

Cultural capital, curriculum policy and teaching Latin

Jane Gatley 

Department of Education and Childhood Studies, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

Correspondence

Jane Gatley, Department of Education and Childhood Studies, Swansea University, Swansea, UK.

Email: j.o.gatley@swansea.ac.uk

Funding information

Economic and Social Research Council, Grant/Award Number: ES/W006146/1; Society for Applied Philosophy

Abstract

Latin is currently being trialled as a subject in 40 state secondary schools in England. This paper focuses on one of the justifications of this trial: that teaching Latin in state secondary schools provides students with cultural capital which in turn counters social injustice. By taking the example of Latin as a starting point, I reach two conclusions about cultural capital. The first is that providing students with cultural capital can be good for some individuals, and so justified on a case-by-case basis depending on context. However, this justification does not hold for curriculum policy making. My second conclusion is that in the long term, pursuing cultural capital as part of curriculum policy exacerbates the social injustices it purports to address. Wherever an activity is introduced for the sake of cultural capital rather than its educational value, educationally valuable activities risk being pushed off the curriculum, potentially degrading the educational value of the curriculum. In the case of teaching Latin, it may provide benefits to particular students, but as part of curriculum policy it risks exacerbating social injustices and undermining the educational value of school curricula. Going beyond the place of Latin on the curriculum, I argue that all appeals to cultural capital provide a poor basis for curriculum policy making.

KEYWORDS

curriculum, inequity and social justice, philosophy of education, social and cultural capital

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2022 The Author. *British Educational Research Journal* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of British Educational Research Association.

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper examines the idea that cultural capital should guide curriculum content. At the same time, it interrogates recent proposals to introduce more Latin teaching into state schools in England. The paper takes a philosophical approach to these issues.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

By taking the example of teaching Latin in schools, I explain that while cultural capital is valuable to some individuals, it does not provide a good foundation for making curriculum decisions. I conclude that the policy to introduce Latin into state schools in England is misguided.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2021, Gavin Williamson, the then education secretary in England, announced that Latin will be taught at 40 state secondary schools in England (DfE, 2021). In October 2021, it was announced that applicants would be offered bursaries to train to teach Latin (The Times, 2021), demonstrating a commitment to providing schools with Latin teachers. Williamson's statement on the rationale for teaching Latin in state schools goes as follows:

We know Latin has a reputation as an elitist subject which is only reserved for the privileged few. But the subject can bring so many benefits to young people, so I want to put an end to that divide.

There should be no difference in what pupils learn at state schools and independent schools, which is why we have a relentless focus on raising school standards and ensuring all pupils study a broad, ambitious curriculum.

Latin can help pupils with learning modern foreign languages, and bring broader benefits to other subjects including maths and English.

(Williamson, 2021)

This paper focuses on the middle paragraph of Williamson's statement, that 'there should be no difference between what pupils learn at state schools and independent schools'. I link this to broader trends to provide students with cultural capital. Although cultural capital is not an explicit part of Williamson's claims or the Department for Education policy, there are reasons for thinking that cultural capital is a motivating factor. To this end, I sketch an account of the apparent ideology behind Williamson's policy, with its specific focus on social mobility. This will then be used to explore whether Williamson's understanding of the value of cultural capital can justify teaching Latin, or anything else in schools. While Latin is used as an example, the aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which cultural capital should motivate curriculum planning.

There are two questions at play when considering the extent to which curricula should provide students with cultural capital. The first is whether providing individual students with

cultural capital can address some of the injustices caused by the unequal distribution of educational resources. The thought is that cultural capital helps an individual to compete with other more advantaged students in an unjust system. The second question is whether policy making should be guided by the aim of providing students with cultural capital. Here, the broader social and educational consequences of pursuing cultural capital as curriculum policy need to be considered. I argue that while cultural capital can be valuable to individual students, curriculum policy making on the basis of providing cultural capital risks (i) exacerbating the injustices it is designed to solve and (ii) undermining the educational value of school curricula. I conclude that it is permissible, and sometimes laudable, for teachers, parents and schools to try to help students by providing them with cultural capital. However, it is harmful for top-down curriculum policy making to focus on cultural capital. Thus, Williamson's policy of introducing Latin into secondary schools is flawed.

