

Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan

Summary and Introduction

This summary and introduction is a précis of five fuller documents: *The Essentials of English; The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework; The National Curriculum for English from 2015; An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16; Assessment and Examinations in English 3 to 19*. Together, these documents constitute the statement *Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan*.

The statement sets out a better plan for the teaching and assessment of English 3 to 19 than is contained in current statutory requirements. It represents the views of the National Association of Advisers in English, the National Association for the Teaching of English and the United Kingdom Literacy Association. It has been written by John Richmond, with contributions from Andrew Burn, Peter Dougill, Angela Goddard, Mike Raleigh and Peter Traves. The statement is produced with support from the organisations just named and from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education.

The National Association of Advisers in English works to promote the highest standards of English teaching through the involvement of its members as advisers, inspectors, consultants, ITE lecturers and subject leaders in UK schools.

The National Association for the Teaching of English works to promote standards of excellence in the teaching of English from Early Years to University.

The United Kingdom Literacy Association aims to support and inform all those concerned with the development of language, literacy and communication.

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The purpose of this statement

The purpose of this statement is easily explained. There should, in the second decade of the 21st century, be a professional consensus amongst those who teach English to children and young people, or who teach those children and young people *in* English, as to how to help them most effectively gain confidence and competence in the use of English. Such a professional consensus might draw on seven basic principles.

1. There is no intellectual achievement more intimately connected to a child's and young person's overall sense of worth as an individual and as a social being than the achievement of competence and confidence in the use of her or his language or languages.
2. The achievement of competence in any aspect of language is prior to and more complex than the achievement of the ability to analyse that aspect of language. Learners nonetheless continually engage in acts of reflection on aspects of the language they encounter and use.
3. The achievement of competence in any aspect of language is principally owed to the enjoyable *experience* of that aspect of language. *Instruction* in an aspect of language has a secondary but nonetheless very significant role to play in this achievement.
4. The learner's brain makes dynamic generalisations from enjoyable experiences of language. These generalisations prepare the learner for new encounters with and uses of language.
5. The motivation for any productive or receptive encounter with or use of language is the desire and need to construct meaning. Producers and receivers of language are both engaged in the construction of meaning.
6. Examples of language and literacy in use in English and of potential value and interest to learners are vast in number and diversity. Some of that diversity should be evident in the selection of examples which teachers present to learners.
7. Learners' experience of language in education should both value and confirm their linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds, and introduce them to cultural and social contexts beyond those they are familiar with.

It may be asked of these principles: what is so remarkable about them? Are they not self-evident, uncontroversial? The answer is: they should be, but they haven't been. The reason why they haven't been has something to do with the history of the contest for control of the teaching of English, language and literacy in our schools and colleges over the last five decades. It also has to do with the fact that worthwhile professional knowledge can sometimes be forgotten, get lost, in the welter of new initiatives and changes of course – often politically driven – affecting the curriculum.

The documents which constitute this statement aim to describe a desirable, intellectually sound and practically achievable consensus around which those who teach English or teach in English could unite. The statement is offered as a tribute and an encouragement to the professionalism of thousands of teachers in England, in the United Kingdom as a whole, and in the English-speaking world more widely. The proposals it contains are theoretical and practical frameworks within which teachers can take fuller responsibility for their professional actions than – in recent years and in England at least – they have been allowed to. For too long, teachers in England have effectively been treated as machine operators, given sets of instructions narrowly related to 'method', and told to follow them. Professional success comes not from adherence to any one method of teaching, but from a deeper understanding of the conditions for successful learning. To promote that success is the ambition of this statement.

The Essentials of English

This document describes the essentials of English in brief terms.

