

Ofsted's approach to curriculum development

In September 2018, Amanda Spielman discussed Ofsted's findings from their recent curriculum research, curriculum design and the [new Ofsted framework 2019](#).

She stated that:

“Ultimately, the curriculum is the yardstick for what school leaders want their pupils to know and to be able to do by the time they leave school. It is therefore imperative that the new inspection framework has curriculum as a central focus.”

In Ofsted's curriculum research, three types of approach towards curriculum development in education, and their design (as characterised below by Spielman, 2018) were identified: knowledge-led, knowledge-engaged and skills-led.

A knowledge-led curriculum:

- is the mastery of a body of subject-specific knowledge defined by the school;
- generally considers skills to be an outcome of the curriculum, not its purpose;
- focuses on in-depth understanding of fewer topic areas rather than surface-level understanding of more content;
- uses developments in cognitive psychology and theories of working memory as guides for curriculum design.

A knowledge-engaged curriculum:

- is less reliant on curriculum theory but still maintains knowledge as a focus;
- believes that knowledge underpins and enables the application of skill;

- has a slightly stronger emphasis on cross-curricular teaching than in a knowledge-led curriculum in order to make the curriculum relevant and meaningful to pupils, and for putting knowledge into context.

A skills-led curriculum:

- is designed around skills, learning behaviours and 'generic knowledge' such as resilience, a growth mind-set and perseverance;
- has these skills as explicit intentions rather than by-products of the curriculum, or developed through extracurricular activities;
- places limited value on knowledge within the content of the curriculum.
"Knowledge was often seen as just disconnected facts."

"Nearly all the curriculum experts we spoke to considered their local context and pupil needs when building their curriculum... The experts tended to talk about giving their pupils the knowledge or skills that were lacking from their home environments as a core principle for their curriculum and tailored their approach accordingly. Many of the leaders in these schools saw a knowledge-led approach as the vehicle to address social disadvantage." (Spielman, 2018)

Ofsted's 3 approaches towards curriculum design

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Spielman concluded her findings with the following statement:

"Without doubt, schools need to have a strong relationship with knowledge, particularly around what they want their pupils to know and know how to do."

However, school leaders should recognise and understand that this does not mean that the curriculum should be formed from isolated chunks of knowledge, identified as necessary for passing a test.

A rich web of knowledge is what provides the capacity for pupils to learn even more and develop their understanding. This does not preclude the importance of skill. Knowledge and skill are intrinsically linked: skill is a performance built on what a person knows.”