



**THE RESPONSE OF THE NATIONAL UNION
OF TEACHERS TO THE PRIMARY
NATIONAL CURRICULUM DRAFT
PROGRAMMES OF STUDY IN ENGLISH,
MATHS AND SCIENCE**

JULY 2012

INTRODUCTION

1. The National Union of Teachers welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft programmes of study for English, Mathematics and Science at Key Stages 1 and 2 as part of the wider National Curriculum Review.

SUMMARY OF THE RESPONSE

- The over-prescriptive nature of the proposals in the programmes of study will constrict teaching and learning and produce conformity rather than innovation in our schools.
- Too much emphasis is placed on systematic synthetic phonics as the only method for children to learn to read.
- Rote learning of key facts will leave children feeling bored at school and lacking in opportunities for exploration and the development of higher order thinking skills.
- The increased emphasis on 'talk' within the programmes of study is welcomed. However, the failure to acknowledge alternative ways of communicating and the issue of including those children for whom 'talk' is not easy, for whatever reason, remain a concern for teachers.
- There is insufficient information for teachers on inclusion and differentiation within the programmes of study. It is impractical to expect all children in a class to acquire knowledge and move on at the same pace.
- The importance of reading for pleasure is strongly advocated in the programmes of study. This is welcomed but with reservations about the lack of time and flexibility within the curriculum for this approach to be successful. Reading for pleasure must be integral to schools, not an add-on.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

1. The Government's proposals fundamentally lack credibility. The Expert Panel appointed to advise the Government has been largely ignored due to differences of opinion between the Secretary of State and the majority of the Panel.
2. International evidence on which the programmes of study are purportedly based, has been carefully selected to meet the Government's ideology. The NUT would not, for example, wish to see a return to the whole scale selection of pupils at age 11 as is the case in the system in Singapore which is often quoted in evidence by the Government.
3. By citing the high scores achieved by systems such as that in Singapore the Government implies that this can be replicated in England. It is unlikely that this is the case as Singapore has only approximately 170 primary schools serving about 270,000 pupils.
4. Standards and achievement in primary schools in Singapore are high due to additional tutoring, excessive home work and a rigid and uncreative curriculum. Rote learning is the norm.
5. A return to overt selection, removing creativity from the curriculum and replacing it with rote learning, a narrow curriculum focus, and expecting children to use home tutors to achieve academic success, is not a system that we want for this country.
6. The Government should strive to create a more inclusive primary education system in England. It should not look to systems such as that in Singapore which discriminates against children with special educational needs or disabilities. Children in Singapore "*who cannot attend any national primary school due to any physical or intellectual disability*" are exempt from compulsory education. They can attend schools run by welfare organisations so they are effectively segregated or completely excluded as there is no entitlement for them to attend any school. Is this the model the Government would have us follow?
7. Singapore is not a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of Disabled People which states that disabled people should be guaranteed the right to an inclusive education. Any school system and curriculum should be flexible and creative enough to include all children and all children should have the opportunity to succeed within it.
8. The Expert Panel was restricted to such an extent that it was not even allowed to consider early years education or how the principles of this key stage might be applied to the primary curriculum. Furthermore, they ruled out year on year targets, a move which was supported by the Mathematical association, but they are included in the proposals anyway.
9. The introduction of year on year targets for each of the core subjects is a move which the NUT opposes on the grounds that young children do not develop at the same pace or in a linear fashion. The proposals take no account of the issues

such a move would have on the many mixed age classes in primary schools across the country.

