

## ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

7 NORTHUMBERLAND STREET, LONDON WC2N 5RD TEL: 020-7930-6441 FAX: 020-7930-1359  
e-mail: info@atl.org.uk web site: http://www.atl.org.uk VAT REG NO 539 0866 17  
GENERAL SECRETARY Dr MARY BOUSTED B.A.(Hons) PhD



### **Draft Programmes of study for primary English, mathematics and science – informal consultation**

***Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers***

***3 August***

ATL, the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. AMiE is the trade union and professional association for leaders and managers in colleges and schools, and is a distinct section of ATL. We recognise the link between education policy and members' conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally.

ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

#### **ATL policy**

ATL's education policy is underpinned by the professionalism of teachers.

Education should enable all children, young people and adults to:

- ♦ realise their potential, be creative and develop holistically
- ♦ have the knowledge, skills and confidence to take an active part in society, including through employment
- ♦ have respect for themselves and for others, including other cultures, live peacefully and protect the natural environment
- ♦ develop and sustain an understanding of social responsibility, human rights and fundamental freedoms
- ♦ understand and critically interrogate the world in which they live.

A broad and balanced curriculum is the best route to increased attainment in literacy and numeracy, while also developing well-rounded individuals.

ATL supports an **outline skills-based national curriculum** which is relevant for all pupils throughout compulsory education. It should specify what is essential to learn across the range of subjects to meet the aims of education. Detailed content should be developed locally by teachers in collaboration with the community.

Teachers should be recognised for their deep knowledge, expertise and judgement over curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, within a balanced

accountability system. Teachers need space to innovate, to be able to support their pupils' learning through an ever-changing society.

### **In summary**

- ♦ The curriculum as specified in three 'core' subjects is too detailed and will leave little space for any other 'essential' learning.
- ♦ The current draft is not coherent, has no framework of aims and no transition from early years to the end of compulsory education.
- ♦ Year-on-year specification does not recognise the enormous range of children's experiences in each classroom, and will not give space for teachers to build on and extend children's capabilities in order to meet the needs of all children.
- ♦ It presumes a transmission model of teaching and a corresponding model of rote learning for children. Pupils will learn to recite and give presentations, but there is little space for them to develop thinking, reasoning and questioning skills.
- ♦ It is a limiting rather than an enabling curriculum: it ties learning in all subjects to 'current phonic knowledge', rather than challenging children with exciting and complex vocabulary; and it limits spoken language to the development of reading and writing rather than recognising its importance for thinking.
- ♦ By removing 'speaking and listening' as a separate strand in English, spoken language is reduced to a tool to support other subjects, rather than a skill to be developed alongside the skills of written language.

### **ATL response**

We believe that such a prescriptive primary curriculum makes nonsense of trusting teachers to get on with their job. The current drafts are an attempt to control everything that happens in the classroom in the three core subjects (down to the detailed spelling lists and writing numbers to 10 million). It is difficult to imagine what curriculum breadth will mean in primary school, when three subjects are specified in so much detail.

It is not the written curriculum that raises standards, but the curriculum as it is taught in classrooms. There is no evidence that top-down prescription by government raises standards. Over-prescription of curriculum and pedagogy continues a trend of de-skilling the profession which, if unchecked, will deplete the pool of professional expertise.

### **Aims**

We agree with the Expert Panel that aims should be agreed first, at the level of the system, the school and the subject. These Programmes of study (PoS) have been developed in advance of any such debate. The aims currently specified are for individual subjects and show no appreciation of aims at school or system level, nor any suggestion of how each subject might fit into an aims-led school or system level statement.

The lack of overall aims, coupled with the publication of detailed PoS in only three subjects in only the primary phase, mean that it is impossible to understand how the national curriculum will develop as a coherent whole. There is no sense of how one stage will build upon another: the proposals for key stage 1 in particular do not take account of either the knowledge or the skills that pupils will have developed through the early

years foundation stage. Neither is there any sense of what we should expect an educated 19-year-old to have learnt, and therefore how each key stage leads towards those outcomes.

### ***Learning and teaching***

These PoS show that this Government believes in *the importance of teaching* but without much reference to the importance of learning. It suggests a belief that what is taught is the same as what is learnt. Effective teaching is about recognising that this is not the case, and that what is learnt depends on what the pupil already knows, and importantly what misconceptions they have.

There is a year's difference between the youngest and the oldest in a class: a year's less life experience, a year's less language development, a year less of exploring the world. This makes a significant difference when you are 5, still makes a difference when you are 11, and continues to have an effect at GCSE and beyond. Skilled teachers work with the whole range of children's experiences – this written curriculum gives little scope for the professional judgement required.

Children do not learn in a linear fashion. They revisit concepts in more detail, more abstractly or in new situations over time, and may need to go back to basics each time. Ideas need to be encountered several times, in an increasingly sophisticated way and in a variety of contexts before they can be fully grasped. Year-on-year specification does not allow for the spiralling rather than linear progression that is needed.

