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Briefing Paper

The Future of Primary Education in England - In the Hands of a New Government

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Introduction

At its best, primary education is a phase when children's natural curiosity and intrinsic thirst for learning is augmented by their increasing capacities for independent thinking and their levels of understanding (Goswami, 2020): a golden opportunity not to be squandered. The vast majority of primary teachers and schools provide excellent education for children, but for more than a decade teachers have had to mitigate the deficiencies of England's policies on curriculum, assessment, and increasingly pedagogy. These policies have limited what children experience in schools, and constrained teachers' creativity and professionalism. The consequence has been too many children not progressing as well as they could. Disadvantaged children continue to be particularly poorly served but other groups of children are also not making as much progress as they should be.

England's national curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are set in the context of a range of societal factors that impact on the capacity for schools and teachers to help children's learning. For example, in 2021-22, there were 4.2 million children living in poverty in the UK, which is 29% of children (Child Poverty Action Group, 2023). Research has shown that schools have had an increasing role in addressing the multiple impacts of poverty and disadvantage, related to both the cost-of-living crisis, austerity, and the long-term consequences of Covid (Lucas et al, 2023). This increased role includes running food banks in schools, which HHCP research has explored (Bradbury and Vince, 2023a; 2023b). While the efforts of school staff to address the problems arising from growing child poverty are laudable, they remain unrecognised by the accountability system, and unfunded. The combination of increased need for primary schools to provide social support for children and families in the context of prescriptive curriculum, pedagogy and assessment policies has become a toxic mix.

Although early years education quite rightly has been recognised as an important foundational phase in children's development, and the nature of the vocational vs academic divide at secondary and further education phases has been the subject of continued thinking, primary education is currently in danger of not receiving the attention that it deserves in spite of powerful evidence that underlines the importance of primary education but also the deficiencies in education policies (e.g. Alexander, et al 2010). The purpose of this briefing paper is to stimulate debate about the importance of primary education, and to recommend some improvements that we hope will be acted on by a new government.

Putting children and teachers at the heart of primary education

One of the most concerning and archaic aspects of England's 2014 national curriculum, and associated guidance on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, is the neglect of children's and teacher's agency¹. The idea that education should engender agentic citizens is particularly important when we consider the uncertain future that today's children face not least in relation to aspects such as climate change. Well informed, visionary, caring and bold decision-makers are needed in all levels of society in future. These capacities need support from education right from the beginning, in early years and primary education, and encouragement through the whole of the education system. Agency is also closely connected to other desirable aspects related to children and childhood including children's rights ([The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)) and the need to listen to and respect the voice of the child (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Wyse & Manyukhina, 2024).

Numerous studies emphasise the crucial role of children's agency in education, for example linking it to motivation and enjoyment in learning. This aligns with research showing that pupils who have a sense of control and autonomy in their learning exhibit greater intrinsic motivation to engage in the learning process (Wigfield, 2019). As part of the HHCP Children's Agency in the National Curriculum project² children told us that when they were not allowed to make decisions about what and how to learn they felt disempowered and unmotivated, which they characterised in feelings of sadness.

Teachers' capacity to act in ways they think benefit children has been eroded over the last decade, with implications for recruitment and retention. Research has established that people go into teaching wanting to 'make a difference', but become disillusioned with the heavy workload and pressure related to assessments and Ofsted (Perryman and Calvert, 2020). Thus plans to recruit more teachers or to keep existing teachers for longer must take into account how policy makes teachers feel as professionals, including how much agency they have over their own work.

The reasons for the lack of children's and teachers' agency in primary education in England are multiple. One of the major contributors has been the unprecedented levels of control that government has assumed over education through the Department for Education's (DfE) policies on curriculum, assessment and increasingly pedagogy. The ideologically based conception of knowledge that frames the national curriculum has been a contributor. If the overriding main emphasis and driver of a curriculum is the acquisition of knowledge, with a corresponding lack of emphases on agency, independent thinking, values and skills, this is far from optimal. While knowledge is one important part of any curriculum, the particular ways that knowledge is contextualised and balanced, in relation to values and skills and wider understandings across the whole curriculum, is vital.

