

**A Response to the Draft Primary National Curriculum for English  
from  
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***General Points:***

- There is a mismatch between the laudable aspirations in the introduction and the dead hand of the Programmes of Study which, in their worst light, could appear to be taking us back to an almost Gradgrindian model of teaching.
- The dividing of KS1 into two discrete year long elements may well encourage a fragmentation of the learning process which could easily generate a “tick-list” mentality among less confident practitioners.
- Related to the previous point: the tone of the Programmes of Study suggests a fairly linear approach to the pedagogic process. This denies all that we know about effective learning/teaching in English that has always had, at its heart, the notion of a spiral curriculum. We are in danger of the worksheet or the text book taking centre stage across the Primary Curriculum.
- The level of detail in the PoS and in the appendices tends to contradict statements from ministers about the need to put responsibility for the curriculum into the hands of classroom practitioners. The implied transmission-style teaching does not cohere with what we know about the way the best teachers of English work.
- This does not appear to be a curriculum for the C21 given that there is almost no mention of media education and visual literacy or of ICT and digital texts.
- There appears to be a contradiction between this document and the work of OFSTED. In the latest English report (“Moving English Forward”) by Phil Jarrett (HMI) – National Adviser for English – there is an emphasis on creativity in both teaching and learning, on teachers thinking for themselves and on sensible risk-taking.
- Ministers may claim that this document offers a minimal entitlement for pupils on which teachers should build but anyone who has worked in education over the past 30 years knows that a minimal entitlement has a nasty habit of quickly becoming the only entitlement for learners. This is particularly true when there is so much detail related to the mechanical/technical aspects of language development. Many children may well miss out on the richness and depth that the current curriculum offers.
- It would be interesting to know what research has fed into the process of creating this curriculum. Much of the research (Alexander, Rose, Myhill, William, Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner et al) with which educationalists are familiar seems to have been disregarded or marginalized.
- The fact that the two appendices on spelling and grammar outweigh the actual Programmes of Study is a worrying factor in all this and only serves to

reinforce the concern that this part of the curriculum – important though it is – will far outweigh every other aspect of the child’s experience in the classroom.

- There is no glimmer of the need for “fun”, for enjoyment or for genuine engagement with both language and literature in the document.
- Looming over the whole process are the tests that are being devised to examine this curriculum. An emphasis on phonics and grammar in a context of high-stakes assessments - will ensure that everything else will be relegated to a peripheral status in many schools across the country.
- There will be an urgent need for extensive training of teachers if this curriculum survives the consultation stage and, given the almost total lack of resources now at the disposal of Local Authorities, it is difficult to see how this will be provided. Teaching schools have not the capacity, the resources nor the inclination to engage in this level of training.

### ***Speaking and Listening***

- It is of great concern that – although, as stated earlier, oracy is mentioned extensively in the introduction – there is hardly a mention of it in the PoS. All teachers know how important exploratory talk, questioning, discussion are in the learning process yet here it is relegated to a consideration of how talk can be represented in writing and of reading/reciting aloud.
- There is almost no mention of drama or of role play and none related to the notion of dialogic teaching.

### ***Reading***

- All teachers are aware of the importance of phonics in the life of the developing reader but, in this document, there appears to be an obsession with only this one aspect of the reading process. There is no mention of using visual clues and context; no apparent acknowledgement that reading is, in part, dependent on motivation, engagement and enjoyment and no understanding that different children learn at different rates and in different ways. Much of the work here seems to relate to the child who has difficulty with reading and does not apply to the majority of pupils in our classrooms who need to be quickly engaged with real books in order to contextualise their developing knowledge of phonics.
- To suggest that pupils’ reading experiences should be limited to texts which are phonetically regular or to those whose vocabulary correspond to the phonemic knowledge of the pupils is a crass over-simplification that can only harm or delay the sort of progress that KS1 teachers have come to expect.
- There is a huge emphasis on “learning poetry by heart” and no teacher would quibble about the joy that learning poetry can bring, particularly in the early years. However, very few teachers can understand why there is this sudden pedagogic imperative to engage in this activity – perhaps at the expense of

other more urgent learning needs or other activities/strategies that would engage pupils more readily in a literary experience. Educational priorities seem to be in some sort of disarray here or is it that the reference points of some politicians are so firmly rooted in their own experiences of schooling that they fail to understand the nature of classrooms in C21.

- One redeeming feature is that there is a helpful emphasis on the reading of “whole” books.

### **Writing**

- There is a great deal about the transcriptional elements of writing (spelling, handwriting, grammar and punctuation) and – again – every teacher would, wholeheartedly, acknowledge the importance of these areas. However, there is a concern that this emphasis will over-ride other, equally important aspects of the writing process like engagement, enjoyment, having the self-image of a writer and an awareness of audience particularly as there are very limited “Notes and Guidance” related to these areas compared to “transcription”.
- A lack of acknowledgement of the importance of writing on screen or of digital composition is another glaring omission from the document.
- The level of detail involved in the various references to grammar and in the Grammar Appendix seems to be indicative of a desire to atomise knowledge about language when most educationalists understand that the most effective grammar teaching occurs in the context of the pupils’ own reading, writing, talking and listening. It is in a recursive, spiral curriculum that the most effective teaching of grammar occurs; not in a linear structure that is heavily dependent on the “naming of parts”.
- The spelling sections seem equally archaic with words lists which will encourage teachers back to old-style spelling tests that rely on short –term memory and have little impact on real learning. At a time when increasing numbers of teachers are using spelling journals, a range of investigative, word-level strategies and etymological dictionaries to encourage pupils to engage in enjoyable and effective spelling activities it does seem rather short-sighted to offer guidelines that take us back to the worst features of the 1950s.
- The apparently random selection of words on the lists for Yrs5&6 is perhaps indicative of the rather simplistic approach that is being advocated here. Why “blemish” (a word that one would hope most Yr2 pupils could spell)? Why “manage”? Why “omit”? Why “fruit”? Indeed what is the use of this type of redundant exercise which has no bearing on the literary or linguistic lives of pupils in our schools?

These are just some of the reservations and concerns that the Association has about this draft document and we would urge ministers to reconsider its introduction before it is too late to undo the damage that it will do to both pupils and teachers in our schools.