10. A key aim for the primary National Curriculum should be that it excites and inspires children and fosters in them a love of learning for its own sake. In order to achieve this, the primary curriculum needs to provide children with both time and space to grow and develop as individuals at their own pace.
11. The curriculum proposed by the Government tells teachers what not to do rather than advising on best practice as evidenced by robust research and teachers own experience. It is the only national curriculum in the world which disables rather than enables teachers.
12. The curriculum should enable children to experiment and experience, as a means of developing their own identity, interests and tastes. There must be limits to such freedoms, to ensure that all children receive both a broad and balanced curriculum and achieve mastery of the 'basics', There must also be opportunities for children to develop their own skills, abilities and areas of particular interest. These can only be developed within a supportive and enabling, rather than a restrictive and prescribed, curriculum framework.
13. The NUT, like the Government, wants all children to succeed at school regardless of their background. The premise in the draft programmes of study, however, that all children will 'master' skills and content before moving on is impractical and not supported by evidence on how children learn.
14. The paragraph on inclusion which is the same in all three programmes of study does little to reassure teachers and parents that there will be the freedom and flexibility to create inclusive classrooms where each child works towards their own realistic individual targets.
15. Colin Richards in his response to the Government proposals for the Primary Curriculum suggests that the programmes of study as constructed are premised on a view of teachers as 'transmitters of subject content' rather than 'agents working with children to co-construct understanding and develop personal capacity'. Schools and teachers need professional freedom in order to respond creatively to all children.
16. There needs to be a far more overtly permissive tone in all the revised National Curriculum documents if teachers are to feel confident that they can adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their pupils in more than superficial ways.
17. With an already struggling admissions system developing as academies and free schools become increasingly selective, the NUT believes that the pressures on schools to secure mastery in English, Maths and Science across whole classes will deter them from admitting children with special educational needs. Schools with decreased inclusion and diminished diversity will be poorer learning environments for all children.
18. The proposals contained in the English, Maths and Science draft programmes of study are very weighty and lead to the question of how much breadth will actually remain in the primary curriculum? With such emphasis on three subject areas,

schools will find fitting the Humanities, Arts and Physical Education into the curriculum increasingly difficult. It is inevitable that the 'tested' subjects will assume greater prominence in the curriculum timetable. The Government has not learnt the lessons from the existing curriculum and assessment arrangements which have compelled schools to 'teach to the test' in the context of high stakes accountability.

19. In its response to the Henley Review of Cultural Education in England the Government stressed the importance of The Arts in schools. It makes no commitment to arts and culture in the curriculum. The Government is proposing a curriculum for the first half of the 21st century which harks back to an imagined golden era in a previous century. This is simply foolhardy and does not reflect the realities of the modern world. With the increased emphasis on English, Maths and Science in the draft programmes of study it is hard to see how a broad and balanced curriculum for primary children will be maintained.
20. Another theme running through the English, Maths and Science programmes of study is the promotion of rote learning as part of the 'mastery' model. Such learning does not promote exploration and investigation and in fact represents a dumbing down of children's skills and educational development. As Professor Robin Alexander ¹ points out, rote learning will not in itself increase standards because as well as providing answers pupils must also be able to pose their own questions.

Programmes of Study

21. More detailed comment is provided for the English, Maths and Science programmes of study below.

ENGLISH

22. The Bullock Report², published in 1975, was the most comprehensive enquiry into all aspects of English teaching undertaken to date. It concluded "*there is no one method, medium, approach, device or philosophy that holds the key to the process of learning to read*".
23. Throughout the English programme of study there is too great an emphasis on the only permissible method of teaching English being the use of systematic, synthetic phonics first and fast. It suggests that children who have not met the required standard within any year or key stage should be taught to decode and spell 'through a rigorous and systematic phonics programme so that they catch up rapidly'.
24. Children learn to read in different ways and teaching methods must be tailored to meet each child's individual needs. Teachers know that there can be no 'one size fits all' approach to the teaching of reading and already use a range of strategies, including systematic synthetic phonics to help children in their class progress.

