



Policy right on the ground: The tension that exists at the heart of school improvement

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A speech by Joshua Vallance to the Knowledge Network/Civitas on 24th June 2026.

Firstly, thank you to Loraine Lynch-Kelly for inviting me to speak today. I feel honoured – if not a little nervous – to be following the likes of Daisy Christodoulou and Tom Rees in speaking today.

For those I haven't met before, my name is Josh Vallance and I'm currently Vice Principal at Trinity school, Brixton – part of Future Academies. I'll talk a bit today about school turnaround, leadership and what I see as a set of complex – and often conflicting – pressures that schools are under.

But I thought the most logical place to start was my own initial exposure to this group. And I hope you will forgive me if I go into a little detail! About 5 or 6 years ago now, I was given the great privilege of designing a trust-wide history curriculum. But as much as it was a wonderful opportunity, I also felt a fairly hefty burden of responsibility. What children were taught in their history lessons in 50 or so schools would be determined by me, someone who'd just finished their Early Career Teacher years. Not a particularly sensible model and certainly not one I would advocate moving forward, but a position I was in nonetheless.

That sense that I really needed to do a good job of this led me to engage very closely with so much of the output with which this room is familiar. The work of Hirsch, Willingham, Counsell, Christodoulou etc. But it also brought me into contact with some of the history teachers in the room. Teachers whose blogs I'd read, whose articles in *Teaching History* I'd enjoyed, and who I sensed I had a lot to learn from.

By Spring 2021, we were writing our history curriculum, having spent weeks and months engaging with various models and ideas. Around the same time I started to write about what I was doing and, perhaps, to contribute to the rich history community that had sustained my own efforts throughout the early months in the role. And there was one enquiry in particular that appeared to catch people's attention. It was a unit of work I wrote based on this extraordinary book by the historian Camilla Townsend called *Fifth Sun*. It was a unit I wrote quite a long way into the process, coming at the end of the Year 7 curriculum (i.e. after 10 enquiries and story lessons that I'd planned that year).

In so many ways, this unit of work was the culmination of a deep engagement with both my subject community and much wider and broader principles of knowledge-rich curriculum design. It picked up on so many of the breadcrumbs that had been laid by the Year 7 curriculum already. It invited students to a New World (literally) and allowed them to engage with concepts like empire, taxation, agriculture, trade, conquest and alliances, with which they were familiar from studying William's changes after the Norman conquest, Mongol expansion along the Silk Roads in the 13th century and the great pilgrimage of the West African King Mansa Musa.

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The unit was complex, it asked the question: *who can tell us most about the Aztecs?* And asked students to engage with not only the pioneering work of Townsend, but also source material from both the Spanish conquistadors and Aztecs who had survived the conquest and passed down their stories orally until descendants hundreds of years later had committed them to paper. It achieved clear substantive aims, in that we explicitly tried to add to student schema around some of the concepts I previously mentioned, but also had a very clear disciplinary purpose – we were forcing children to engage with historical evidence and interpretation.

I think, after a year of really engaging with the craft of planning a great curriculum, it was maybe the first and only enquiry I wrote that I felt truly satisfied with.

But what felt like a crowning achievement in terms of my planning became something altogether different when it came to teaching.

My early experiences after Teach First showed me there could be a lot philosophically wrong in different schools' approaches to teaching. Schools could be wrapped around the idea of inclusion, but a version of this that didn't seem particularly inclusive to me. Poor behaviour could often be justified with reference to a child's trauma, and disruption in lessons commonplace. It seemed to me as though the most vulnerable, far from being *included*, were more often than not *excluded*. Sat in separate rooms doing separate work and not enjoying the same level of curricular entitlement as their peers.

It was also noticeable that many schools asked for a generic set of teaching practices to be implemented across all classrooms. Now, a disclaimer – I have no problem with schools mandating cold call, turn and talk, choral response across classrooms *as mechanisms* to drive thinking and participation around the curriculum. We do this at my current school. I'm not talking about this though. I'm talking about learning objectives that escalated according to Bloom's Taxonomy. I'm talking about limited 'teacher talk' and encouragement from the Senior Leadership Team to 'get students finding things out for themselves'. From what I could see in my early years of teaching, this meant, in some classrooms, children were subject to gallery walks and minimal teacher input.