First, I give an overview of the use and meaning of the term 'cultural capital' in the context of educational discourse in England. Next, I outline the potential value of Latin as a school subject. These introductory sections set the scene for a discussion of the value of cultural capital to individuals, and as a basis for curriculum policy making.

CULTURAL CAPITAL

The term 'cultural capital' is widespread when talking about education in England. For example, the 2022 Ofsted framework states that 'inspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life'. They define cultural capital very loosely as 'the best that has been thought and said and helping to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement' (OFSTED, 2022). In this section, I will pin down a more precise understanding of what cultural capital means in this context.

Originally, the term 'cultural capital' stems from Bourdieu's account of 'a broad array of linguistic competences, manners, preferences, and orientations' including 'the embodied state incorporated in mind and body ... cultural capital in the institutionalised state, that is existing in institutional forms such as educational qualifications, and ... in the objectified state, simply existing as cultural goods such as books, artefacts, dictionaries and paintings' (Reay, 2004, pp. 74–75). In educational discourse, the term 'cultural capital' is often used to refer to the body of culture that we have available to pass on to our students. Appeals to the value of cultural capital in schools rest on the idea that the more cultural capital we provide students with, the better off they will be. A variety of reasons are given for why this might be the case.

Oakeshott describes education as an initiation into 'an inheritance of human achievements: an inheritance of feelings, emotions, images, visions, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, understandings, intellectual and practical enterprises, languages, religions, organisations, canons and maxims of conduct, procedures, rituals, skills, works of art, books, musical compositions, tools, artefacts and utensils' (1989, p. 45). One way that we attribute the label of 'educated' to someone is in light of how well acquainted they are with a particular body of culture. He thinks that this body of culture is intrinsically valuable.

In *Culture and Anarchy*, a book which marked the policy behind reformations to the British education system in the late 1800s, Arnold (1932) describes 'culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically' (1932, p. 7).

To Arnold, cultural capital drives progress, but it also provides a common cultural foundation amongst members of society which supports democratic deliberation.

More recently, Hirsch has advocated a core curriculum based on cultural literacy. Being culturally literate involves possessing the body of knowledge required to properly access and partake in national debates. It 'demands more than mere linguistic skills; it demands participation in, and knowledge about a shared body of knowledge, a knowledge of the culture of the country. Knowledge of this body of ideas and history is assumed by writers of everything from training manuals to newspapers, yet many adults do not possess this knowledge' (1984, p. 1). Without cultural literacy, it is not possible for people to properly understand, converse with or interact with the contemporary cultured world. The second justification that Hirsch gives relates to the value of cultural literacy to an individual's social standing: 'Students who possess this knowledge are prepared to participate in civic life, move up career ladders, succeed in college, converse confidently with a wide variety of Americans with whom they work or socialize, and generally have the esteem that comes with being regarded as an educated person' (Hirsch, 2020).

It is this latter point, that cultural capital helps students to move up career ladders, succeed in college, converse confidently and have the esteem that comes with being regarded as an educated person, which is influential in educational policy making. For example, Brighthouse and Schouten describe 'high commitment charter schools' in the United States, which 'often embrace intense curricular and cultural regimes that are characterised by long school days and stringent disciplinary protocols' (2014, p. 346). The Michaela Community School in London takes a similar approach with a curriculum that prioritises 'rigorous, traditional academic subjects' providing 'an education that will rival what many of their counterparts receive in the private sector' (mcsbrent.co.uk, 2020).

Williamson's statement implicitly appeals to this sense of cultural capital when he links learning Latin to a private school education. A student who has studied Latin has been provided with cultural goods associated with an elite education and a privileged upbringing. These goods allow students to better compete with other students who have attended elite schools and do come from a privileged background. Cultural capital is valuable insofar as it ameliorates existing social injustices. It is this meaning of cultural capital that I will henceforth be referring to and scrutinising in this paper.

LATIN AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

In England at least, teaching Latin really does seem to provide students with the sort of cultural capital outlined in the previous section. As a school subject, it is associated with elite private schools where it has traditionally been taught. Attending private schools is in turn associated with many forms of advantage. In their report, 'Elitist Britain', the Sutton Trust claims that Britain's most influential people are five times more likely to have attended a fee-paying school. In British politics, '29% of MPs still come from a private school background, four times higher than the electorate they represent' (The Sutton Trust, 2019, p. 4). Over 50% of senior judges, permanent secretaries, Lords, diplomats and junior ministers are private school educated, whereas only 7% of the population is privately educated (2019, p. 6). In summary, 'the type of school someone attends is both a proxy for socio-economic background and is also in and of itself an important part of someone's background, which can have a substantial impact on where they end up in life' (2019, p. 12). Since Latin is associated with an elite, private school education, teaching children Latin in schools might influence where they end up in life by this positive association.

