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The problem with “finding the main idea”

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Series overview

Across the world, too few education policymakers have seen curriculum as a powerful lever for reforming schools. That might seem surprising. After all, “curriculum” is what we teach, and what we teach surely matters to student learning. As leading curriculum researcher Dr David Steiner of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore puts it: “What we teach isn’t some side bar issue in American education: it is American education”.¹

Yet for some years, curriculum has been overlooked as a pillar of school improvement strategy. Education reform has focused on teacher quality, and often seen curriculum as simply a tool that teachers use. Curriculum’s role as a battleground for ideologues has also led policymakers to avoid the subject. But that is beginning to change.

The research is increasingly clear that quality curriculum matters to student achievement. What’s more, there is emerging evidence to suggest that quality curriculum has a larger cumulative impact on student achievement than many common school improvement interventions – and at a lower cost.

Much recent research on the impact of curriculum on student learning has emerged from the US since the development of the Common Core State Standards. While the definition of curriculum remains contested (see our working definition overleaf), this research focuses on content-rich, standards aligned curriculum materials, especially textbooks. Several US states and districts, such as Louisiana, have begun to develop systems to identify and make available high-quality curriculum materials – and the approach seems to have paid off. The experience of these American states and districts reinforces some of Learning First’s research findings in high-performing systems such as Finland, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, and British Columbia. In these places, high-quality curriculum is always part of the story.

Of course, what we teach matters. But what does this mean for educators and policymakers? How do we ensure that schools have the support they need to select or develop high-quality curriculum aligned with rigorous standards for student learning? How do we narrow the gap between the achievement standards that sit on department of education websites, and what is *actually taught* in classrooms? How can policymakers meaningfully engage with teachers, support and make the most of their instructional expertise, and encourage uptake of quality curriculum? What is there to learn from how other systems have designed and implemented standards and curriculum, and what are the implications for related policy levers, especially initial teacher education, ongoing teacher professional learning, and student assessments? Finally – and critically – how do we define high-quality curriculum in the first place?

The answers to these questions have profound implications for education policy in Australia, the United States, and around the world. This series of reports, – a collaboration between Learning First and Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy – draws on international research to help inform the conversation.

This report, *The problem with “finding the main idea”*, draws on examples from the United States to show how systemic assessments of student learning that isolate skills such as “finding the main idea” encourage teachers to place an unhelpful emphasis on the teaching of these skills. The report explains why this approach fails to improve student learning. Finally, it shows how student assessment can be both aligned with high standards *and* help to encourage effective teaching practice that supports student learning.

¹Steiner, 2017, p. 11.

Box 1: Defining “curriculum”

“Curriculum” is a notoriously contested term. In a recent blog post, Chester E. Finn, Jr. of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute likened the line between standards and curriculum to “the pavement on Copacabana Beach. No two people describe it in the same way”.² Such varying definitions within and among school systems muddy the waters of an already complex debate about the role of curriculum in school improvement. A shared understanding of the term “curriculum” is required before any collective consideration of its impact on student learning can occur.

When Australians talk about “curriculum”, they tend to be referring to the Australian Curriculum or its state derivatives – frameworks of standards, alongside content descriptions, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities.³ Conversely, when Americans talk about curriculum, they tend to mean textbooks or other day-to-day instructional materials. The definitions below are rooted in the American context to more usefully support international readers’ interpretation of the research set out in this report series:

Standards are expressions of the goals of student learning, typically at the state or federal level. Standards typically aim to outline what we expect students to know and be able to do at different stages of schooling, usually expressed in year levels.⁴ Examples of standards include the Achievement Standards of the Australian Curriculum, and the Common Core State Standards in the United States.

Curriculum is the means to achieve the goals expressed in the standards. It is the teaching and learning program, and can include lesson plans and activities, scope and sequence documents, textbooks, computer programs, and even related pedagogical advice and embedded formative assessments.

² Finn, Jr., 2017.

³ For more information, see <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/structure/>

⁴ Houchens, 2017.