- The spoken language is the mode of language from which competence in all the other modes springs. Speech, and attention to speech through listening, are key media through which children and young people learn.
- Successful entry into literacy depends on an existing competence in spoken language. The beginning reader, to be successful, must employ all the resources of her or his retentive memory, generalising brain and propensity to make meaning. Effective reading teaching involves attention both to meaning and to the structures of words.
- Creating capable and keen readers is the most important job that schools can do. The high-value benefits that skilled independent reading can bring are pleasure, personal enrichment, practical value and power as a citizen. Since reading is a major strategy for learning in virtually every aspect of education, it is the responsibility of every teacher to develop it.
- The purpose of the teaching of writing is to develop in children and young people a confident control of the medium, in all the diversity of its forms and purposes, and a sense of the pleasure that writing can bring. Teachers working with young children teach about the technicalities and conventions of the English writing system, and teach the physical mastery of handwriting, as essential aids to the achievement of this larger purpose. As children and young people then develop as writers, their development happens most effectively on a broad front, in several areas at once, and development in one area is often supportive of development in another. There is no dichotomy between content and correctness in the effective teaching of writing.
- Metalinguistic understanding, of which understanding of grammar is a part, is a potentially worthwhile outcome, not an essential generator, of implicit productive and receptive competence in language itself. Competence in language precedes analysis of language, not the other way round. The teaching of grammar is a valuable and interesting activity, so long as it is pitched at an appropriate level of difficulty for the learners in a class, so long as it occurs in the context of the study of worthwhile texts, and so long as it engages learners actively in investigating language in use. Grammar teaching out of the context of pupils' broader language learning is useless.
- Drama's potential contribution to learning and to the life of schools is diverse and enriching. It is a means of enhancing learning in a range of curriculum subjects and areas. It has close links with literature and with narrative generally, and therefore has a special significance within English teaching. It is also a practical art form, with its own techniques, conventions, vocabulary and technology. It has the potential to develop qualities of empathy and respect for difference in children and young people. It enables active and collaborative learning.
- Media education involves the study and production of a selection of the wide range of media texts, technologies and institutions which characterise and form our society. Equally important, it involves learners in the creation of media products themselves.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework and The National Curriculum for English from 2015

These two documents critique the statutory requirements for the English curriculum at the Early Years Foundation Stage and at Key Stages 1 to 4.

- The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework is an excellent document in its understanding of the importance of the spoken language in young children's intellectual and social development. Unfortunately, its approach to the development of literacy (both reading and writing) is limited by the government's preoccupation with phonics as the only effective method of teaching reading.
- The revised National Curriculum for English, compulsory in state schools other than academies and free schools as from September 2014 or September 2015, is a document of mixed quality.
- The National Curriculum undervalues the spoken language at Key Stages 1 and 2, and is over-concerned with formal, performance-based uses of the spoken language in the secondary years.
- The National Curriculum's approach to the initial teaching of reading and to the teaching of spelling and grammar at Key Stages 1 and 2 is based on a flawed understanding of learning in these years: one that imagines that analytical instruction is a prerequisite for competence.
- The National Curriculum's requirements for comprehension in reading at Key Stages 1 and 2 are perfectly acceptable. Those for composition in writing at Key Stages 1 and 2 usefully refer to some of the essential processes involved in writing, but say far too little about *what* children should write.
- The National Curriculum's requirements for reading and for writing at Key Stages 3 and 4 are broadly acceptable.
- The requirements for the teaching of grammar in the primary years should be more modest; those in the secondary years should be more detailed and more demanding.
- The paucity of requirements to do with knowledge about language other than grammar is regrettable.
- The new orders ignore the electronic and digital means of expression and communication with which most of our children and young people are intimately familiar. They have abolished any reference to media education. These are major omissions.
- The requirements for drama, whether as a part of English, as a learning medium across the curriculum, or as a freestanding subject, are inadequate.
- At some point, there will have to be further revision of the orders, to deal with those parts of them which will be seen to be unworkable.

An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16

This document offers a complete alternative curriculum for the Early Years Foundation Stage and for Key Stages 1 to 4. This alternative represents a genuinely rigorous programme of study, grounded (unlike the National Curriculum for English) in a proper understanding of the conditions in which children's and young people's competence and confidence in the use of English are most likely to develop effectively.

Assessment and Examinations 3 to 19

This document offers critiques of the Department for Education's arrangements for assessment and examinations across the 3 to 19 age-range. It combines these with proposals for alternatives which would provide reliable information as to learners' progress, while representing a more fruitful relationship between curriculum and assessment than do many of the current and planned statutory requirements.

