

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Rose review of the primary curriculum
Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
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ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL policy

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

We set out our curriculum policy in the position statement *Subject to change: new thinking on the curriculum*. We propose a national curriculum model which starts with pupil needs and interests and is designed in terms of the skills and attitudes that we want pupils to acquire and develop. This would be a light framework, built from the foundations up, specifying what learners are able to do rather than what they know. The curriculum as taught should be designed locally, focussing on the knowledge content through which the skills can be developed. This is very different from the model set out in the Rose review, which continues to be a nationally prescribed curriculum, with areas of learning under development by the QCA.

ATL response

ATL is disappointed that much of the proposed curriculum appears in fact to have been decided even before the publication of the interim report, with QCA already working on the detail. We are also frustrated by the narrowness of the review, which although supposedly independent, has been limited by the government's heavy handed remit. The short timescale for the review means that there is little time to engage in proper debate about the purposes of education, and of primary education in particular; differences between primary and secondary education; the differing needs and interests of children as they grow and develop; and the impact of all of those things on curriculum aims and frameworks. This thinking is already taking place, in the context of the Cambridge primary review, and we believe that government needs to be brave and embrace this bigger debate, that is about rethinking rather than just rearranging the curriculum.

The rationale for the curriculum

In ATL's curriculum policy, we reaffirm our commitment to a national curriculum which should secure entitlement for all children to a broad and balanced curriculum – thus we agree with recommendation 1. The current national curriculum is too prescriptive, and offers no protection from ministerial decisions to add further 'subjects' and dimensions. We cannot see that the proposed model resolves this problem.

It is our belief that the government should provide a slim national curriculum framework alongside an expectation that the curriculum as taught would be developed locally. In this, we go further than the suggestion from the Cambridge primary review that there should be a 70/30 balance of national and local in curriculum development.

In ATL's model, national review of the whole statutory framework would arise naturally from the monitoring of developments at a local level, rather than needing nationally agreed intervals for review (recommendation 2). However, we welcome the acknowledgement that curriculum is dynamic and will need to be reviewed, and that this review should be of the whole curriculum rather than its parts in isolation of each other.

Curriculum design and content

Aims, values and purposes

We are particularly disappointed that the Rose review has not been able to engage with debate about the aims of education as publicly developed by the Cambridge review of primary education. We believe that, by moving directly to a discussion of the aims of the curriculum, the Rose review has missed an opportunity to consider the role of education, schools and teachers within the wider Every Child Matters framework. It is right that aims for children underpin the aims for the curriculum, but we are still missing in this country a proper debate on how schools contribute to the aims for children, and the limits of this contribution.

By immediately adopting the secondary aims for the curriculum, we believe that this review has also missed an opportunity to consider the significance of primary education. Although we agree that the revised primary curriculum should be underpinned by a statement of aims and values which is fit for all stages of statutory education (recommendation

3), we believe that this should mean a curriculum based on consistent aims, not necessarily aims that are the same across all phases.

We are concerned that Rose does not set out his understanding of the values that underpin his proposed curriculum, even though the recommendation is that there should be a clear statement of aims and values. The secondary curriculum does have a statement of values as well as the aims which are listed in annex 1, and we would certainly question any assumption that those are the appropriate values for the primary curriculum. There is also no suggestion of the purposes of the curriculum, another aspect of the secondary curriculum that is developed distinct from the aims.

It is impossible to argue with the aims as set out by the Rose review: of course we would expect the curriculum to help all children become successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve; confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives, and responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society. However, they can each be interpreted from both a 'top-down' and a 'bottom-up' perspective: successful learning could mean reaching government-specified targets, or developing the skills and attitudes that will lead to a life-long love of learning. Neither the aims themselves, nor the design and content of the curriculum, offer any help to balance those potentially conflicting interpretations. This lack of engagement with the aims will lead, ultimately, to a curriculum framework, the development of programmes of learning and of assessment, and the training of teachers and support staff which pay lip-service to the aims of education but are not underpinned by them.

We recommend a close look at the aims developed by the Cambridge review team, focussed on *the needs and capacities of the individual, the individual in relation to others and the wider world, and learning, knowing and doing*. Not only are these much more comprehensive, but the curriculum framework is designed so that these are woven into every domain/area of learning. ATL members, in particular, believe that the curriculum should start from children, from their developmental needs, and that personal development should be a 'central constant' in the development, planning and teaching of the whole curriculum.