And so along came my Aztec enquiry, which included lengthy passages of reading – often reading directly from the work of Camilla Townsend. It involved children interrogating complex source material, but also teachers situating that source material inside a much wider context and so, inevitably, doing some teacher talk. And it involved children spending quite a few lessons simply acquiring knowledge about this new place.

It shouldn't come as a surprise to the room that two things happened. Firstly, I drew the ire of the Senior Leadership Team who, once again, felt the history department was out of step with the rest of the school. But secondly, and more importantly, despite the best efforts of our history department, the enquiry didn't totally land. I've reflected at length on this and I think there are three reasons for it. Within these three reasons, I think there is a lot that is reflective of education more broadly right now:

1. Firstly, for knowledge-rich curricula to be successfully implemented in schools, the cultural conditions need to be in place that allow for the following: children to sit, listen, work hard and pay attention. Children to be polite, curious, and prepared to learn. To be clear, these things are possible in *any* school, but there are many schools up and down the country where they either do not exist, or even worse, where leaders view them as impossible within a given context.

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2. Secondly, in environments where generic pedagogies are driven by leadership, the curriculum is inevitably distorted. In this sense, normal service is reversed. Instead of the curriculum driving the pedagogy, the pedagogy warps the curriculum. Children stop seeing new knowledge in the way you have intended, and they increasingly become lost. Subjects bleed into each other and we lose any sense of subject distinctiveness.
3. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, unless senior leadership are involved and invested in the debates and literature around knowledge-rich curricula, and are curious and knowledgeable about the subjects they line manage, then regardless of the strength of individual Heads of Department, things will not land as they should.

I learnt these three lessons the hard way and I was very grateful when I was given an opportunity to join the Senior Leadership Team and begin to effect change. We did achieve this, in part, and I'm proud of that work.

Years later, however, as I look back on my time as Trust history lead, Head of Department, and then Assistant Principal, I see something else, too. I don't just see a plucky young teacher trying his best to teach the children about this wonderful book on the Aztecs he's just read. In fact, I don't just see a slightly confused school and a leadership team at odds with the evidence.

What I see is a fundamental tension that schools battle all the time: the tension between policy and reality. If we take the past 10 years alone, I think we see the tension everywhere. How many schools appear to be so distant from the ambitious and rigorous aims laid out by policymakers? How many were schools where leaders took a superficial 'knowledge turn' and inadvertently mandated generic pedagogies apparently 'based on evidence,' or demanded the creation of knowledge organisers by the thousand? How many were really capable of delivering effective, challenging, complex, awe-inspiring, knowledge-rich curricula? How many remain stuck? How many still look like my previous school looked at the beginning? How many have turned their back on the idea of knowledge rich with glee now it appears to be no longer in vogue?

The tension between policy and reality is a real one. At the very least, however, the policy of the past 10 years is one this room agreed with – thank you, Nick Gibb. But what about now?

In the recent Schools White Paper, the current government set out the noble and shared aim to see *Every child achieving and thriving*. The accompanying consultation on SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) reform coupled this with the equally ambitious desire to put inclusion in the hands of mainstream schools.

I firmly believe that well-run mainstream schools are the answer to so many of the current issues we see, and subscribe to the idea that an exclusion model is not wise. We should not continue to see SEND as someone else's problem.

And yet I am concerned. And, again, my concern stems from the tension that can exist between policy and reality.

1. I am concerned for the turnaround school. The school in which hundreds of children have been failed year on year, and who are in desperate need of better leadership and higher standards. In our very best schools, students with SEND thrive in a mainstream environment *because* behaviour is exceptional, culture is nurtured and explicitly taught, routines are clear and

consistent, and children work hard. My concern right now is that at the very moment when we should be welding SEND and behaviour together into a national strategy, we are instead de-coupling them. Strong behaviour is the mechanism through which inclusion becomes possible. To the turnaround school that desperately needs direction on this, I am not so sure they are getting it. The risk is that a misinterpretation of policy equals lower standards – this should worry us.

