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Seven starting points for curriculum conversations between subject and senior leaders

As part of our HUH project, Mary Myatt and I have engaged in *wonder-full* conversations with both subject and senior leaders.

Before senior leaders embark upon a conversation with a subject leader, they would do well to decide upon what they want out of such a conversation. When I shared my thoughts with Christine Counsell, she suggested that there were, perhaps, three reasons why senior leaders want to discuss the curriculum with subject leaders they line manage. Is the senior leader...

- A. just trying to find out about principles and dynamics of quality in that subject, from a strong subject lead who is genuinely teaching you about how that subject community works, how subject structure works and how they are realising it in their curriculum, or...
- B. aware of some deficit or other and is trying to inject a mixture of support and challenge to push the subject leader into some new avenues, or...
- C. merely trying to work out whether they need to do more of A or more of B, or a mixture of the two?!

Furthermore, the notion of holding subject leaders to account for the curriculum is obsolete; on the contrary, senior leaders need to approach this work with genuine humility.

Informed debate is the fuel of curriculum development. Developmental curriculum conversations between senior leaders and subject leaders can take several forms; the best conversations are organic. Once you begin a dialogue with a subject leader the conversation usually develops its own energy and direction. So, once senior leaders know why they are discussing the curriculum with subject leaders, there are, arguably, seven starting points for their conversation. The first question of each starting point is often all you require, because, as Christine pointed out to me, "after the first question or two, the thing is driven by the dynamic of that subject or that particular subject curriculum's issues and/or that particular subject lead's concerns".

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Listening hard is important. Making notes to come back to points whilst the subject leader is talking is essential; it is all too easy to let a follow up question escape your mind whilst you continue to listen to what is being said.

You will want to gauge what kind of terminology the subject leader is comfortable using when discussing the knowledge-rich curriculum. Ask them before you begin whether they use terms like *substantive and disciplinary knowledge*. Irrespective of where they are in using the terminology of the knowledge-rich curriculum, they will need, at the very least, to be clear about the idea of pupils, knowing, understanding and applying what they have learnt in their subject.

These seven starting points are by no means exhaustive and they are all inextricably linked. You will probably touch upon all seven if you have a healthy, open curriculum conversation with a subject leader. Some of the best conversations occur when you get into the detail of curriculum design at the granular level.

Much of what follows is largely based upon the thoughts of the remarkable curriculum leader Claire Hill, taken from the opening chapters of *HUH: curriculum conversations between subject and senior leaders*.¹

¹ Myatt, M. and Tomsett, J., (2021) *Huh: curriculum conversations between subject and senior leaders*, (John Catt Educational: Woodbridge)

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Generic introduction

Hello...

Thanks for taking time to meet with me. I am keen to find out more about the ***** curriculum. I want to be able to support you in developing the curriculum and also to reflect with you upon how rich, challenging and ambitious the ***** curriculum is for pupils across the full range of prior attainment.

Hope that is OK?

Today I want to focus specifically upon...

I will make a few notes as we go along so that I don't forget things I would like to follow up, but the key thing for me is to let you talk about the ***** curriculum so that I can find out more about how you have shaped the curriculum in *****.

Any questions before we begin?

1. The history of the ***** curriculum at our school

Lots of elements of a subject curriculum in a specific school have been shaped by colleagues who have long gone. The subject curriculum can end up being a hotch-potch of different legacy units which have been developed over time but which are not necessarily talking to each other. Before you can get a full grasp of what needs to be developed within a subject curriculum, you need to find out its unique history.

1. How was this curriculum developed over time?

2. Who has been involved in this process?
3. Who put these different elements together?
4. Who wrote this and why and when did this get introduced and why is it here instead of there?
5. Has it always been at this point in the curriculum? Why?
6. Which of these legacy issues are proving barriers to specific improvements you'd like to see and/or specific improvements I think you need to think about and/or specific improvements that an external subject specialist or subject resource might suggest is desirable?

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7. Let's kick ideas about together around how we might OVERCOME those barriers (What can you do? What I can do to help?) so that we get beyond these legacy issues.

2. General overview?

When you are trying to establish a general overview, begin at the end with the pupils' learning and then go to the beginning to find out how they get the pupils to the end!

1. **Let's begin with Year 9. Imagine it is the last ***** lesson in Year 9. If you have taught a rich, challenging, ambitious curriculum for all the pupils in front of you, what will success look like? What will the pupils in front of you know, understand and be able to do?**
2. If that is where you want to end up, how do you build up to that point from Year 7?
3. What are the building blocks of the curriculum from Years 7 to 9?
4. Please could you explain how you decide upon which aspects of the content to use to exemplify which aspects of conceptual understanding in *****?
5. How rooted is the current curriculum in the National Curriculum for your subject?

3. Curriculum Sequencing 1: Why that, then, to them?

We want to be sure that each curriculum unit builds upon pupils' prior knowledge and understanding, develops their understanding by adding to what they already know and understand, and prepares them appropriately for what they will be learning next.