Subject teaching or cross curricular studies

Although we agree with Rose that the curriculum as taught should contain both high quality subject teaching and high quality cross-curricular teaching (recommendation 4), we believe that decisions about pedagogy, and how to organise the taught curriculum, should be placed in the hands of professionals, rather than specified as part of a national curriculum framework. High quality cross-curricular teaching arguably requires an increased depth of subject knowledge in order to understand the ways in which children learn particular subjects and the links that can be made between subjects. This implies a consistent and ongoing strategy of professional development for teachers.

Developing the six areas of learning

While it is important that a national curriculum framework is developed with and by experts who can offer advice on key ideas, knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes within each area of learning, (recommendation 5) this offers no protection against the weaknesses of

the current national curriculum. Subject experts have an inbuilt bias towards their subject, which can lead to an over-prescribed knowledge content in each area of learning, and an even more complex overall curriculum. Subject experts must also be joined by experts in children's development and in pedagogy, if the curriculum framework is to offer more than just a sum of what children should know, understand and do. ATL recommends that there is local and ongoing debate about the key ideas in each subject, and a formal mechanism for judging the overall balance of the whole curriculum as taught rather than only within each area of learning.

We believe that the remit of the Review goes too far in suggesting that national decisions should be made about 'when and how children should be introduced to the key ideas and practices of the principal subject areas of learning'. A national curriculum framework should identify the key ideas and practices, it may even identify some ways in which children's understanding and skill develops (eg gross motor skills before fine motor skills): it is for professionals to decide when and how those should be introduced. Although this causes potential problems for pupils who move between schools, and also for any national assessment system, a national curriculum framework that can be developed locally is surely a key component of personalised learning.

Curriculum in phases

We believe that questions of the organisation of learning into particular blocks of time (recommendation 6) are unnecessary in a review of the national curriculum framework. Key stages are arbitrary segments of children's lives and only useful for policy-makers and those who are tasked with organising a curriculum (or its assessment) nationally. In particular, this question leaves out the complication of the reception year, which is part of primary school, but not part of the primary curriculum as it is envisaged in this model. This leads to a somewhat illogical argument about when children should start primary school which has no bearing on the development of a primary curriculum that begins in Year 1.

Reading, writing, numeracy and ICT

ATL members agree that literacy and numeracy are important (recommendation 7). However, even with the addition of speaking and listening, literacy is only a small part of English and numeracy a small part of mathematics. By insisting on 'priority' for these areas, and placing them in the middle of the 'target' that is the Rose curriculum model, this necessarily puts all other areas of learning as lesser priorities. In particular, members believe that children's personal development should be a central constant in a new primary curriculum, ensuring that the curriculum as taught starts from where children are rather than where they are 'expected' to be at any particular age. While we welcome greater emphasis on spoken language, the development of spoken language, particularly across all areas of learning, demands a change in emphasis within both curriculum and assessment so that children have constant opportunities to discuss their learning and their lives with adults and peers. This is a very different model from that which expects children to work on their own for the most part, and adds on 'speaking and listening' with plenary sessions.

ICT should largely be seen as part of the area of Understanding English, communication and languages. This would allow further discussion of appropriate technology for the youngest children, as part of their developing communication. Other aspects of ICT would be developed through the other areas of learning. While it is possible that some rearranging of the ICT curriculum across KS2 and 3 would be beneficial (recommendation 8), we believe that this should be part of a debate about the uses of ICT and the development of children's skills. We believe that any expert groups should offer a view of the key ideas, knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes within ICT, as well as English and maths, rather than assuming that these areas are right as they stand and need only minor readjustment.