This is not to say that there are no other reasons for teaching Latin in schools. Williamson's statement also appeals to 'many benefits', including that it can 'help pupils with learning

modern foreign languages, and bring broader benefits to other subjects, including maths and English'. The classicist, Mary Beard's media response to the announcement that Latin was to be taught in more state schools was that 'studying classics opens up history to us – from early dramas, that 2,000 years on are still part of the theatrical repertoire, to some foundational philosophy, from democracy to empire, from powerful rulers to the enslaved. But it's not just about the past. Studying the ancient world helps us to look at ourselves, and our own problems, afresh and with clearer eyes' (Guardian, 2021). This echoes claims made by Edith Hall and Arlene Holmes Henderson in their 'Advocating Classics Education' project (2017–2018). They claim that studying classics 'hones analytical and critical skills, trains minds in the comparative use of different types of evidence, introduces young people to the finest oratory and skills in argumentation and communication, enhances cultural literacy, refines consciousness of cultural difference and relativism, fosters awareness of a three-millennia long past, along with models and ideals of democracy, and develops identities founded in citizenship on the national, European and cosmopolitan, global level' (2017, p. 25). Neither Beard, nor Hall and Holmes Henderson speak specifically about Latin, but about the broader study of Classics which includes much more than the Latin language, and need not include Latin as a language.

It is also worth noting that neither Williamson's appeal to the 'many benefits' of Latin, nor Beard, or Hall and Henderson-Holme's accounts of how studying Classics provides historical insight provide strong arguments for teaching Latin in schools. Adding any subject to a school curriculum either displaces some other curriculum content or prevents some alternative new subject from being introduced. Schools have limited resources both in terms of money and also in terms of curriculum time, so making the case for teaching a new subject is quite a stringent task. It may be true that studying Latin opens up history to us, but so does studying history directly. Latin may be foundational to the study of philosophy, democracy, and empire, but studying those subjects directly would be a more straightforward route than teaching children Latin. Similarly, critical and analytical thinking skills and oratory skills can be taught in a variety of different ways other than by teaching Latin. While I am sympathetic to the idea that teaching Latin can make us look at our lives afresh and develop identities grounded in three millennia of history, this does not require learning the Latin language, and even if it did, this would entail equally strong arguments for learning other ancient languages which are not being proposed by Williamson, perhaps because they do not confer the same cultural capital.

Williamson's claim that Latin helps students with other areas of the curriculum is also controversial. Bracke and Bradshaw's review of existing data on teaching Latin in schools concludes that 'claims regarding the impact of Latin study – on MFL [modern foreign languages] and cognitive development – cannot be substantiated significantly and require further research' (2020, p. 232). Holliday (2012) points out 'there is evidence to support that the study of Latin has several benefits, including increased English vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. However, research does not indicate that Latin is unique in this regard. Indeed, scholarship suggests that the study of Latin [is] like that of Spanish or French' (2012, p. 10). Overall, Bracke and Bradshaw argue that 'the positive findings [about Latin teaching] are not necessarily universal but particularly relate to Latin teaching in specific contexts, both historical, socio-economic and pedagogic' (2020, p. 227). They found that in the United States, schools teaching Latin were more likely to be innovative in other curricular and pedagogic ways, and more likely to be located in advantaged socio-economic areas. This means that positive findings about Latin may reflect these contexts rather than the benefits of Latin itself.

In Williamson's statement, providing cultural capital as a means of countering social injustice stands out as the most compelling reason he gives for teaching Latin in state schools. This makes Latin an interesting case study for examining the use of cultural capital in educational discourse.

THE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL CAPITAL TO THE INDIVIDUAL

As outlined in the introduction, there are two angles to consider when assessing the value of teaching for cultural capital. Teaching for cultural capital is promoted as a means of countering social injustice; this can be either at an individual level or at a societal and structural level. In this section, I will discuss the value of teaching for cultural capital to individual students. In the case of Latin, is teaching individual students Latin to help them compete with more advantaged students justified?

