conversations with staff have turned back to what is being taught. If we are serious about raising achievement of our disadvantaged students, we are serious about them studying challenging texts right from their first day in Year 7. We have talked about pedagogy, but in a way I have never talked about before in my teaching career. We are talking about direct instruction and modelling and giving staff permission to teach their subject rather than entertain. We discuss distributed practice and interleaving key content to ensure our kids can recall key knowledge months after they are first taught it. Although very early days, our staff feel affirmed because they have permission to be experts.

A school culture that minimises disruption and reduces unnecessary teacher workload frees teachers to develop and hone their craft. The question is no longer ‘How am I going to teach Year 9 today?’ Instead, by providing teachers with a coherent curriculum programme, teachers can focus on more important questions:

- How should I build on prior knowledge?
- What is the best way to sequence the new material?
- How will I ensure pupils retain what is taught?’

The search for expertise in teaching lies at the heart of these questions, amongst others. As Clare Sealy puts it when considering just one of these questions:

If children don’t remember what we have taught them, then even the richest curriculum is pointless. Knowledge can’t empower if it is forgotten. So as well as thinking about what is the richest, best material to put into our curriculum, we also have to structure our curriculum in a way that make remembering almost inevitable.

So consideration of how pupils learn is at the heart of teacher expertise. When writing ‘What Is Expert Teaching’ for the Institute for Teaching, Peps McCrea looked at what expert teachers know. And amongst the defining characteristics of expert teachers is a knowledge of how children learn and how to use what we know from cognitive and behavioural science.

Describing his own early experience of the classroom, Nick Rose, who is the Curriculum Director at the Institute for Teaching, reflected on the importance of teachers having an understanding of how memory works, and he wrote:

“ I gained great satisfaction from pupils achieving ‘lightbulb’ moments in lessons where they appear to ‘get’ a new idea, but this was often countered by bitter disappointment when I came to assess learning at a later date and often discovered that such breakthroughs were ephemeral.

Expert teachers draw on their extensive knowledge – from knowledge of their pupils, to an understanding of cognitive science and their subject and curriculum knowledge – to inform the innumerable decisions they make each and every day in the classroom. As with other top professionals, this knowledge is critical to their professional identity. Expertise in these areas distinguishes teachers at the top of their profession.

Which is why it is crucial that schools set the culture, provide a well-resourced, high-quality curriculum and support teachers to develop their expertise. By providing this framework of support to teachers, schools and – most importantly – pupils will benefit.

Andrew Percival – head of curriculum in a primary school in the North West – described how his school is

embracing a knowledge-rich curriculum in a widely shared blog. Like Chris Martin, he is seeing several benefits from taking a knowledge-rich approach to designing curriculum. In his conclusion he lists some of them:

- We will know exactly what is taught across school in every subject in every year group. There will be clarity in definitions and terminology to reduce variation from year group to year group.
- We will have a much clearer sense of the progression in each subject from Reception to Year 6.
- We will know exactly which resources are needed throughout the year so can ensure these are purchased well in advance.
- We can ensure that threads are woven carefully through the curriculum e.g. the concepts of 'parliament' and 'civilisation' will exist in multiple History units in different year groups to ensure they are remembered for the long term.
- We can ensure greater consistency in the curriculum across school from one year to the next.
- We can be more confident that our children make good progress in foundation subjects developing robust knowledge and vocabulary.

Across the country, teachers are adopting a knowledge-rich approach to curriculum. Driven by social justice and a desire to ensure that all children are taught the best that has been thought and said, a grassroots movement of teacher innovation has resulted.

So thank you to everyone that has been part of this movement. The movement is growing, and it's growing to the benefit of teachers, pupils and our country.

Thank you so much for what you are doing.

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