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1 Introduction: finding the main reason for a failed literacy strategy

An ordinary school is examining its 2018 summative student assessment results. If the school is in the United States, these might include results from its Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test; if the school is in Australia, these might include results from its National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test, among other sources of information about student learning. The school notices a decrease in student achievement in reading, or literacy, in Year 5. Digging deeper, it finds that students are struggling to identify the main idea of a text (its central point, sometimes described as the “thought the author wants to communicate to readers”⁵).

Armed with their analysis of summative student assessment results, the school develops a plan to explicitly teach the skill of “finding the main idea”. This plan is a response to a specific set of conditions and incentives present in many systems, including in the US and Australia. These systems create assessments that are focussed on measuring students’ ability in literacy and numeracy. They do so, among other reasons, because literacy and numeracy are skills that are universally valued, and because these systems cannot reasonably create an assessment that measures student understanding of the broad range of content being taught in schools.⁶ Schools, as a result, are encouraged to focus on improving student literacy and numeracy skills – including “finding the main idea”. Teachers who are expert in literacy development understand how to respond to a “dip” in student mastery of a “skill” such as “finding the main idea”. Many others have not yet been supported to understand how to respond in a way that will strengthen student literacy.⁷

In response to the analysis of summative student assessment results, a teacher at our ordinary school sources a commonly used and highly recommended suite of “finding the main idea” resources, including lesson plans, worksheets and common assessment tasks. Teachers use these materials in their classes and meet in their professional learning teams each week to better understand and improve their teaching of “finding the main idea”.

Over several weeks, teachers and leaders at the school carefully collect evidence of changes in teaching and learning. They pinpoint the baseline level of achievement for each Year 5 student and monitor their performance on the “finding the main idea” assessment tasks, which feature excerpts from a range of increasingly complex texts. They also monitor the fidelity of implementation of the “finding the main idea” teaching resources and observe one another in the classroom to understand how their practice is changing, and how students are responding.

Initial results are promising. Student assessment results show that students are improving their ability to find the main idea, and teacher observations show that teachers are becoming more confident and skilled in their teaching of the topic. Teachers and leaders at the school are ecstatic with these results, and confident that they will realise their goal of improved student literacy achievement.

However, despite teachers’ and leaders’ best intentions and hard work, their strategy to support student understanding of how to find the main idea does not significantly improve student literacy achievement and the school does not realise its goal. They are understandably disheartened, and unsure about what went wrong or what to do next.

⁵ See, for example, “Finding the Main Idea,” n.d.

⁶ For a discussion of the current state of curriculum implementation in the United States, including wide range of ad hoc materials used in classrooms, see Steiner, Magee, & Jensen, 2018

⁷ For a discussion of the shortcomings of current approaches to initial teacher education in the United States, for example, see Steiner, 2018

This example is from a real school. Similar scenarios have played out countless times in schools in Australia and the United States, among other countries. Literacy strategies that focus on strengthening teachers' ability to teach students to “find the main idea” likely account for an enormous amount of instructional time and resources invested in teacher professional learning. In the above example, and in examples that could be drawn from many other schools, these resources have not resulted in improved student achievement. The school did many things the system tells them to do; they rigorously examined the evidence of student learning available to them, located the most relevant and recommended curriculum materials, and tracked the fidelity of their implementation. But no meaningful changes in student learning occurred. This paper draws on examples from the United States to explain why, and what needs to happen next.

2 Find the main idea (or, rather, please don't)

“The crucial moment had arrived: Readiness was all. But how could the googly have been anticipated? Still less, the absurd positioning of the silly mid-off - which turned out to have been a brilliant move, perfectly judged given the scenario that unfolded to my chagrin. Out, and out in a way that was in equal measure humiliating to me and a source of great amusement to others. The wicket was taken, and all was lost.”

Imagine students in the tenth grade taking an English Language Arts (ELA) assessment. They are asked to read the passage above, and then to answer some questions. The first question: “Put the main idea into your own words.” Second, “How can you infer the conclusion of the passage from earlier evidence in the text.” Third, “Explain how the event described in the passage could be both a source of “humiliation” and of “amusement.”