¹ Improving Oracy and Classroom Talk in English Schools: Achievements and Challenges, 2012, Extended version of a presentation given at the DfE seminar on Oracy, 20 February 2012, University of Cambridge

² Bullock A., 'A Language for Life', HMSO, 1978

25. Children need a balanced, interesting and motivating approach to learning to read. Teachers should be able to make professional decisions about children's reading and not be over-directed and instructed in detail about what to teach, and when³.
26. The Secretary of State for Education, in his letter to Tim Oates, suggests greater emphasis on reading widely for pleasure but it is difficult to see how this fits in with the overemphasis on phonics first and fast and the increased demands of the curriculum on spelling, punctuation and grammar.
27. The inclusion of reading for pleasure in the programme of study is, however, welcome but sufficient time and flexibility within the curriculum must be afforded to schools for this to happen. Reading for pleasure must be a whole school initiative, not an add-on. The NUT's *Reading for Pleasure* booklet provides advice and guidance on methods of promoting reading for pleasure in schools and classrooms. It can be downloaded at www.teachers.org/reading.
28. School libraries and librarians are essential in fostering a good reading environment in schools. The National Literacy Trust in its recent report on the Boys' Reading Commission⁴ emphasised school libraries as the 'power houses of reading within the school community'. They support this assertion further by citing international evidence⁵ which connects quality of school library provision with the achievement of pupils. With the pressures on schools to admit greater numbers of pupils, due to the increased demand for primary places, many school libraries are facing closure as the space is used for classrooms. This is a move opposed by the NUT.
29. It is important for children to have an appreciation and understanding of all elements of language, including poetry. Indeed rhymes and poems are the first experiences many children have of language when they are babies. The extent to which learning to recite poetry from memory will enhance the appreciation and understanding of poetry has been questioned by teachers contacting the NUT.
30. For many children forcing the rote learning of poetry could have the opposite effect and turn them off of this genre. For many children speaking aloud in class is frightening. Teachers encourage children to speak in class by using subject matter about which they are particularly interested or knowledgeable, such as their pet or their favourite toy. Forcing children at five to rote learn poetry shows little understanding of young children's development.
31. Teachers must have considerable flexibility in judging the pupils in their class who would enjoy such an experience and benefit from it and those who would not. With the ever present threat that Ofsted will be inspecting such elements of teaching and learning it would be preferable for this to be removed from the draft programmes of study altogether. If forced, rote learning of poetry may simply destroy rather than increase children's confidence and reduce any chance of them developing an appreciation of poetry in the future.

³ Teaching Reading: What the evidence says, 2010, Henrietta Dombey et al and the United Kingdom Literacy Association, UKLA

⁴ Boys Reading Commission, 2012, Report of the APPG Literacy Group Commission, National Literacy Trust

⁵ <http://www.lrs.org/impact.php>

32. The increased emphasis on oracy and talk in the English programme of study is welcomed. There is concern amongst teachers, however, that no mention is made of the adjustments which should be made for children who either communicate in different ways, such as using British Sign Language, or those who do not use talk as a means of communication. Children on the autistic spectrum, for example, may not use talk as a means of expression in the same way as other children.
33. A much broader definition of spoken language must be included in the programmes of study, along with additional guidance for schools on including all children.
34. Teachers are key to promoting high quality talk in classrooms and must feel enabled to do this effectively. As Professor Robin Alexander⁶ says the paper curriculum cannot be scripted in advance and the enacted curriculum is what teachers 'do'.
35. The paragraph on inclusion which is in each of the programmes of study provides little useful information for teachers in supporting pupils with additional needs. It is unclear whether there is an expectation that these pupils should also meet the end of year or key stage targets. In some classes this will apply to large numbers of children and there is little, if any, mention of differentiation within the draft programmes of study. This advice must be expanded and the expectations being placed upon teachers regarding differentiation made more explicit.
36. The draft proposals state that the National Curriculum for English aims to ensure all pupils "appreciate our (NUT emphasis) rich and varied heritage." England does not have a monopoly on rich and varied literary heritage. It is essential that literature is drawn from diverse sources and cultures.

