

KS3 English in England

A NATE Position Paper

Following the introduction of the new National Curriculum and new GCSEs in England, two key issues being considered by the English teaching community at present are developments in curriculum and assessment at KS3, and uptake of English at A Level and in Higher Education, both causes for concern. Here we present the first of two NATE position papers on these issues. This paper, on KS3, was written by NATE's Management Committee as part of a consultation with other associations in the Common English Forum.

Principles

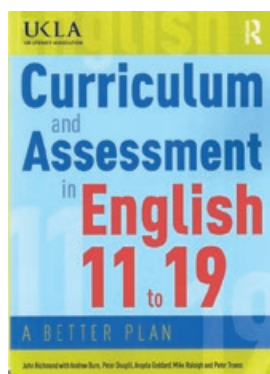
1. NATE believes that KS3 English (60% of most students' secondary experience) should be a distinct stage of young people's cognitive, emotional, social and linguistic development. This requires a creative teaching and learning strategy which adapts motivation, method, stimulus, pace and attainment to a wide variety of learners and kinds of learning. This in turn requires teachers to be creative and flexible in their use of resources and pedagogical approaches to engage and support young people of all abilities.
2. The KS3 English curriculum should inspire young people to read critically, widely and for pleasure, whilst developing an understanding of language, literature and media. Students should also be encouraged to write for pleasure and purpose and develop oracy and collaborative skills in a range of contexts.
3. The KS3 English curriculum should provide a secure skills and knowledge foundation for the assessment objectives of GCSE in KS4 without imposing on the KS3 experience the protocols of GCSE assessment. It should ensure a purposeful and satisfying experience of reading, writing and speaking for those who may not eventually gain 4+ accreditation in their GCSE, as well as for those taking the subject further. Given that English has a value and utility beyond GCSE, KS3 English should equip students with the skills, knowledge and motivation to read, speak and write in life, leisure and work beyond school
4. The aim of such a KS3 curriculum should be to enrich students academically and culturally, but also humanely: the development of self-understanding, empathy, collaboration, creativity, independence, imagination and resilience is essential for self-esteem and citizenship. Literature within the KS3 English curriculum is the key to developing these attributes. For similar reasons, the KS3 English curriculum should develop in students a critical appreciation of the communicative craft and purposes of print and non-print media.

Context

The demands of the new English GCSEs, first examined in 2017, and the continued pressure of school performance measures related to GCSE results, have in recent years exerted considerable influence on the KS3 curriculum, with many schools increasingly using KS3 as a preparation ground for GCSE English content and assessment – an issue recently highlighted by Ofsted. Given the increased narrowness of the new GCSE, this narrowing at KS3 is doubly of concern. NATE hears many tales of schools populating their KS3 English experience with GCSE content – for instance, beginning to teach GCSE set texts in Year 7 – and assessment – for instance, drilling them in the GCSE assessment objectives from Year 7, and using GCSE-style exams produced for KS3 by Awarding Bodies. The removal of KS3 levels of assessment and the reduction in national curriculum requirements for KS3 has undoubtedly aided this process, allowing the colonisation of KS3 by KS4 to take hold.

In the face of the new GCSEs, with their emphasis on formal written assessments, and their demotion of aspects such as extended writing, creativity, drama and spoken English, language study, media study, contemporary literature, digital textuality, and so on, it is ironic that there should be a tendency to narrow KS3, when in fact it has never been more crucial for KS3 to provide a humane, contemporary experience of the subject, in order to motivate, engage and enrich secondary students. Crucially, at a time when teacher retention is a problem, a more open KS3 also gives teachers the opportunity to develop their own creativity, and a greater sense of ownership over what they do.

Such a position was clearly set out in 2017 by John Richmond's crucial book *Curriculum and Assessment in English 11 to 19: A Better Plan*, the result of a collaboration between CLPE, NAAE, NATE and UKLA who together wanted to make a strong common statement about the curriculum and assessment in English across the whole school age-range, in the light of the publication of the new National Curriculum for English. (Much of this



material is also online at <https://ukla.org/resources/details/curriculum-and-assessment-in-english-3-to-19-a-better-plan>). Whilst the new curriculum removed many aspects of the subject NATE would like to see formally reinstated, its benefit is that it is minimal and allows schools the freedom to include as much additional material as they would like.