Each of these three questions is fully legitimate based on the American Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Here are the first three “anchor standards”⁸ from the CCSS ELA⁹:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.¹⁰
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.¹¹
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.¹²

Let's return to the assessment based on the passage above. Almost 100% of tenth graders in the United States, are likely to fail all three question elements. Conversely, many tenth graders in Australia and the UK will pass all three elements. The difference will have nothing to do with a set of discrete skills such as the literacy skill in finding the main idea. *It results from their different background knowledge.* Those Australian and UK students who have grown up knowing about the game of cricket will understand the passage immediately. The more esoteric words – “googly,” “silly mid-off” – are not esoteric to them, because they are part of knowing about cricket. The American students will fail this part of the test, because they do not understand the game of cricket.

That is how knowledge works: reading about new topics brings new vocabulary to the consciousness of the student. Indeed, reading “renders” the vocabulary meaningful. In this case, understanding that the ball can be bowled at the batsman in different ways, and that the googly is the name that cricket-playing nations give to one exceptionally weird but sometimes highly effective piece of bowling, gives the word “googly” its meaning in the context of a knowledge domain, and in turn deepens the knowledge of that domain.

Both E.D. Hirsch, the founder of a national school network in the United States known as “Core Knowledge” schools, and Dan Willingham, a nationally respected educational psychologist, have made this point forcefully for some years.

⁸ Anchor standards, described as the skills “that high school graduates should have in order to ready for entry into the workplace or postsecondary”, are broad standards for language, reading, speaking and listening and writing that house more specific standards at each grade level. See Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2019.

⁹ Common Core, 2018

¹⁰ Common Core, 2018

¹¹ Common Core, 2018

¹² Common Core, 2018

Willingham gives an American equivalent to our cricket story:

Remarkably, if you take kids who score poorly on a reading test and ask them to read on a topic they know something about (baseball, say, or dinosaurs) all of a sudden their comprehension is terrific—better than kids who score well on reading tests but who don't know a lot about baseball or dinosaurs. In other words, kids who score well on reading tests are not really kids with good “reading skills.” The kids who score well on reading tests are ones who know a lot about the world—they have a lot of prior knowledge about a wide range of things – and so that whatever they are asked to read about on the test, they likely know something about it. (This is only true once kids have cracked the code of letters and sounds and can apply that translation fluently – say, 5th grade and after.)¹³

Hirsch provides a second example geared to adults, where he emphasizes that background knowledge is vital even where the vocabulary is already “familiar” to the individual trying to understand what is written (or in this case, said):

Domain knowledge is necessary to give meaning to otherwise confusing sentences. *I once read an anecdote about an elderly person who went to hear the great Albert Einstein lecture on relativity at Princeton University. She is reported to have said after the lecture: “I understood all the words. It was just how they were put together that baffled me.” What she meant was that the everyday words that Einstein used in his lecture referred to a particular knowledge domain. If we don't know that domain, we can't construct a meaningful mental model of what's being said. Here's a sentence by Einstein that might have been heard in his Princeton lecture: “It will be seen from these reflections that in pursuing the general theory of relativity we shall be led to a theory of gravitation, since we are able to produce a gravitational field merely by changing the system of coordinates.” I know all those words, but since I can't imagine how changing coordinates will “produce” gravity, I can't comprehend what that sentence means.¹⁴*

These examples from Willingham and Hirsch both reflect the fact that tests of reading comprehension – including tests of component skills, such as “finding the main idea”, actually test content knowledge, and therefore favour students who know more about the topic in question. The next section sets out the implications for assessment of student learning.