¹ Agency defined here: https://bit.ly/Agency_Blog and teachers' agency here <https://bit.ly/3y44TSj>

² CHANT, funded by The Leverhulme Trust

Reforming statutory assessment

Closely related to curriculum content are the ways in which the curriculum is assessed. England's very heavy emphasis on statutory assessment for accountability has not been fit for the essential purpose of supporting children's learning. The research evidence that points towards more effective ways to undertake assessment is longstanding (e.g. Harlen & Deakin-Crick, 2002). The Independent Commission on Primary Education ([ICAPE](#)) drew on extensive seminal and new research to reach its evidence-based conclusions (e.g. Bradbury et al, 2021; Education Endowment Foundation EEF, 2021; Lucas, 2022; Moss et al, 2021; Richardson, 2022). ICAPE reported compelling research evidence showing that an emphasis on formative assessment is more likely to lead to enhanced learning. There was also evidence of teachers' and parents' growing unhappiness with the high stakes assessment that had been intensified by the Conservative government during its more than 10 years in power (Wyse, Bradbury & Trollope, [2022](#)). The report made reference to a series of other high profile reports, such as The Times Education Commission³, that also clearly articulated the need for change.

ICAPE found that England's high stakes assessment system was an outlier compared to other countries that performed equally well or better than England in international comparative assessments. As a good example of how curriculum could be developed and enacted the work done in Ireland on the development of their primary curriculum, since 2020, is exemplary and one that future developments in England could learn much from ([National Council for Curriculum and Assessment⁴](#) NCCA).

Releasing pedagogy

The failure to address the consequences of a narrow knowledge-based curriculum enforced through high stakes assessments has been compounded by the requirement for teachers to adopt particular pedagogies. Heavy handed political prescriptions about how to teach, sometimes led by single ministers of education, imbalance the more appropriate context-informed decision-making that should be the responsibility of teachers. And when professional autonomy is not supported, over time new teachers can become deskilled because they have not been 'allowed' to experience a full repertoire of research-informed practices.

The worst examples of restricted pedagogy are seen in the prescriptions for language, reading and writing as part of the national curriculum and its guidance (although in many other areas of the curriculum the prescriptions also fail to sufficiently reflect research evidence). At the root of the problem with language in the national curriculum is a lack of explicit recognition that children are growing up in a world of different languages. For example in 2023, 30.4% of children in state-funded

³ <https://bit.ly/4abd392>

⁴ <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/84747851-0581-431b-b4d7-dc6ee850883e/2023-Primary-Framework-ENG-screen.pdf>

nursery settings spoke a language that was known or believed to be different from English (Gov.uk, 2023). These children are now embarking on their primary education. At the very least, explicit statements in the national curriculum that acknowledge the reality of language variety are needed, not least the idea that supporting home languages helps the development of the English language, and that full support for multiple languages promises greatly improved outcomes for children (Li Wei, 2018; Wyse and Hacking, 2024a).

Not only is the emphasis on “standard English” disproportionate, but its representation in the national curriculum is also linguistically ill-informed. The idea that standard English “is the variety of English which is used, with only minor variation, as a major world language” (DfE, 2013, p. 95) is not tenable. Oral language use of English shows astonishing variation in every part of the world that it is used, including in the British Isles (Kerswill, 2007). And even in relation to written English, significant variations are present, for example represented in the different dictionaries that represent global variations of the English language. The poor conception of, and disproportionate emphasis on, a monolithic, old fashioned, elitist conception of standard English also fails to explicitly accommodate the multiple languages and dialects that are central to children’s identities (Snell and Cushing, 2022). As is the case in some other countries and regions a curriculum subject title of ‘Language’, to include appropriate emphasis on a linguistically accurate version of standard English in the programmes of study, would be more appropriate than the current curriculum subject title of “English”.

The pedagogy for the teaching of reading is also restricted and imbalanced in the national curriculum. The emphasis on synthetic phonics to the relative exclusion of other aspects of reading is in urgent need of reform to reflect a closer match with evidence of what works in the teaching of reading and writing (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022; Wyse & Hacking, 2024b). The emphasis on formal grammar teaching also needs review, in order to reflect a more appropriate place for different kinds of language teaching and learning (Wyse, et al. 2022; Graham, Harris, and Chambers, 2016), a change that could also be consistent with changes to the conception and place of the English language in primary education.

Promoting hands-on learning and creativity

The undue focus on narrow forms of knowledge, and related pedagogies, has also resulted in neglecting important pedagogies relevant to all areas of the curriculum. For example the lack of explicit recognition of the importance of children’s hands-on experiences of learning. There is a growing body of research that shows that experiential learning (EL), a teaching approach that is hands-on, child-centred and set in meaningful, real-world contexts, is particularly valuable. The HHCP review of the research evidence showed the highly beneficial effects of EL (Ranken et al., 2023), such as improved vocabulary development in Science and Maths and the improvement of skills such as memory, critical thinking, and problem-solving competence.