2. I am concerned that the recent output from the government is treating SEND as a system problem as opposed to a societal one. More and more children appear to be arriving at school these days with poor attention, weak language, low resilience, poor emotional regulation, and other difficulties around sustaining effort and following instructions. Many are diagnosed as SEND and the direction of travel increasingly suggests that mainstream schools must address these needs. I strongly agree that we should address them. But I also think that we should be clear and open about where they are coming from. How much of this is arriving in schools because of some, frankly, bad parenting? How much is arriving because of astonishing levels of addiction to social media? I worry that we are not asking the right questions here, and therefore risk moving further away from the right solutions.
3. And finally, I am concerned not so much for the continuation of the knowledge-rich movement, but the growth of this. Schools are driven by different incentives. Many leaders, whether we like to admit this or not, work towards Ofsted cycles and the satisfaction of our external inspectorate. What happens to the curriculum when the incentive is placed elsewhere? Our evidence from the 2000s would suggest that when the incentive is *not* placed on the curriculum, weird things happen. I don't know if we will see a return to children being placed on third-tier courses to achieve exam success, but with the incentive focussed so squarely now on inclusion, we can assume that curriculum takes a back seat. This is not a good thing and it can't be what is meant to happen.

And so, where once we had a tension between delivering on a promise of knowledge-rich curricula within schools that may not have the conditions in place for this to succeed, I think we have a new tension now. The tension of dealing with an increasingly complex set of societal problems each day in school, often manifesting in challenging or extreme behaviour, and early signals from the government that these challenges are for schools and schools alone.

But while I have been clear on my concerns, I also have hope. It is worth saying now that the people in this room have already done as much to drive positive change in education over the past 10 years as anyone. I think that is instructive. And I think there are three things we can – and should – all consider:

1. The first is that we begin to politely push back. I have no doubt that we have all expressed concern around some elements of the current direction of education, but how often has this translated into meaningful feedback, or a genuine attempt to find common ground? It strikes me – and has struck me for the past 2 years – that for all the good in this group meeting regularly, what we really need is to mount a co-ordinated effort to pressure, and indeed work with, the current government. Perhaps naive, but there's no harm in trying and, in my view, a lot of harm from not trying.
2. The second is that we double down on the things we believe and we know to work. And we do this in the face of ever-increasing opposition. We have colleagues from Athena in the room who have been under intense political and media pressure for lifting schools out of a cycle of

underachievement, insisting on good behaviour, asking children to be polite and introducing some systems designed to combat truancy. What I say is more power to these schools, trusts and leaders doing it in the toughest of circumstances. Keep doing it, keep making the difficult decisions, and the rest of us keep supporting them at every opportunity.

3. The third, and perhaps the most challenging for some in the room, is to remove the politics from it. Some might say that isn't possible and trad education and conservative politics are intertwined. I disagree. Michael Young disagrees. There are intellectual arguments that need not be made today around social justice that would also signal disagreement. And in this vein, it is *not* good that some of the single most successful schools in the country are positioned so obviously to the right in political terms. It cannot be only conservative to believe children should behave in schools, to explicitly teach values of respect, hard work and gratitude. It isn't only the domain of conservatives to believe children are entitled to the best of what has been thought and said. And it certainly isn't somehow a political conservative doctrine to teach via direct instruction. These are things that matter for all schools and I do not believe these are party political. And yet how many of the successful schools that do these things has our current education secretary visited? How many leaders who do these things has she spoken to? I might suggest that if we want influence over education in the next 3 years (and maybe more), we should do our very best to decouple whatever right or wrong perception there is around the politics of this movement.

With these three things, I think we can continue to grow and develop the knowledge-rich movement up and down the country. I remain hugely inspired by the people in this room, some of whom helped that 26-year-old write his enquiry on the Aztecs, and remain resolute in my belief that this room will continue to shape education in the manner it has already done so. I have concerns, but I remain hopeful, and I hope you do too. Thank you.

Joshua Vallance is Vice Principal at Trinity Academy in Brixton. His essay on knowledge-rich curriculum – and why not everyone has been convinced of the benefits – appears in the Civitas essay collection which can be [read or ordered here](#).



55 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL

T: 020 7799 6677 / E: info@civitas.org.uk

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