¹³ Strauss, 2009

¹⁴ Hirsch, 2003

3 Assessments: the tail that wags the dog

American ELA assessments, unsurprisingly, test the “skills” that the standards lay out. They require students to read passages from texts most of them have never seen before, and then answer questions of the kind we cited above – questions about finding the main idea, inferences, and evidence for conclusions. To give one of many examples, in the PARCC¹⁵ ELA assessment of 2017, students in the ninth grade were asked to read the poem “The Ubiquitous Day Lily of July” by David Budbill, and answer a variety of comprehension questions.¹⁶ Here is question 6:

6. Part A

Which sentence states the theme of the poem?

1. One must be tough to survive.
2. Common things are usually beautiful.
3. Lilies can grow almost anywhere.
4. People can find comfort in nature.

Part B

Which lines **most** clearly state the theme of the poem?

1. lines 1–9
2. lines 10–12
3. lines 13–18
4. lines 19–22

Given the ubiquitous presence of questions such as these in America’s ELA assessments, teachers in the United States understandably drill students on such skills. As Hirsch puts it: “A great deal of time in language arts is currently being spent on teaching children formal comprehension strategies like predicting, classifying, and looking for the main idea. In most language-arts textbooks, these exercises persist throughout the year and over many years.”¹⁷

Surely, teachers and education policy makers will argue, the way to get better at such skills as “find the main idea” is to practise that skill repeatedly? But the disappointing result has been that since 1992, while fourth graders in the United States have registered some improvement in their reading scores, 12th graders’ results have actually gone down.¹⁸ Hirsch explains why no one should be surprised:

After an initial benefit, further conscious practice of these formal skills is a waste of time, according to Barak Rosenshine, who reviewed the research on the effects of using such methods¹⁹ Rosenshine found that spending six classes on teaching these skills had the same effect on students’ reading comprehension as spending 25 classes on them. After a quick initial bump, there’s a plateau or ceiling in the positive effects, and little further benefit is derived. Rosenshine’s finding might have been predicted from the rest of what we know about comprehension. Children have been strategically inferring meaning from speech most of their lives.... Students don’t lack inferring techniques so much as they lack relevant domain knowledge.... The point of a comprehension strategy is to activate the

¹⁵ PARCC is an assessment given in a consortium of American states from 3rd to 12 grade in ELA and math. It has consistently been ranked as one of the highest quality assessments in the United States.

¹⁶ Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2017

¹⁷ Hirsch, 2003

¹⁸ “2015 | Mathematics & Reading at Grade 12,” n.d.

¹⁹ The initial benefit of drilling on “finding the main idea” is what made the teachers in our example in the introduction think their strategy was working

*student’s relevant knowledge in order to construct a situation model. That’s great, but if the relevant prior knowledge is lacking, conscious comprehension strategies cannot activate it.*²⁰

Of course, beginning readers need explicit instruction in the component skills of reading, including phonemic awareness and phonics. However, once students have mastered decoding the text in front of them, they will find that their ability to understand any given passage, to comprehend familiar words in an unfamiliar context, and/or to guess the meaning of words they do not know, will depend on:

1. Whether or not they have a prior grasp of what the passage is actually talking about, and
2. The breadth and depth of their knowledge of the world, of history, of geography, of science, of the arts, and of the human condition as depicted in poetry, drama, and novels.

Ironically, by narrowing the curriculum in the United States to put more emphasis on the mastery of reading “skills,” what has actually been achieved is a widening of the gap between the more and less advantaged amongst our students. More privileged students will be exposed to knowledge at home, during their holidays, and in interactions with equally privileged peers who enjoy the same advantages. They will not need drilling in “finding the main idea” because they will score well on tests that assess this “skill.” Not, we should re-emphasize, because they somehow mastered it better, but because it isn’t actually a skill – it’s simply something a reader can do when she or he understands the “world” – in our examples, cricket or baseball – that the passage is referencing.