Increased engagement and motivation resulting from EL has been particularly notable in children with special educational needs or behavioural or emotional difficulties. EL has also had a generally positive effect on children's wellbeing, with participation in EL programmes increasing children's confidence, problem-solving skills, socio-emotional skills, empathy, emotion regulation, and in-class behaviour. Longitudinal research points to the persistence of these effects over the long term.

Experiential learning is often linked with more creative forms of teaching and learning. The national curriculum in England has very few instances of explicit requirements to support pupils' creativity in its programmes of study, a stark difference from the national curriculum that preceded it (Wyse & Ferrari, 2015). In her research, Isobel Reagan (the first HHCP-funded doctoral student) found that even visual art, which used to be one of four pillars of an 'integrated day' approach to classroom practice in the UK, was at risk of neglect⁵.

The future of primary education

In this briefing paper there has only been space to identify some of what we see as the most pressing concerns about England's national curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. We are encouraged to see that the Labour Party has committed to a review of curriculum if they are elected to government at the next election. This review must be ambitious and bold in its remit for primary education, however this does not mean starting from scratch. It is important that curriculum reform builds appropriately from any positive features of the current national curriculum, but crucially also makes the necessary changes that are fundamental and necessary.

From our perspective we think the following areas are urgently in need of reform.

1. Ensure that the wider work of schools responding to the effects of child poverty, for example through food banks, is recognised in accountability frameworks, and funded appropriately.
2. Ensure that children's and teachers' agency is central to new curriculum developments.
3. Develop aims for the national curriculum that more accurately and meaningfully represent our aspirations for children in the 21st century, such as the following:

Aims for England's National Curriculum

- to develop pupils' agency as an essential attribute for life
- to stimulate pupils' motivation for learning;
- to enable pupils to learn independently and through collaboration;

⁵ Isobel Reagan's PhD dissertation is soon to be published via UCL Discovery.

- to develop pupils' capacity to critically analyse in a wide range of contexts,
 - to encourage children's creativity across the whole curriculum;
 - to ensure that pupils acquire skills, knowledge and understanding that are relevant and meaningful to them now and in the future.
4. Restore the concept of balance in the curriculum so that the so-called 'core' subjects do not dominate the curriculum.
 5. Re-affirm that decisions about pedagogy are for teachers' professional decision making.
 6. Ensure that hands-on learning and creativity have a stronger explicit focus in all subjects and areas of the curriculum.
 7. Rename the subject area English as 'Language' with a more coherent account of oral language in the curriculum.
 8. Ensure that the main purposes of reading and writing, to comprehend and compose meaning, are first and foremost in amended programmes of study for reading and writing.
 9. Revise the programmes of study on reading and writing to more closely reflect research evidence. For example the undue emphasis and amount of content on narrow synthetic phonics and on learning grammatical terms should be changed.
 10. Change statutory assessment to reduce the emphasis on assessment for school and teacher accountability and to focus on pupils' learning more holistically.
 11. Abolish the phonics screening check, the SPAG test, and the mathematics times tables tests.
 12. Commit to a longer term consultation on a new single national curriculum for early years, primary, and through to the end of secondary education.

How should a new government make changes?

While we think that some changes to the curriculum are urgent this has to be balanced with the need for a more genuinely collaborative and consultative longer-term process of change to the national curriculum and assessment systems in England. These processes need to ensure that they are well planned and paced given the changes that schools have continued to respond to. We recommend the formation of a body like the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Ireland to lead changes to the national curriculum and assessment systems.

The contribution from educational researchers, particularly those in education departments in universities, should play a much bigger part in curriculum, pedagogy

and assessment policy development. Although researchers in other academic disciplines bring important knowledge to bear on many of the topics we have raised in this briefing paper, education researchers whose expertise includes knowledge about, and frequently prior experience in, the practice of education is vital for a fully informed view of improving education. Evidence from head teachers, teachers and other practitioners is also vital, particularly those with experience of multiple schools can who bring the necessary breadth of understanding of education systems. And policy makers with appropriate knowledge and understanding, exemplified by the NCCA in Ireland and in other regions of the UK, are also needed. A genuinely open-minded spirit of close-to-practice collaboration between researchers, practitioners and policy makers is needed⁶ in stark opposition to the centralised control that has characterised education in England for more than a decade.

⁶ The concept of close-to-practice research is relevant: <http://bit.ly/3wvXbjx>

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