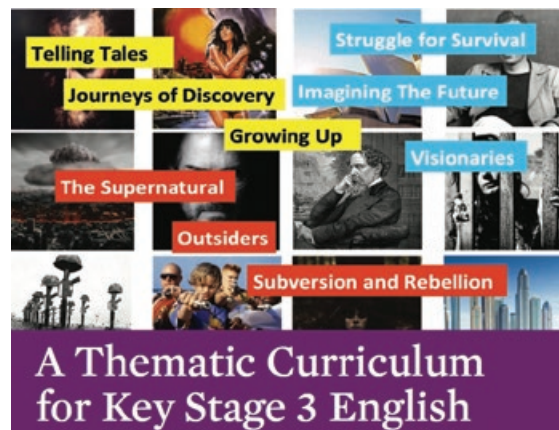
Richmond's work also suggested ways of compensating for some recent developments in KS2 English, weighed down as it is by the inappropriate demands of KS2 testing and a misguided grammar curriculum. Again, NATE hears many tales of narrowing primary English experiences, with reduced scope for creativity, rich literary exploration, extended personal writing, and so on. Bob Cox's recent work on 'Opening Doors' to great reading and writing (e.g., Cox 2019) has been an inspirational challenge to such a tendency. Again, it is clear that KS3 English could offer a valuable opportunity for humane renewal and inspiration after the stresses of the KS2 tests and the prescriptiveness of the KS2 curriculum.

The English and Media Centre has also made this project of humane renewal at KS3 a central part of its work in the last two years, with a strong focus on re-stating principles for 'big picture' English (see Barbara Bleiman's Harold Rosen Lecture in this edition of *Teaching English*), and its publication of a fine series of 'KS3 Curriculum Plus' resources (see www.englishandmedia.co.uk/blog/the-rationale-behind-emc-ks3-curriculum-plus).

More broadly, the narrowing of KS3 and KS4 English in England poses a threat to the health of the subject at a time when there are significant concerns about the continuing decline in uptake of English at A Level and in Higher Education (to be discussed in the next edition of *Teaching English*), as well as the fate of the 'forgotten third' at GCSE, highlighted last year by Geoff Barton as leader of the ASCL ([www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our view/Campaigns/The-Forgotten-Third-full-report.pdf](http://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Campaigns/The-Forgotten-Third-full-report.pdf)).

Together, these concerns highlight a growing divide between the increasingly conservative ethos of school English in England and the need for the development of knowledge and skills for the contemporary world of communication, including digital literacy and oracy, and 'soft' skills such as initiative, collaboration, creativity, adaptability, empathy, and so on. We see an alternative view of the secondary English curriculum at work in Wales (see <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/languages-literacy-and-communication>) as part of a new Curriculum for Wales which resists recent trends in England with a vision of a joined-up curriculum which includes a strong commitment to aspects such as creativity, oracy, social justice and digital literacy.

Resistance to the narrowing of KS3 English clearly has some strong proponents, and responses to NATE's recent survey of English teachers (see below) show that many teachers feel strongly that such resistance is needed – with almost every comment echoing the concerns of this paper. And yet there are many obstacles, at a time when schools are struggling with recruitment, retention and workload issues, with special needs provision, and with adequate access to CPD. Following the dismantling of local authority control, national, regional and local networks for sharing good practice and subject-specialist guidance have declined.



In-school CPD tends not to be subject-specific, and standardised schemes of work within Multi-Academy Trusts often create an unhelpful uniformity of approach uninformed by long-developed sources of specialist subject knowledge.

Teachers and departments who wish to take part in this renewal and resistance at KS3 have many models and resources to draw on. In addition to those key resources mentioned above, we note that there is a wealth of high quality curriculum and enrichment resources, particularly digital ones, available from organisations such as the British Library (including 'Discovering Literature' and a range of Language resources), Poetry By Heart, Into Film, the RSC, Shakespeare's Globe and the National Theatre, as well as NATE's own website, publications and membership mailings.

Two recent articles in *Teaching English* have highlighted the work of departments which are actively designing their programmes of work in order to go beyond the restraints of GCSE at both KS3 and KS4, and to embrace aspects such as citizenship, social justice and oracy – Anthony Cockerill's 'A Thematic Approach for KS3 English' (Oct 2019) and Helen Mars's 'Hand, Heart, Head and Voice' (in this edition) – whilst Peter Thomas's recent work for NATE in collaboration with the Ideas Foundation and schools in Cumbria (see 'Live the story: Creativity, Criticality and Active Learning' in *Teaching English*, Oct 2019) shows what can be achieved when schools and educational institutions engage with local communities, creative agencies and industry to create powerful resources that link literary and linguistic study with the world outside school. More generally, James Durran's occasional series in *Teaching English*, for the column 'Teaching and Learning', continues to argue for enlightened approaches to pedagogy even within the restraints of current KS2-KS4 curriculum and assessment provisions, and many other writers in recent editions of the magazine have explored similar ideas and classroom strategies.