It is a final irony that American assessments try to use passages that don’t include esoteric words that underprivileged students might not have been exposed to (“opera” and “yacht” are two examples)²¹. By ensuring that tests do not have such vocabulary, all that is being done is to further narrow the reading topics for our poorer students, freeing up more time to drill them on “skills” that aren’t actually skills at all. The unsurprising result is not only that the reading ability of poorer students is not catching up with that of their more affluent peers, but that the gaps between the performance of the two groups of students are actually widening.²²

²⁰ Hirsch, 2003

²¹ D. M. Steiner, 2014 See https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-m-steiner/the-new-common-core-asses_b_4809973.html

²²See, for example, Sparks, 2018; Sparks, 2017; Sparks, 2016

4 A new way forward: towards better assessment for learning

Schools and systems need information about student learning in order to create successful plans for improvement and to target resources in a strategic way. Recognizing this, many school systems around the world devise and implement assessments of student learning and communicate the results of these assessments to schools and to parents. Despite widespread opposition in many systems, state assessments are not inherently evil, nor is the communication of the resultant information. Indeed, information from state assessments can help systems to better understand student learning needs, including the size of the gaps in achievement between the most and least advantaged students. Information about student learning is important to promote both achievement and equity.

Nevertheless, critical issues with the design and implementation of systemic assessments, and with the communication of the resulting information, do occur and can cause tremendous damage. This report has highlighted one critical issue that occurs when assessments of student learning isolate the skills laid out in standards. When systems test students on skills such as “finding the main idea” and publish information to schools and parents about how well students do so, then of course teachers and school leaders are going to focus on better supporting students to “find the main idea”. Schools are more likely to do so when the school system is not specific on how to improve teaching and learning of the ELA curriculum and how this relates to standardised assessments. When systems are silent, schools are left with little choice. Schools will take the approach of drilling on “finding the main idea,” not just to get better results on the tests – although this might be one reason, since educators are rational, after all – but simply to *do better* by the students they care deeply about helping to prepare for their future life and work.

The problem is that “finding the main” idea is not a skill that can be taught in isolation, especially for an extended period of more than a few lessons. Good readers can find the main idea of a text when they know how to decode the words on the page in front of them, and when they *have the content knowledge to understand the text they are reading*. It is up to teacher preparation providers and school systems to support teachers to understand this important point. If these institutions do not cultivate an understanding of the importance of student content knowledge for reading comprehension, and if school systems continue to devise assessments that focus on “skills”, they will encourage the kind of well-meaning but ultimately poor practice described in the introduction to this paper, wasting countless hours of instructional time.

Some systems are taking steps in the right direction. For example, the Louisiana Department of Education has publicly committed to less but better student assessment and has worked to create a comprehensive assessment system that encourages effective, standards-aligned teaching and learning. Recently, Louisiana has worked with the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and Odell Education to develop an English and social studies assessment that “align(s) with the knowledge and books taught in Louisiana’s classrooms”.²³

Louisiana’s approach to curriculum-aligned assessment, which education commentator Robert Pondiscio has described as a first in the United States, recognises that literacy depends on knowledge.²⁴ The central concept of Louisiana’s new assessment design is that assessments will be given in several iterations across the academic year, closely following the conclusion of each major unit of students’ reading. Thus, for example, having read “The Giver” and some associated texts focused on dystopia, students will take a test in which they will not only answer comprehension questions about that text, but write an essay about it. At the end of the year, students will write a longer essay in which they bring together their knowledge of

²³ Pondiscio, 2018

²⁴ Pondiscio, 2018

the year’s readings in order to respond to an overarching essay prompt. The results from all these various tests will be combined to produce an overall score.

Through this approach, Louisiana has reflected its understanding that not all “standards-aligned” assessment is good assessment. In the US, Australia and other systems, it is time for a sea change in how we teach and assess English or English Language Arts, in particular. Rather than repeatedly use strategies that have demonstrably failed, we need to restore time for students to learn about their world by reading texts that describe its diverse wonders, and then assess these students through essay-based questions that ask them to write about the knowledge they have learned by discussing the texts they have actually read, and others that refer to that same domain of knowledge. Assessment that is designed to measure students’ knowledge and understanding of high-quality, content-rich curriculum will both encourage the development and take-up of this kind of curriculum and provide information that will more effectively support improvements in teaching and learning.

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