

Getting Started with Key Concepts

Arguments around Key Concepts - Transcript

Interviewee

Dr Liz Taylor
University of Cambridge

What would you say to a teacher who says “does this mean you’re telling me knowledge doesn’t matter?”

So if a teacher said to me the focus on key concepts does that mean that knowledge doesn’t matter, I think I’d be asking in that situation what they were meaning by knowledge. And I suspect they would be thinking about knowledge as factual knowledge and perhaps they might be concerned that someone was saying all we need to think about in the subject now is the big ideas, not the building blocks of that subject in terms of the smaller ideas, and the factual knowledge, the instances of particular concepts. And I think that isn’t the case at all. So within any subject when we’re planning we would be thinking about conceptual knowledge, we’ll be thinking about factual knowledge and also of course about skills. And considering what’s an appropriate balance between those three in our planning, how do we build in opportunities for children to progress in all of those areas. So factual knowledge is of course very important and a key way that children are going to build up understanding of conceptual knowledge within that subject.

What would you say to someone who said to you, “I looked at two books on my subject and they each had a different list of key concepts.”

So if someone said to me I looked at two books on my subject and they both had a different list of key concepts, I think I would sympathise with their wish for there to be a right answer. But that simply isn’t the situation and the reason for that is that what we consider as a key concept is very much determined by the context in which we’re working as a teacher and by the understanding we have of our subject, perhaps by the particular topics that we’re working with. And even two, um, exam specifications for the same age group might have a different list of key concepts, perhaps there might be some overlap but also some difference, because they might have different takes on that subject and different aspects that they’re emphasising. So this is an area where I’m afraid there is no easy answer and it’s about the teacher as a professional considering what is appropriate in their curriculum planning.

Can you give some examples of key concepts in different subjects?

So when you think about examples of key concepts in different subjects I think it’s quite easy for a non-specialist to suggest substantive concepts in those subjects. So if we were thinking about art I could say, oh, it’s paintbrush, colour, tone, impressionism. There’s going to be lots and lots of different levels of substantive concepts. But I think for a non-specialist to suggest key concepts in that subject is actually quite problematic, because that’s where you actually need to understand the structure of your own subjects, your own discipline in order to make those judgements. You also need to understand the context



of the class, the topic, the situation that you're teaching in, because it's a professional judgement of the teacher to think about what would be key in that situation. So I think I'd hesitate to suggest key concepts in disciplines other than my own, but that actually gives the teacher a very good opportunity to have agency in that situation and to be deciding what's appropriate for their context.