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Proposals

NATE plans to set up a KS3 committee to draw up a three-year model with clear principles, and a range of strategies, sample resources and links to KS2 and KS4/5/beyond, building upon the examples cited above. NATE is currently exploring ways of funding this project to support the research, curriculum planning and resource creation that would provide guidance for KS3 teachers and learners.

Meanwhile, NATE continues to work in a variety of ways to promote good practice and subject knowledge, and the sharing of creative resources. *Teaching English* has maintained a strong focus on progressive strategies for KS3 and KS4, and we continue to share resources and ideas through *IllumiNATE* mailings, through Teachmeets across the country, and through national and regional conferences.

If you would like to set up a Teachmeet to address these concerns (and/or others), please contact NATE's regional officer. Visit <https://www.nate.org.uk/about/regional-reps/> for more information.

Further reading:

Curriculum and Assessment in English 11 to 19:

A Better Plan (John Richmond et al, Routledge 2017, and at <https://ukla.org>).

View from the Chair: selected columns in *Teaching English*

magazine by NATE Chair Peter Thomas

Rebuilding English (Feb 2020)

Knowledge Anyone? (Jun 2019)

Getting the Balance Right – English as a humane discipline (Oct 2018)

English and Media Centre blog and publications at www.englishandmedia.co.uk.

Selected recent articles in *Teaching English*:

Big Picture English – beyond the brushstrokes (Barbara Bleiman, Feb 2020)

Hand, Head, Heart and Voice (Helen Mars, Feb 2020)

A Thematic Approach for KS3 (Anthony Cockerill, Oct 2019)

*Navigating the Flood – what English teachers can learn from *The Book of Dust** (Beth Cooper, Oct 2019)

Rethinking KS3 – a novel approach (Barbara Bleiman, Jun 2019)

Creative English (Andrew McCallum, Oct 2018)

Reinvigorating the KS3 Curriculum (Andrew McCallum, Feb 2018)

A Manifesto for English (Peter Thomas, Feb 2018)

NATE Survey 2019

Responses to the question: **If you could change one element of KS3, what would it be?**

- Less pressure to prepare for KS4
- Less focus on GCSE; more on creativity and enjoyment
- STOP teaching GCSE at such an early stage. I am seeing more and more of this.
- We have made a change this year: removed all explicit GCSE content from Year 9. Now a much more solid, non-GCSE foundation year.
- Do not turn it into KS4/Avoid starting GCSE early/Less GCSE focus
- Keep a 3 yr KS3 in all schools - don't introduce GCSEs too early
- Stop beginning GCSEs in Y9
- Bringing GCSE into Y9 or using marking criteria from Y7
- More whole texts. Less teaching towards GCSE
- Less reliance on KS4 assessment outcomes
- Make it free from KS4 prep
- Make it less of a KS4 'light' and teach students English skills for life not exams e.g. how to spot fake news
- Remove any shred of KS4 assessments
- Not teach GCSE texts from Year 7, and read more widely 10/23/2019 8:49 AM
- 3 year, not 2 year; not teach any GCSE exam questions; more oracy
- Less focus on GCSE AOs in SOWs/assessments
- Limitations of curriculum
- Encourage love of English rather than a focus on exam skills
- Government to reintroduce some kind of formal assessment boundaries for this.
- Clear national expectations for ability at end of KS
- More detailed curriculum with set texts
- Less teaching discrete grammar lessons, less focus on dead white male authors
- More scope to explore texts from around the globe/other cultures
- Teaching grammar through literary texts, more reading
- Greater focus on oracy
- The opportunity to study a wider variety of texts
- To promote more creativity in reading and writing
- Greater focus on world literature
- Review of setting across years 7–9
- More drama crossover
- More challenging texts
- Greater focus on creativity and breadth of literature
- More creativity, less testing
- Wider range of texts: global, reading of media
- More challenging texts
- More time; more variety; more fun
- Make English more enjoyable, less formulaic
- I would prefer it if we assessed KS3 differently.
- More opportunities to work across curriculum areas.
- Build in more speaking and creative writing.
- Progression and engagement.
- More opportunity for writing for pleasure.
- More media study
- Less exam focus and more focus on building confidence and enjoyment
- Teaching reading and writing side-by-side
- Make it more creative and fun
- More use of speaking and listening and more 'fun' - outside the box thinking and doing
- More integrated curriculum, value to S and L