Cases of schools making curriculum decisions on the basis of cultural capital abound and are by no means limited to teaching Latin. The 'knowledge-rich-curriculum' emphasised in schools like the Michaela Free School or those run by the Inspire Academy Trust is an attempt to emulate private school provision. Alternatively, cultural capital is appealed to through a school's ethos or a set of virtues. For example, Brampton Manor, which sends more students to Oxbridge than Eton despite serving a deprived area of London (it is worth noting that its sixth form is highly selective), 'works hard to develop students who are confident, creative, expressive, independent, collaborative, [and] resilient' (Brampton Manor Academy, 2021). Lists of competencies such as this often reflect markers of an elite education.

Of course, private schools themselves often, and knowingly, plan curricula with cultural capital in mind. Teaching cricket and rugby, running a Combined Cadet Force, bringing in external high-profile speakers, organising formal meals, teaching students to play musical instruments, residential trips, long school days, chapel services and Duke of Edinburgh assessments in exotic locations are all part of a long-standing arms race between private schools to provide students with cultural capital that will set them apart from students at other schools in the competition for university places and employment. Leading private schools differ from state schools because they have the resources to provide cultural capital, so that employing a Latin teacher does not necessarily mean cutting back on spending elsewhere. This additional resourcing allows these private schools to set the terms of the competition when it comes to cultural capital. State schools are left in a position of trying to boost their students' cultural capital so that they can compete with better resourced private schools. Teaching for cultural capital in state schools is an attempt to counter existing social injustices caused by the unequal distribution of educational resources.

There are good reasons for thinking that state schools should teach for cultural capital. If being taught Latin will genuinely help individual students to be more socially mobile, access better jobs, have more choices, and generally live happier lives, then it seems that schools ought to facilitate this.

Jennifer Morton presents two case studies that can be thought of in terms of an exploration of the value of cultural capital to individual students. The first case study is in a co-authored paper is about 'grit', where she and Sarah Paul discuss its merits as a part of character education (Morton & Paul, 2019). The second is a paper about cultural code-switching. This paper explores the value of teaching for code-switching in schools as a means of countering injustice by providing cultural capital (Morton, 2014).

Teaching for grit, or perseverance towards long-term goals, is something that has been associated with private schools in the UK; in 2015, Anthony Seldon described private schools as leading the way in 'teamwork, empathy and grit' (The Telegraph, 2015). During the same period of time, the private school that I was working at aimed to 'develop resilient, adaptable, independent learners' as one of its key values (Worksop College, 2021). Ethan Ris argues that the history of 'grit discourse' suggests it is 'a useful concept that middle and upper-class adults can employ to justify their own children's shortcomings, and perhaps to overcome them' (2015, p. 2). Morton and Paul point out that grit is in fact a significant predictor of success in a variety of domains. Those who score highly on measures of grit are more

likely to 'get good grades at Ivy League schools, and perform better in the National Spelling Bee' (2019, p. 193). Like Latin, teaching for grit is associated with elite education, and is also indicative of success; it has cultural capital.

However, the reasons for teaching for cultural capital may be outweighed by its costs. Morton and Paul point out that getting high grades at an Ivy League school, or performing well at a spelling bee are 'high risk, high reward' activities. They are the sorts of activities that require someone to put themselves forward, knowing that they may not succeed, and in these cases, perseverance can make the difference between succeeding and failing. The problem is that 'high risk, high reward' activities can be damaging to students who cannot afford to take risks. They say that 'it may be that in situations of extreme scarcity, agents should have reasoning habits that lead them to remain maximally sensitive to evidence of potential failure even after adopting a difficult goal. Put simply, perseverance may not serve such agents well' (2019, p. 193). Here, 'for an agent with scarce resources, events that would constitute small setbacks for someone else can be devastating. A low-income student who persevered rather than dropping a college class and ultimately receives a failing grade could lose his funding, have no parental back-up, and be forced to leave college' (2019, p. 193). In these cases, being gritty and having perseverance is a damaging, rather than helpful trait.