KEY STAGE 1 : YEAR 1

37. The use of the term 'common exception words' in the programme of study, rather than the currently used 'tricky words', is rather longwinded and unnecessary.
38. Contractions (I'll/can't etc) are a difficult concept for pupils to understand and it could be confusing to introduce them to pupils who may still be at the early stages of learning to read 'whole' words. Teachers responding to the NUT's call for views on the drafts have questioned whether it is essential to introduce this in Year 1.
39. The inclusion of the statement that pupils should continue to follow the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) if they have not met the Early Learning Goals for literacy is welcomed. However, we wish to stress that phonics as the only method of learning to read does not work for all children.

⁶ Improving Oracy and Classroom Talk in English Schools: Achievements and Challenges, 2012, Extended version of a presentation given at the DfE seminar on Oracy, 20 February 2012, University of Cambridge

40. Teachers must feel enabled to use other methods of teaching reading. They should not be constrained by having to justify to Ofsted, for example, that they have persisted in using a 'rigorous' method of teaching phonics when their professional judgement tells them that this is the wrong approach for any given child.
41. In the Notes and Guidance it is suggested that children use only phonic decoding in their reading at this stage. Furthermore throughout year one it is recommended that children do not read books which require any other reading strategies. This would constrict rather than enable reading. It is also unclear how this might relate to Maths and Science as it is also referred to in those programmes of study.
42. The dogged persistence of the ideology throughout the draft programmes of study that systematic, synthetic phonics is the only way to teach reading actually undermines its potential to improve standards and the quality of the school experience for many children. It also further undermines the professional judgement of teachers and constrains schools in their supposed freedom to manage the curriculum.

KEY STAGE 1 : YEAR 2

43. The term 'including whole books' in the introduction to this section implies that 'whole books' may not have been read to pupils in year one. Teachers have grave concerns about the implication that whole books should not be read to children until they can read. It is important for children to listen to and concentrate on whole books in class. The UKLA ⁷ made clear in its paper on *Teaching Reading* that the most successful classrooms were filled with interesting written texts-on screen as well as on paper- and children were given rich experiences in putting these texts to use.

Spelling

44. The suggestion in the introduction to Appendix 1 is that pupils do not need to focus on the 'common exception words' (tricky words) until after Key Stage 1. This is unrealistic when all books read by children from their earliest experiences with books to their entry to school are likely to have such words in them. The phrase 'tricky words' may seem more colloquial but is much more user friendly than 'common exception words'.
45. It is for this reason that just emphasising the decoding aspect of phonics is unhelpful and inappropriate.
46. Why is there a spelling list for years 5 and 6? Will they be tested only on these spellings as part of the SATs? Pupils have always been given spellings in class relating to topics or issues being covered in the curriculum. It seems bizarre to provide a list of random 'essential' spellings for year six unless of course this is something upon which children and schools will be measured.

⁷ Teaching Reading: What the evidence says, 2010, Henrietta Dombey et al and the United Kingdom Literacy Association, UKLA

47. Ministers have suggested that the inclusion of a spelling list at this stage is evidenced in the curriculum in Singapore. This is an example of the selective use of international evidence. It would have been more useful for the Expert Panel and Ministers to consider the evidence from Singapore relating to early years education. In Singapore Kindergarten takes place from age 4-6 and the curriculum is based on values, attitudes and skills making no mention of specific competencies in reading, writing and arithmetic.
48. This is deliberate as it is seen as preparation for lifelong learning rather than for entry to primary education or 'school readiness' as Ministers would prefer to say in this country.
49. Is this the reason why pupils in Singapore do better by the end of primary school? They have not been forced into a too formal too soon curriculum. Where is the Expert Panel evidence on this? Have Ministers considered this?
50. In England the Government proposes the opposite and is ramping up the 'academic' rigours in the early years in order to prepare children for starting school at age five. It is then testing the five and six year olds on their decoding phonic skills before children in Singapore have even started any formal learning. This is a flawed proposal and should be abandoned.

