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Opinion: Coalition curriculum is a death knell for UK youth

By Stephen Heppell



Professor Heppell: 'schools being filled with unskilled clerical tasks'

Two years ago in Hong Kong, Kenneth Chen, the undersecretary of state for education, told school leaders the territory would not remain top of global science teaching tables “by continuing to teach science in the old ways”.

He urged educationalists to “move away from a focus on content knowledge” and to embrace the concept of “learning to learn” that he had placed at the heart of education reforms. Technology was crucial to achieving that ambition.

A decade earlier in Singapore, Teo Chee Hean, the state’s then minister for education, summed up an ambitious research project by saying “the pace of change of new technology is more rapid than the typical time line for educational research studies ... Teachers need to ... produce and publish research findings on a more rapid cycle so that other teachers can build on their experiences, learn from them and implement these improvements in their own classrooms.”

By 2012, looking back on past reforms, Heng Swee Keat, Singapore’s current minister for

education, noted today's focus on "developing a broader range of skills such as critical thinking and creativity, and to devolving more autonomy to our schools to encourage innovation".

Although it is not the only factor in these states' economic success, this pedagogic approach seems to be working. Between 2007 and 2013 the annual growth of Singapore's GDP averaged about 4.5 per cent while Hong Kong's GDP is growing at close to 3 per cent each year. The UK's GDP, by contrast, is forecast to grow at 0.9 per cent this year.

A key factor is that these economies view education as an investment, while in much of Europe and the US it is seen as a cost. In return for this investment, Singapore and Hong Kong want more than kids who can recall a finite set of facts. They want collaborative ingenuity.

Unsurprisingly, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, an educational survey, following criticism of its own measures of educational success, has noted Singapore's focus on equipping "students with critical competencies, such as self-directed learning and collaboration skills". It will be introducing collaborative problem-solving as an international measure of educational effectiveness from 2015.

How well might English children perform on such tests? In England we have an alternative coalition government experiment in education. Encouragingly, this has given us a huge diversity of school types, from free schools to studio schools, from university technical colleges to academy clusters, and a diverse pool of teachers, precisely what is needed to provide the "vibrant learning communities where exploration and experimentation are integral" spoken of by Mr Heng. But while school diversity is necessary, it is not in itself sufficient and, rather less encouragingly, the other half of this bold experiment involves pupils learning content.

It was ironic that, in a month when a fact-based English history curriculum was announced, Richard III's skeleton was found under a car park in Leicester. As English schoolchildren were being told of the irrevocable supremacy of their history books, archeologists were saying "we will have to rewrite the text books".

Oh dear. Focusing on content is a common economic mistake. In the 20th century, in parallel with the expensive misunderstandings of the dotcom bubble, education-based companies thought their market would be content delivery. Surely, content was king and delivery equalled dollars? The answers were it wasn't and it didn't.

In a world awash with content, much of it free, ingenuity and creativity were increasingly scarce and valued commodities.

However, will English schoolchildren, newly returned to rote learning, sitting down to an exam paper and hoping there are no surprises, be ready for the continuing uncertainty and the constant surprises that characterise our current economic circumstances?

This concentration on being able to repeat facts rather than learning how to critique and apply knowledge feels reckless.

In a world that has witnessed the collapse of unskilled clerical jobs, filling our schools with unskilled clerical tasks is not likely to offer a positive outcome for tomorrow's youth in terms of educational or economic returns.

At this stage in the world's race for economic survival, the UK coalition's educational focus on uncritical content is starting to look like a suicide note.

The writer advises governments and organisations around the world on large education and other IT projects.

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