More worryingly, Morton and Paul point to research showing that 'goal-orientated people who have a strong commitment to hard work and a drive to succeed, but who are confronted with high levels of psychosocial stressors like financial insecurity, familial instability, and discriminatory acts, tend to exhibit significantly worse health outcomes compared to those who are gritty and socially advantaged or those who do not engage in gritty behaviour' (2019, p. 194). They conclude that grit may be a virtue for some people, but it may be harmful for others. Whether or not something associated with successful advantaged students can help less advantaged students to compete is very much dependent on contextual factors. It is likely to help some students, for example students in state schools who are relatively advantaged already and can afford to take risks, but it could be actively harmful to other students who do not already have the sorts of privilege that would allow them the luxury of competing with advantaged members of society. This is an example of harm caused to some individuals by focusing on teaching for cultural capital. Cultural capital, in this case, cannot simply be transferred.

The case for teaching Latin in schools follows similar lines: it is motivated by the aim of helping advantaged students to access elite university places and better jobs. It is also motivated by the aim of helping students to interact with other advantaged members of society on a more equal footing. However, if Morton is correct, then teaching disadvantaged state school students Latin may not translate into the same social benefits of attending a private school. In some cases, where a student already has many of the advantages needed to compete with private school students, it may give them the edge needed to succeed where otherwise they might have failed. However, for many students without existing advantages, teaching them Latin may turn out, at best, to be a waste of their time. The ability to drop a Latin phrase into an Oxbridge interview is unlikely to be of much use to the student who cannot afford to go to university in the first place. The ability to joke about Latin lessons with a potential employer is not very useful if you are not already included in the sorts of social circles where you might be likely to meet potential employers who themselves studied Latin.

In her paper about code switching, Morton explains how 'the ability to adapt one's behaviour as a response to a change in social context' might help students to 'navigate two or more distinct communities and reap the benefits of both' (2014, p. 259). In fact, 'grit' is just one of a host of 'soft skills' that students can be taught to exhibit to help their social mobility. Morton points out that 'non-cognitive dispositions, or "soft-skills", have a significant effect on future earnings potential ... Parenting style and neighbourhood effects play a role in the transmission and entrenchment of the non-cognitive skills that advantage children born to middle and

upper class families' and children who are taught non-cognitive skills in pre-school 'have diminished rates of incarceration, lower unemployment, and better health' (p. 262). Based on this analysis, 'educational institutions must do their part to mitigate these effects by teaching children the dispositions rewarded by the labor market' (p. 262). However, on further investigation, Morton concludes that 'code-switching can only be justified internally if it does, in fact, help students achieve their goals. Even if students from impoverished backgrounds master code-switching, they have little chance of success if schools are too overcrowded for effective instruction, unemployment is so high that even those with a college education cannot find jobs, and if students cannot afford to attend college' (p. 276).

Like grit, code-switching can be helpful, but it is only helpful if a set of advantages already apply. This is not to say that it should not be taught in schools: 'many see education as a way in which a new generation could be given the skills and knowledge that they need to be on a more equal footing with their middle-class peers in attaining the education and career opportunities that will enable them to lead a decent life' (p. 278). What it does mean is that including something on the school curriculum for the sake of cultural capital in this way needs to be sensitive to individual students' contexts. Like grit, teaching for code-switching can be harmful to students who are alienated from 'their communities' values and relationships as a response to labour market pressures that unfairly favour the dispositions and habits of those who already hold positions of economic and political power' (p. 279). It seems doubtful that 'soft-skills' associated with the middle and upper classes, such as grit, are objectively better or more admirable than those of their less advantaged peers. Their cultural capital stems from their association with elite social groups, rather than some intrinsic goodness. To teach Latin for cultural capital alone is to teach Latin so that a student can look like they belong to an elite group. If that student patently does not belong to such a group for any number of other reasons, teaching them Latin is a poor use of their time.

In the case of teaching Latin, or any other case of teaching for cultural capital, there are competing incentives. For some students, usually those who are only from slightly socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, providing cultural capital can tip the scales in their favour, and so schools and teachers ought to make an effort to do this. This is good for their students. For other students, usually from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, teaching for cultural capital is at best a waste of students' time, and at worst, actively harmful to them. In conclusion, in some contexts, it is permissible or even laudable to teach for cultural capital, but in other contexts it is at its worst harmful to student, or at best a waste of scarce curriculum time. This conclusion holds for case by case decision making about teaching for cultural capital. In the next section, I will examine whether cultural capital should play a role in wholesale curriculum policy making.