Mathematics

51. The proposals for the maths curriculum are extremely worrying. They will lead both to teaching of unconnected procedures without understanding or ability to apply, and to an unacceptable level of failure. They in particular contradict recommendations in the most recent Ofsted reports on mathematics teaching (2008 and 2012). They are untried, except in the 1950s and earlier where there was widespread failure and fear of mathematics documented in the Cockcroft report of 1982, and requirements for numeracy have changed substantially since then.
52. The Maths draft programme of study also places an increased emphasis on rote learning with little exploration or deep understanding of number within it. Much of the emphasis in the introductory notes is on the spoken elements of Maths which the NUT agrees is important. The spoken elements of Maths provide a way for pupils to understand mathematical concepts through exploration and making connections. However, in the Maths National Curriculum test papers in recent years questions requiring a certain level of understanding of English have seen children scoring less well. Increasing the emphasis on the language requirements of Maths creates further barriers for children who speak English as an additional language and is likely to skew results unfairly against many pupils.
53. Pupils should have the opportunity to secure new learning over two or three days. Although the current framework for Maths allows topics to be revisited, it still demands a rapid pace of learning. Time to think and digest mathematical concepts, with the opportunity to practise maths in a range of ways, is an essential part of developing children's interest and enjoyment of mathematics both in school and the world outside school.

54. Whilst it has already been stated that the NUT like the Government would wish to see all children succeeding whatever their background, it is also true that raising the bar in Maths so dramatically, by including binary numbers and higher order work with fractions, is likely to lead to more children experiencing failure and consequent disillusionment with Maths in general. It will have the opposite to the desired effect of raising standards.

Science

Key Stage 1

55. The proposals in the Key Stage 1 programme of study present yet more rote learning and less exploration of scientific methodology and independent thinking. There is too little inquiry based learning in the proposals.
56. It is therefore a somewhat 'dumbed down' approach. This is represented by the removal of circuits from Key Stage 1 which was always within children's capabilities and well received by them.
57. The emphasis on biology and naming birds and animals will have been covered by most children in a nursery setting through minibeast projects and stories. Accessing high quality observational opportunities may be more difficult in city schools and some flexibility should be allowed for this.

Key Stage 2

58. In Key Stage 2 the requirement for schools to study gases, which will involve secure storage may be impractical in many schools. This will also involve additional costs which as school budgets reduce in coming years may present difficulties.
59. The biographies proposed must represent a wide range of societal groups, including women, scientists from all cultures, disabled scientists and those who are gay or lesbian. To produce a list of white, male scientists would be a mistake. Including this element in the Key Stage 2 programmes of study may also require the production of appropriately pitched texts.
60. Teachers responding to the draft programmes of study have said that the introduction of elements of the Key Stage 3 curriculum such as blood clotting and inheritance may be concepts which are inappropriate for children in Key Stage 2.

CONCLUSION

61. The prescription, in terms of methodology and ideology, particularly regarding English in the programmes of study is deeply disturbing. It is hoped that reflecting on the responses from the profession to this pre-consultation Ministers will reconsider this approach and produce a framework for teachers which allows them to use their professional judgement in their teaching.
62. The removal of the requirement to only teach reading through a 'rigorous and systematic phonics programme' is essential for all the reasons outlined in this response.

63. Keeping children at the heart of the school and curriculum should be widely reflected in any future drafts of the programmes of study. Increasing expectations and citing unreasonable targets will not raise standards. It may in fact have the opposite effect and generate a widespread sense of failure.
64. It is important to emphasise that the NUT is not opposed to the teaching of synthetic phonics, grammar, spelling or punctuation per se. Our objection is the overemphasis of these elements in the curriculum at the expense of other equally important elements such as reading for meaning. The rhetoric of giving teachers “more freedom” is in fact a lie.
65. Ministers will be aware that the proposed programmes of study for English, Maths and Science are deeply flawed and severely unpopular amongst educationalists. Ministers say that these proposals are popular with parents – we have yet to see the evidence of this.