Early Years Foundation Stage

- The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is, overall, an excellent document, demonstrating an enlightened understanding of learning and of the relationship between learning and assessment. It is a little spoiled by the government's obsession with phonics as the only effective means of teaching early reading, and is perhaps over-complex. But it remains the only instrument which teachers need by which to assess children's achievements in the Early Years Foundation Stage. It could be used as a means of arriving at a floor level, for accountability purposes, at the beginning of the January term of a child's reception year.
- The new baseline assessment is unnecessary and a waste of teachers' time. It should be abandoned.

Key Stages 1 and 2

- The government's plans for testing at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 from 2016 are no improvement on those which operated until 2015, and in some respects are even less satisfactory.
- The ending of levels is in itself welcome. It may well be that scaled scores will be more accurate and reliable than levels have been. However, so far as schools, teachers, pupils and parents are concerned, one set of numbers will have replaced another set of numbers.
- The re-emphasis on the importance of in-school assessment, formative and summative, in the *Final Report of the Commission on Assessment without Levels* and in the government's response to the report, is welcome. We have suggested an approach to in-school assessment which accords with the spirit of these two documents.
- The testing of reading and writing at ages 7 and 11 should treat these two complex activities as wholes. At present, the testing arrangements dismember them.
- The spoken language should be assessed with the same rigour as reading and writing, using teachers' moderated judgements of pupils' spoken language throughout Year 2 and Year 6.
- The outcome of testing or teacher assessment should be a judgement as to whether a pupil has not yet achieved, has achieved or has exceeded an expected standard in reading, writing and the spoken language. It is the accumulation of these judgements across a cohort of pupils which will provide schools, parents, the local authority and Ofsted with the information as to how effective is a school's teaching of English.

GCSE English Language and Literature

- Coursework should be restored to GCSE English Language and English Literature, at 25% of the total weighting.
- Students' achievement in the spoken language should once more count towards the main grade at GCSE English Language, at 25% of the total weighting.
- There should be some prescription of the literature to be studied at GCSE English Language.
- Seminal world literature should be part of the requirement for study at GCSE English Literature.

English 16 to 19

- AS-level should be 'recoupled' with A-level, as was the case until 2015.
- Coursework should be restored to its former maximum weighting of 40% of a student's final grade.
- Digital, electronic and multimodal texts should be studied more widely across all English A-level syllabuses.
- Digital and electronic materials and equipment should be in use in final examinations.
- More opportunity should be made for original writing in all English A-level syllabuses.
- Creative Writing A-level should be reinstated.
- The level 3 qualifications other than A-level now on offer to students at 16 to 19 are welcome.
- A qualification of equivalent value to GCSE, better suited to the needs of post-16 students, is urgently required.

Conclusion

The sponsors and authors of *Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan* share a passionate concern that our children's and young people's schooling should equip them with a confident control of English – whether as first or additional language – and show them the pleasure that is to be had in its use. To have confidence, to exercise control and to take pleasure might be regarded as the essential characteristics of successful speakers, readers and writers of English or any language.

No one will disagree with these remarks. It remains a matter of deep regret, however, and a disservice to our children and young people, that the professional opinions represented here are so often at variance with legislation on the curriculum and assessment in English in England. In *Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan*, we express our criticisms of aspects of government policy in terms sometimes robust but we hope never destructive. Every negative criticism is accompanied by a positive suggestion for an alternative way of doing things. Whether, in the immediate term, our alternative suggestions have any effect on the government's policy is a matter of doubt. But we hope that they will be seen as a constructive contribution to the debate in the medium and longer term and, for the present, as an encouragement and a support to those many practitioners who share our passion and our concern.

English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19 – Principles and Proposals

Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan draws heavily on the series *English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19 – Principles and Proposals*, published in 2015 by Owen Education and the United Kingdom Literacy Association.

The ten booklets in the series are:

English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19 – Summary: John Richmond, Peter Dougill and Mike Raleigh

Talk: John Richmond

Reading 3 to 7: John Richmond

Reading 7 to 16: Peter Traves

Writing 3 to 7: John Richmond

Writing 7 to 16: John Richmond

Grammar and Knowledge about Language: John Richmond

Drama: John Richmond

Media: Andrew Burn

English 16 to 19: Angela Goddard.

All are available, price £12 each (£11 to UKLA members), from the United Kingdom Literacy Association at <http://www.ukla.org/publications/shop/>

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