CULTURAL CAPITAL AS CURRICULUM POLICY

Whether schools, teachers or parents ought to provide students with cultural capital through activities such as teaching Latin is one question. The answer to this, as discussed in the previous section, is that sometimes it is good for the student, and so sometimes it ought to be taught. Whether cultural capital ought to guide curriculum decision making more generally is a different question. Here, I argue that cultural capital should not guide curriculum policy. I will provide two reasons. The first is that top-down policy making on the basis of providing cultural capital risks undermining the educational value of school curricula. The second is that endorsing cultural capital as part of curriculum policy implicitly embraces existing social injustices, potentially contributing to them. This means that Williamson's policy of introducing Latin into English state schools, and other policies which similarly appeal to cultural capital, are unjustified.

Unlike leading private schools, state schools have more limited resources. As I have already pointed out, where a private school can add Latin to the curriculum by hiring a new teacher, adding another option to students' choices, or extending the school day, adding Latin to a state school curriculum is likely to have broader repercussions. Hiring a new Latin teacher might be at the expense of hiring a teacher for another subject. Adding Latin lessons to the curriculum could force off another subject, or to reduce the amount of time spent on existing subjects. Where resources are limited, adding cultural capital to the curriculum can push off other activities or resources. The same is true of government allocation of resources. In a limited education budget, providing additional funding for teaching Latin in schools prevents other possible uses of limited funds. So while the £4 m Latin Excellence Programme will cover costs associated with the training of teachers and the resourcing of new departments, questions remain about whether money should have been allocated in this way.

This is unproblematic if Latin is clearly more educationally valuable than other subjects; however it seems that in Williamson's case, Latin's best claim to curriculum space is that it provides cultural capital. This is why it provides an interesting case study into the role of cultural capital in education.

As has been mentioned, studying history can provide the sense of awe and perspective that Mary Beard describes. Studying a modern foreign language such as French is associated with the same sorts of advantages as studying Latin. Studying English grammar and vocabulary is a more direct way to teach English grammar and vocabulary than teaching Latin. All of these other activities come with overlapping existing benefits. Studying history rather than Latin provides students with a broader knowledge and understanding of the social world they inhabit, studying French rather than Latin provides students with a living language they can use in French-speaking environments. In the case of Latin, it seems that cultural capital is one of the few benefits offered. The same can be said for other markers of private school education such as Combined Cadet Force, rugby or formal meals with staff and guests. While these might be beneficial, the benefits could be provided in broader and more efficient ways. The activities themselves are better understood as markers of social class, rather than as engineered to be educational.

One of the most basic claims that can be made about education is that it ought to equip students for the challenges and opportunities they will face over the course of their lives. Curriculum policy based on providing cultural capital risks pushing the knowledge, skills and qualities that students need to navigate their lives off the curriculum in favour of markers of social advantage. Policy making based on cultural capital risks degrading the educational value of school curricula.

Pursuing cultural capital to its logical end might result in schools teaching for grit, politeness, handshaking, confidence, knowledge of Latin, rugby playing, correct cutlery use at formal dinners, making eye contact, and so on. This imagined curriculum would provide a veneer of education, creating the illusion of elitism without providing students with the sorts of skills, knowledge and qualities that they need as individuals working their way through the world. Additionally, it would not help students to become the sort of thoughtful, competent, well-informed and virtuous people that societies benefit from. This is the first problem: that curriculum policies based on providing cultural capital can undermine the educational value of school curricula through displacing other educationally valuable activities and resources.

The second problem is that curriculum policies motivated by cultural capital implicitly endorse the social injustices they purport to address. Teaching for cultural capital is lauded for its contribution to social mobility. It is meant to 'level up' state schools so that their students can better compete with private school students. However, a curriculum policy which promotes cultural capital does not tackle social injustices themselves. Instead of providing disadvantaged students with more resources, and limiting the opportunities that

money can buy advantaged students, a cultural capital-based policy asks state schools to compete with private schools without providing anything like the equivalent extra resources needed. Cultural capital-based curriculum policy acknowledges and affirms the value of arbitrary markers of social advantage such as knowledge of Latin, the ability to play rugby or a firm handshake. This does not help disadvantaged students for two reasons: the first is that the goal-posts of cultural capital will always shift; and the second is that underlying prejudice and discrimination against disadvantaged students is untouched by cultural capital interventions.