1. **Why do you teach that to those pupils, at that point in the scheme of learning?**
2. Follow the answer to the first question with an in-depth discussion from what arises. For example, having answered that question, SLT asks, 'Please could you explain more about what you've just said? You've said Y follows on well from X because.... But how exactly does the knowledge/expertise achieved in the unit before/ the stories/texts/works in the previous term/year manifest itself in this new unit? How does it get practised in this new unit? How does it get questioned in this new unit? How does it get modified/extended in this new unit?' Then you might want to consider the following questions, depending upon what the member of SLT wants to find out (whether they are an A, B or C?).

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3. What else could you teach to those pupils, at that point in the scheme of learning that might be richer, more challenging and more ambitious?
4. What else could you teach to those pupils, at that point in the scheme of learning that might better link what they have learnt before to what they are learning next?
5. What are the key concepts of the subject and how do you plan for when and how you teach them?
6. How does the content of this unit of study allow pupils to develop their conceptual understanding and their subject specific skills?
7. How have you woven formative and summative assessments through this curriculum unit to maximise pupils' learning?

4. Curriculum Sequencing 2: Boring down into the fortnightly curriculum

One of the ways that we bring coherence to our curriculum is through meaningful retrieval practice, and that retrieval practice is around creating connections between what has been learnt before and what is going to be learnt later and activating what is required in the current live lesson. So, by looking at the fortnightly curriculum on a regular, frequent basis, you start to build a picture not as a curriculum map, not as an infographic, but crucially as a mental model for your subject leader.

- 1. What are Year 8 learning at the moment in their lessons?**
2. What is that building upon from what they have learnt previously?
3. How will what they are learning now prepare them for what they are going to be learning over the next two weeks, month, two months and so on?
4. How does that key concept link to what they're going to be studying in a few weeks' time or a few months' time?
5. So, why do we focus on this in this particular lesson or at this particular point?
6. What vocabulary do we think children are not going to be able to access?
7. How are we going to explain this particular concept?
8. What kind of common language are we going to use?
9. How are you supporting the lower/higher prior attainers?

When you get into the classroom to experience the enacted curriculum, there is a small number of starting points for questioning pupils:

1. What are you learning about and why?
2. How does this lesson fit in with what you learnt last lesson?

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3. What do you think you might be moving on to study next?
4. How do you know how to improve in this subject?
5. To what extent do you find the work challenges you and makes you think more about the topics you are studying?

5. Assessment and responsive pedagogy

We want to assess so that we can identify what pupils know, understand and can do at different stages of the curriculum; we need to know how well our assessments achieve that aim. An effective assessment schedule which dovetails with what is being taught when to whom is essential if you are going to be sure that what has been taught has been learnt. Teaching which is responsive to what the assessments tell you has or hasn't been learnt is an essential aspect of the enacted curriculum.

- 1. How are we going to look at assessing pupils' learning of your curriculum in a way that is meaningful?**
2. How does this fit within allowing you to understand what pupils know, understand and can do at this point?
3. How is this the most appropriate way to assess at this point in your curriculum?
4. How true is this assessment to your curriculum and to your subject discipline?
5. How scholarly is this?
6. To what extent do your colleagues respond in their teaching to what assessment data is telling them about what has been learnt?
7. How, as a department, do you decide which formative assessment method you will use and why?

6. Misconceptions

One thing that sets apart the expert teacher from the novice is having a profound understanding of the subject so that they know when pupils are going to have misconceptions about what has been taught. The expert teacher will anticipate misconceptions and will be prepared with different ways of teaching the content which disabuses the pupils of their misconceptions.

- 1. What are the pupils' likely misconceptions in this unit of work?**
2. Does the rest of your department know that? How do you know?
3. How do you help the pupils overcome those misconceptions?
4. How do you prepare less experienced teachers to approach the teaching of the identified misconceptions?
5. How as a department do you share good practice and different teaching strategies?

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7. What is great and how can we spread the greatness?

This questioning route builds upon what is going well in the ***** curriculum and helps the subject leader understand what specific factors make a certain unit successful (that could include how well it builds upon what has gone before in the curriculum's narrative and extends/deepens pupils' subject knowledge and understanding) and how can they replicate those successful factors in units which are not so successful.

- 1. Which part of your curriculum do you love, which part really works, which part really sings? (That could include how well it builds upon what has gone before in the curriculum's narrative and extends/deepens pupils' subject knowledge and understanding.)**
2. What is it about that part of your curriculum that is so wonderful?
3. What is it that taps into the pupils' interest?
4. What is it that is really helping the pupils learn in that particular unit?
5. Which part of your curriculum do you feel you need to change? Why?
6. How can we make changes to these less effective parts of the curriculum in the light of what we know makes some of your curriculum really work?
7. Now that you have identified the less effective parts of the curriculum, how can you work as a department to develop these aspects of the curriculum?

Lastly, don't forget the two vital questions which needs oft repeating: "Why?" and "How do you know?"

And if you can only ask one question, ask this one:

"Why do you teach **that** to **those pupils**, **at that point** in the scheme of learning?"