Personal development

ATL members believe that personal development (recommendation 9) should be at the heart of the primary curriculum, both in terms of supporting children's personal, social, physical and emotional development and in ensuring that the curriculum truly begins from children's developmental needs. Although members have welcomed the SEAL programme, it is still seen as an 'add-on' rather than the foundations on which everything builds. We believe that personal development is both an aim of the primary curriculum, as it is in the model proposed by the Cambridge review, and a value that is interwoven into every area of learning, into playful pedagogy and into the life and ethos of the school

Transition and progression

School starting age

ATL strongly opposes the suggestion that all children should enter the reception class in the September after they turn 4. Evidence is inconclusive about the effects of length of schooling versus immaturity at entry to school, particularly for the summer born children, and this lack of conclusion is enough for us to argue for flexibility so that children start school when they are ready. ATL members offer their own experiences of working with disaffected children who have been 'failures at four' because they are not given permission to develop at their own pace. Although we would be the first to argue that it is the quality of children's experiences within the early years foundation stage that matter rather than its location, and that children learn better when they engage with qualified early years teachers, the fact is that primary schools are not resourced to manage the varying needs of children who are barely 4 years old alongside those who are already 5. An adult: child ratio of 30: 1 which is deemed acceptable in a reception class does not provide opportunities for close support which many 4-year olds still need; reception classes remain more like year 1 than like nursery classes; and the downward pressures from the accountability and testing system is difficult for even the most dedicated early years professionals to resist.

Play and personalised learning

We welcome a focus on play (recommendation 11) and personalised learning (recommendation 12), as vital aspects of pedagogy within the primary phase, and we believe that teachers and support staff will need opportunities for professional development and reflection on practice to support this pedagogy. However, we are unclear about the place of these

foci within the proposed national curriculum framework. They might sit better as values that underpin the development of curriculum. Unfortunately, the recommendations here feel more like the development of a national strategy than support for genuine reflection on how the curriculum might be taught in the most appropriate ways for young children based on how children learn and how that learning changes as children grow.

Transition

While we agree that transition should mean teachers across stages and phases working and learning together, we are concerned that recommendations 13, 14 and 15 are about supporting teachers to work within and across different curriculum frameworks. There is of course a fundamental problem with developing a curriculum for continuity which has to fit between two already established curricula – but it is a review of the curriculum that is needed here, if the early learning goals are to dovetail with the proposed new curriculum. We believe that developing a curriculum based on 6 areas of learning potentially offers a superficial match between the early years foundation stage and the primary curriculum that could confuse rather than clarify curriculum continuity.

There are similar issues with the proposals to solve transition issues between key stage 2 and key stage 3. Some of these proposals are about ways in which schools might organise their teaching staff rather than about the curriculum framework. Suggestions about 'extended study' may be based on examples of good practice, although we would worry about this level of detail and potential prescription in a national curriculum framework. Suggesting that the National Strategies revise their guidance implies that there will be no changes to the literacy and numeracy frameworks within this curriculum review, but also point to an underlying assumption that continuity is only important in those aspects of the curriculum.

Languages at key stage 2

We know that many schools are already introducing languages into the key stage 2 curriculum, and we recognise the description in this report of the range of ways in which this is happening. We do question the focus on modern foreign languages, as we know that a number of schools are taking the opportunity to teach community languages as part of this curriculum. We also question the assumption that children will reach the same level in languages after only 4 years of learning as they are expected to reach in other subjects after 6 years of the primary curriculum and in most subjects more years in the early years foundation stage. If it is the case that for some subjects, children progress faster through the levels, surely the opposite may also be the case. On a practical note, many of our members point out that an expectation that primary schools should try to offer the language(s) offered at secondary schools can be a logistical nightmare for some schools which feed a large number of secondary schools.

Assessment and testing

We are pleased that the Review has gone beyond its remit to consider some issues of assessment and testing. The argument is clear that end of key stage testing focuses children and teachers on certain aspects of certain subjects, narrowing the curriculum as taught and putting emphasis

(and time) on some parts of the curriculum at the expense of others. A new national curriculum framework will have the same problems as the old one unless the assessment system is properly revised.

However, we have grave concerns about the proposed Assessing Pupil Progress, and the way in which APP is conflated with Assessment for Learning. When progress and learning are used as synonyms, we lose a large part of the importance of learning – the danger is that the emphasis moves from the pupil and their learning in its broadest sense, to the curriculum and its goals, with achieving goals coming to be more important than the process of learning.

Conclusion

We are disappointed that this review has been constrained by a narrow remit, and has been unable to engage openly with the wider debate engendered by the Cambridge primary review. We believe that the primary curriculum must be underpinned by a well-understood statement of aims and values and that those aims and values must be embedded into the development of the national curriculum framework and the curriculum as taught as well as into teaching, learning and assessment practices. We hope that the statutory consultation following publication of the final report will allow for further debate and not be a rubber-stamping of a detailed curriculum.