Private schools are already engaged in an arms race with each other to produce students who will be accepted to Oxbridge, or gain high-profile jobs on the basis of cultural capital. Engaging state schools in the same game might push private schools, with their extra resources, to compete even harder, creating new sources of cultural capital and negating the existing cultural capital of subjects such as Latin. It is possible that Latin only has the cultural capital it does because it is a marker of social advantage. As soon as Latin is commonplace and no longer a marker of social advantage, the cultural capital provided by knowing Latin evaporates. If government policy focuses on cultural capital, then the goalposts will simply shift, and students will be left with arbitrary bodies of knowledge that serve them neither in terms of cultural capital, nor in terms of preparation for life.

In summary, a government policy that acknowledges that markers of cultural capital are a driver of social injustice, but addresses them by emphasising the importance of cultural capital and teaching for it, is contributing to the injustice it purports to solve. State schools, with their limited resources, are being encouraged to teach for arbitrary markers of advantage, while other educationally valuable activities might be pushed off the curriculum to make space for these. At the same time, private schools will do what they have always done, and compete to make their students stand out, moving the goal posts to exclude state school students once again. The policy of introducing Latin into state schools affirms tendencies to reward people for appearing advantaged, rather than on their individual merits or relevant qualities. At a policy level, the sticking plaster of providing students with cultural capital to help counter social injustice exacerbates the injustice stemming from unequal distribution of resources, the prejudice and discrimination faced by disadvantaged students, and the positive discrimination enjoyed by advantaged students. A policy which affirms the value of cultural capital affirms this status-quo.

Rather than promoting a curriculum which provides students with cultural capital and holds that 'there should be no difference in what pupils learn at state schools and independent schools' (Williamson, 2021), curriculum policy which seriously aims to address the social injustice attached to cultural capital should focus on the fair distribution of educational resources, and on discouraging prejudice based on markers of socio-economic advantage. A policy serious about ameliorating injustice might encourage elite universities to broaden their intake (there has been some progress here with, for example, Oxbridge admissions), or it might work to counter prejudice in employment practices. This could take the same form as initiatives to widen gender and race equality in the work place. Since policy makers have the power to bring about these measures, turning to the sticking plaster of teaching for cultural capital in schools is unjustified. Policy makers stand in contrast to the parent or teacher with little control over existing injustices in society, who teach Latin to give the children in their care the best chance in life. Context dependent, this is sometimes in their students' best interests. However, introducing Latin, or other forms of cultural capital, into state schools in England as a matter of curriculum policy aggravates injustice when long-term outcomes and possible alternative measures are taken into account. Such policies are likely to degrade the educational value of school curricula, and further embed the injustices they purport to address.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the policy of introducing Latin into state schools in England in order to provide students with cultural capital is unjustified. While teaching Latin for cultural capital can be beneficial to some students as a means of countering social injustice, as curriculum policy, introducing Latin into state schools is likely to exacerbate injustice and undermine the educational value of school curricula. The educational aim of preparing students for their future lives might be undermined by prioritising cultural capital over other activities which develop important knowledge, skills and qualities. Curriculum policy based on cultural capital also affirms tendencies to discriminate against those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds solely on the grounds of whether or not they appear socially or economically disadvantaged.

The more significant, and broader conclusion is that cultural capital as a whole ought not to guide educational policy. The injustices that disadvantaged students face can rarely be solved by providing them with a veneer of advantage. As Morton and Paul point out, this veneer might not help them if other contextual factors are actively working against them. Furthermore, depending on the sort of veneer provided, cultural capital can actively harm individuals. Even when, in the short term, cultural capital helps individual students to be more socially mobile, it ought not to form a basis for curriculum policy because in the longer term it is likely to lead to a curriculum that prioritises appearances over educational value. As the arms race of cultural capital continues to be waged by well-resourced private schools, the appearance of advantage provided by teaching for cultural capital may wear off as the goal posts of cultural capital move. Finally, government policy based on cultural capital embraces the idea that it is acceptable to judge people on the advantages they have enjoyed, and discriminate against those who appear less advantaged. This contributes to the underlying existing injustices that it purports to address.