The PoS are predicated on a notion that children must first learn 'the basics' and 'the facts' and then apply those things to real world situations, to innovate, create, think and play. They are also too focussed on rote learning rather than inquiry, experiment, and independent thinking. Teachers know that children learn 'the basics' and 'the facts' precisely through real world situations, and that through being creative, thoughtful and questioning, pupils make their learning make sense.

Children do not all learn in the same way or at the same time. Teachers must respond to children's needs, not government lists.

### ***English***

The English programme of study must have a spoken language strand. It should enable children to develop skills in providing focussed answers and asking their own questions, as well as using talk to narrate, explain, speculate, imagine, hypothesise, explore, evaluate, discuss, argue, reason and justify<sup>1</sup>. Spoken language is vital for developing and articulating thinking – it is a skill that must be developed by sensitive and skilled teaching.

Teachers also call for more reference to drama, ICT and multi-media.

Although there is reference to 'reading widely for pleasure', the English PoS has a disproportionate emphasis on learning the building blocks of language, which will be underpinned by new tests and inspection focus. In a system where success or failure depends on a score in a test of phonics

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Alexander (2012) *Improving oracy and classroom talk in English schools: achievements and challenges* University of Cambridge Extended version of a presentation given at the DfE seminar on oracy

or grammar, 'reading for pleasure', enjoying poems, literature, fiction and non-fiction will become an afterthought rather than a key focus.

### **Mathematics**

Maths should have a strand about mathematical thinking, reasoning and problem-solving. Research from Oxford University for example suggests that it is 8-year-olds' reasoning ability, rather than knowledge of arithmetic, that predicts success at 14;; and that it is possible to teach arithmetic without mathematical reasoning, but not possible to teach reasoning without arithmetic. *Mathematical knowledge is, or at any rate should be, about underlying mathematical principles as well as about mathematical procedures, and children must also learn how to use these principles to reason about quantitative relations.*<sup>2</sup>

The draft PoS appear to suggest that mathematical thinking will come after arithmetic is mastered, rather than it being a skill which is continually developed.

### **Science**

It is extremely difficult to comment on the science curriculum without knowing how it will link with other subjects in the primary curriculum (DT and ICT for example) and without knowing how it will develop into secondary school. While certain concepts have been placed earlier in the curriculum sequence it is difficult to understand the rationale.

We continue to question why PSHE will not be part of the national curriculum. This has particular relevance to the science curriculum: currently the written curriculum is very coy about the human reproductive system, and has little in it about healthy lifestyles, risks to health (from drugs, medicines, diseases), or links between diet and body image for example. All children should follow a curriculum that covers these issues, but it is unclear how this will become an entitlement.

### **Use of language across the curriculum**

Spoken language must be given a much higher prominence across the curriculum, so that children develop skills in different kinds of talk, using different vocabularies, questions, and ways of thinking depending on whether they are learning mathematics, geography or art for example.

These skills are vital if education aims to develop questioning, critical and reasoning citizens, creative, problem-solving members of the community and the workforce, and people who use language to understand and get on with each other.

Because of the focus on children's 'current phonic knowledge' the draft PoS deny opportunities for pupils to explore language beyond their 'phonic knowledge' in a way that would enrich learning. In English, this limits children to a thin diet of 'appropriate' books to read, and in maths and science it potentially limits exploration of key concepts and themes, based only on whether children should be 'allowed' to read or write particular words yet.

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<sup>2</sup> Terezinha Nunes, Peter Bryant, Kathy Sylva and Rossana Barros (2009), *Development of maths capabilities and confidence in primary school*, Department of Education, University of Oxford In collaboration with ALSPAC, University of Bristol

### ***ATL recommendations***

Ahead of formal consultation in the autumn term, a national debate is needed on the aims of education and the purpose of a national curriculum.

Government must listen and respond to the views of the profession, across all sectors, and across the range of schools, including those who teach children as well as school leaders.

Government should attempt to develop cross-UK conversation about curriculum issues, in order to share thinking and effective practices.

Government should consult first on a statement of aims for the national curriculum and on the ways in which each subject will contribute to the overall aims.

Formal consultation on the PoS should cover the full range of national curriculum subjects, across both primary and secondary curriculum, so that teachers can respond to proposals of how each subject will develop from early years to Key stage 4, and of how subjects will link together.

'Spoken language skills' should be a strand in the new English programmes of study, but neither it nor the other strands should contain as much detail as is currently specified.

More emphasis should be placed on developing thinking, questioning and reasoning skills, through the new spoken language skills strand, and also across the curriculum. These skills should be developed from EYFS to KS4.

The mathematics PoS should have greater focus on mathematical thinking and reasoning.

The science PoS should include developing scientific methodology and thinking, practical enquiry and experiments throughout.

We believe the national curriculum should not be based on year-on-year specification. Instead, it should identify essential concepts to be understood across a key stage and across the full range of schooling. The government should be transparent about the evidence on which it has based year-on-year specification when so many of its own 'experts' have argued against it.

### **Conclusion**

So far, consultation with the profession has been extremely limited. We call on the government to ensure adequate time for teachers across the range of schools (and not just limited to those in 'high achieving' schools) to engage with the draft curriculum in its entirety. This is the only way to ensure that the national curriculum is manageable in classroom contexts, and sets high but realistic expectations of pupils.