

Why focus on the primary humanities now?

On seeing the theme of this issue, one may reasonably ask ‘why focus on the primary humanities at this time?’ Are there not more urgent priorities in primary education, such as ensuring that all children can and do attend school, that children learn to read, write and learn the basics of mathematics fluently and that teachers are trained to deliver the curriculum efficiently. Certainly, these seem to be the main concern of policy-makers and those who disburse funding for research.

This initiative started with a series of discussions in 2013 between four academics and teacher educators based in Oxford, in England. Two of us are geographers, one a historian and one interested in cross-curricular approaches, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and primary classteacher expertise. We were all convinced of the importance of the humanities in helping children to understand themselves and the changing world in which they are growing up in the context of globalisation. However, we were concerned at the current emphasis on propositional (content) knowledge for young children in the National Curriculum in England possibly at the expense of skills, procedures and values; and the lack of time and emphasis given in practice to the humanities in primary schools, and the loss of breadth and balance, especially in the final year when preparing for tests in literacy and numeracy often seems to take centre stage.

At that stage, we were thinking of the humanities as the subject disciplines of history, geography and Religious Education and possibly other areas such as citizenship. We soon discovered that there was a startling lack of information and research about these subject areas, and how and how well they were taught, and by whom, in primary schools in England, even from inspection reports. As time went on, we came, rather slowly, to recognise that our assumption that the humanities should necessarily be conceptualised in this way might be too anglocentric. Contacts with colleagues in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales indicated that policy and practice were very different in these other jurisdictions of the United Kingdom; and our knowledge of other systems for instance in Canada and Australia suggested that this was so elsewhere. Factors such as PISA and other international comparison tests in the home language, mathematics and in some cases science have led to a greater emphasis on the ‘core subjects’ and the marginalisation of the humanities in most systems.

We have considerable sympathy with the conclusion of the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2010), summarising much research, that the division of the primary curriculum into ‘the basics’ and ‘the rest’, with much more emphasis and time given to the former, is mistaken. While we believe that the humanities provide particular opportunities for creativity and imagination, such opportunities are available in other subject areas. And while the humanities offer important ways, both overt and implicit, for children to explore values and beliefs, both their own and other people’s, every subject area can do so. We debated questions about the level of subject knowledge required by primary teachers, in the light of the consistent findings (*include references*) about the importance of this and the relatively low levels of many primary teachers’ subject knowledge in history, geography and Religious Education; and the need for pedagogical content knowledge rather than subject knowledge as such (see Eade, 2012). Linked to this was a concern at the reduced amount and quality of sustained professional development opportunities for primary school teachers in areas such as history and geography, given the strong message from international research (*include references eg OECD*) about the vital role that teachers play in bringing the written curriculum to life.

We believe that these matters required more considered and informed debate within the profession and beyond. As a result, in 2015 we approached the editorial board of Education 3-13 with a proposal offering to co-edit a themed issue based on a two-part structure. The first part would discuss the current situation in the four jurisdictions of the United Kingdom in the light of devolution of educational policy and analyse the reasons, cultural, historical and political, why the broad area covered by the humanities is conceptualised as it is and the consequences for how these were taught. The second part would examine from different perspectives how the humanities can be conceptualised and what role they play in the education of young children. Each article would consider the implications for policy and practice across the whole primarily/elementary age range, from about 3 to about 11 or 12 years old. The editorial board was supportive, though keen to ensure that the authors and the whole issue should avoid too anglocentric an approach and so open up discussion for a wide international audience. The result, some eighteen months later, is this issue.

Part 1 contains analyses of the situation in the four jurisdictions of the United Kingdom. *<probably say more on each one>* At the very least, these articles should make one avoid any statements about the ‘British government’ in relation to education. But they also demonstrate how history and culture have influenced approaches to the humanities, most obviously in relation to religion and Religious Education, and reflect different resolutions to dilemmas such as whether to teach the humanities within discrete subject areas or through cross-curricular, topic-based approaches and debates on the emphasis to be placed on children’s, and teachers’, subject knowledge or other aspects such as skills, beliefs and values.

Part 2 consists of four different types of article. Eaude and Pring explore from a philosophical perspective different ways in which ‘the humanities’ have been, and can be, conceptualised and the ‘work’ that the humanities do, especially in relation to primary age children. Catling examines the evidence from inspection reports on the state of the humanities in primary schools particularly but not exclusively from England. Swift discusses the challenges of developing disciplinary knowledge and making links across the disciplines, drawing on her extensive experience both of schools and teacher education. Cox discusses the role of the humanities in developing young children’s values, a particularly important aspect in the context of globalisation and issues such as climate change and increased movement of people across the world.

The final article tries to draw out from the preceding discussion key lessons to identify common themes and dilemmas and to suggest possible ways forward in ensuring that the work of humanities, however conceptualised, helps to develop the whole child in ways which meet the complex requirements of life in the 21st century. It also highlights key issues for practice, policy and future research.

We hope that you will agree that this is an apposite time to examine in detail the state of the primary humanities, comparing four systems which may superficially appear to be similar; and that you will find the articles stimulating and will be able to draw out lessons for future research and for your own work, whether as a teacher or headteacher, a teacher educator or a policy maker. We remain convinced that the humanities have a central role in educating children for a world of change about which we can only speculate.

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References:

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