These conclusions apply to teaching for code-switching, encouraging grit, introducing sailing and rowing into schools in deprived areas, introducing a rigorous 'knowledge-rich-curriculum', teaching children to firmly shake an employer's hand, and so on. Wherever the educational value to an activity is unclear other than its role as a marker of social and economic advantage, it ought not to ground curriculum policy. On the other hand, it remains permissible, and sometimes laudable, for parents, teachers and schools to do their best to help the children in their care to compete with their advantaged peers, including by providing them with cultural capital. It is permissible to teach some carefully selected state school students Latin with the aim of providing cultural capital, but any curriculum policy doing so for the sake of cultural capital is misguided.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Harry Brighouse who brainstormed ideas for this paper with me back in early 2020.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This paper was undertaken as part of two grants: A short-term postdoctoral fellowship awarded by the Society for Applied Philosophy, and an ESRC postdoctoral fellowship.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

There is no data associated with this paper.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

This paper does not include any empirical research and so institutional ethical approval was not necessary.

ORCID

Jane Gatley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7225-1835>

REFERENCES

- Arnold, M. (1932). *Democratic education*. University of Michigan Press.
- Bracke, E., & Bradshaw, C. (2020). The impact of learning Latin on school pupils: A review of existing data. *The Language Learning Journal*, 48(2), 226–236.
- Brampton Manor Academy (2021) *Our Ethos*, available at: <https://www.bramptonmanor.org/Our-Ethos/> (accessed 2nd November 2021).
- Brighouse, H., & Schouten, G. (2014). To charter or not to charter: What questions should we ask and what will the answers tell us? *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(3), 341–364.
- Department for Education (2021) *Press Release: Thousands More Students to Learn Ancient and Modern Languages*, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-more-students-to-learn-ancient-and-modern-languages> (accessed 29th April 2022).
- Hall, E., & Holmes Henderson, A. (2017). Advocating classics education: A new national project. *The Journal of Classics Education*, 18(36), 25–28.
- Hirsch, E.D., (1984) *Cultural literacy* conference paper at National Institute of Education: Adult Literacy Conference.
- Hirsch, E.D. (2020) *Core Knowledge*, available at: <https://www.coreknowledge.org> (accessed 14th October 2020).
- Holliday, L. (2012). The benefits of Latin? *Educational Research Quarterly*, 36(1), 3–12.
- Michaela Community School (2020) *About Us*, available at: mcsbrent.co.uk (accessed October 14th 2020).
- Morton, J. (2014). Cultural code-switching: Straddling the achievement gap. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22(3), 259–281.
- Morton, J., & Paul, S. (2019). *Grit*. *Ethics*, 129(2), 175–203.
- Oakeshott, M. (1989). *The voice of Liberal learning*. Yale University Press.
- OFSTED (2022) *School Inspection Handbook*, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/school-inspection-handbook> (accessed 30th April 2022).
- Reay, D. (2004). Education and cultural capital: The implications of changing trends in education policies. *Cultural Trends*, 13(2), 73–86.
- Ris, E. (2015). *Grit: A short history of a useful concept*. *Journal of Educational Controversy*, 10(1), 1–18.
- The Guardian (2021) *Latin to be Introduced at 40 State Secondaries in England*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jul/31/latin-introduced-40-state-secondaries-england> (accessed 2nd November 2021).
- The Sutton Trust (2019) *Elitist Britain*, available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Elitist-Britain-2019.pdf> (accessed 2nd November 2021).
- The Telegraph (2015) *Sir Anthony Seldon: Private Schools Lead the Way in Teamwork, Empathy and Grit*, available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11904133/Sir-Anthony-Seldon-Private-schools-lead-the-way-in-teamwork-empathy-and-grit.html> (accessed 20th November 2021).
- The Times (2021) *Graduate Trainees Offered £15,000 to Teach “Elitist” Latin*, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/graduate-trainees-offered-15-000-to-teach-elitist-latin-wg9ch02kz> (accessed 2nd November 2021).
- Williamson, G. (2021) *Comments on Schools Teaching Latin*, available at: <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/gavin-williamson-2021-comments-on-schools-teaching-latin/> (accessed: 2nd November 2021).
- Workshop College (2021) *Our Values*, available at: <https://www.wsnl.co.uk/page/?title=Our+Values&pid=189> (accessed 20th November 2021).

How to cite this article: Gatley, J. (2022). Cultural capital, curriculum policy and teaching Latin. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3836>