

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



Public consultation on curriculum reform: the primary curriculum review

Response from ATL, the education union

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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 promoting 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, and assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively across a local area to provide excellent teaching and learning opportunities and a broad and balanced curriculum, and to support pupils' well-being. There must be a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

ATL is committed to the idea of a national curriculum with entitlement for all at its heart. However, we believe that the current system has led to a focus on the acquisition of a narrow range of skills and knowledge, which are evidenced in a particular form, such as the written word, with diversionary activities for those who cannot cope.

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 not an argument against subject knowledge: 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 is very different from the model set out in the proposed primary curriculum, which is still a nationally prescribed curriculum, with detailed knowledge, skills, breadth and progression defined by QCDA.

ATL response

We continue to be disappointed by the lack of vision in the proposed primary curriculum. Government has not engaged in real debate about the purposes of education and of primary education in particular. Nor has it been brave enough to resist the arguments of subject associations and party politics in order to radically redefine the way in which the curriculum is developed. Consequently, this revised curriculum does little to cut down on the content of the primary curriculum and gives no robust argument for the use of areas of learning. Instead, it leaves teachers to navigate a complex arrangement of areas of learning divided into subjects and supported by only marginally revised subject level descriptions. Levels of prescription remain high, with little scope for local development of content or for professional reflection on key knowledge, skills and understanding to be taught.

Aims and values

ATL's policy, *Sustainable Education*, calls for a fundamental review, rethink and reform of existing education policies and practices, including a proper debate about the aims of education and how these fit with our aims for promoting personal well-being and social justice. The revised primary curriculum should be underpinned by a statement of aims and values which is fit for all stages of statutory education, but we believe that this should mean a curriculum based on consistent aims, not necessarily aims that are the same across all phases.

ATL members cautiously welcome the aims as set out in the primary curriculum review, even though those appear to be the same as the secondary aims. They are succinct and easy to remember, and it would be difficult to argue with the sentiments expressed. However, the Rose review did not consider curriculum aims from first principles, it did not explore the links with aims for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), nor did it properly explore values. In fact, although the 'top level' aims (successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens) are the same for primary and for secondary curriculum, we are interested to note that the breakdown of those (on page 34 of Jim Rose's Final Report) omits various important points which are contained in the secondary aims. For example the aims of the primary curriculum do not include being *able to learn independently and with others*; knowing *about big ideas that shape the world*; being *open to the excitement and inspiration offered by the natural world and human achievement*; and being *able to change things for the better*.

This gives the impression that it is more important to have the same aims for primary and secondary curriculum, rather than to engage in any real discussion of what these aims mean for the primary curriculum, or any

understanding of *how* the curriculum contributes to the aims. Currently each area of learning contains the same very general statement that *learning and undertaking activities in this area of learning contribute to achievement of the curriculum aims*. Although this could allow space for teachers to consider how the curriculum can truly grow from the aims, the level of prescribed content is such that this space is severely limited. This bland statement in fact leads us to believe that the aims continue to be an afterthought to a revised curriculum that is a rearranging of previous content.

In fact, each of the 'aims' can be interpreted from both a 'top-down' and a 'bottom-up' perspective: for example, 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.

We believe it is absolutely vital that teachers' professional development begins with reflection on the aims and values, and discussion of how the curriculum can be planned locally to ensure that they are an integral part. Otherwise the curriculum will pay lip-service to the aims of education but will not be underpinned by them.

Essentials for learning and life

A majority of members who responded to a recent survey agree with the new core of *Essentials for learning and life*, which include literacy, numeracy, ICT and personal development. Members particularly appreciate the concise format of those *Essentials*. There is some disquiet about the status of science, particularly as it is too easy to compare the old core subjects of English, mathematics and science with this new 'core'. If this change is to mean anything in practice then teachers will need to be supported to reflect on how the *Essentials* cut across all areas of learning, and more should be made of the fact that many of the scientific 'skills' (investigation, enquiry, analysis, evaluation) are included in the thinking and learning skills. However, Government must also reflect on the implications of a new 'core' for the assessment system.

Although we appreciate that the order of items on a page does not necessarily imply importance, we would like to see personal, learning and thinking skills first in the *Essentials* as these underpin everything else in the curriculum.

We question the need for a separate document for ICT across the curriculum, particularly one that is identical to the area of learning documents. This appears to give it a different status to the other *Essentials*. It may be that this is an area in which teachers need more support to embed the skills across the curriculum, although this will vary, but we would argue that this support should be given through professional training and development, rather than an additional document.

Areas of Learning

ATL welcomes the move to six areas of learning as this offers more flexibility and opportunity to teach and learn across the curriculum. But by retaining the subject level descriptions with only minor changes, it is possible that little has changed. Teachers are left to navigate a complex

set of documents and statements rather than offered a radical alternative to curriculum design.

Although the reasons for reviewing the curriculum included promises to reduce prescription, increase flexibility, and improve transition, ATL believes that once again, government has fallen into the trap of attempting to develop a 'teacher-proof' curriculum. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the detailed statements of the areas of learning. While we believe it is important that the new curriculum sets out key knowledge and skills for each area of learning, we believe that currently this loses its impact because each subject is then unpicked into developmental stages. This unpicking appears to us to be even more prescriptive than the curriculum it replaces, which at least only detailed two key stages. Members are concerned that they must now plan in terms of two key stages, three stages of progression and at least four levels for each subject and area of learning.

The stages of **progression** themselves are not clear. Setting out what children should be taught in 'early', 'middle' and 'later' stages of the primary curriculum suggests that all children progress in neat linear stages, which is not in fact what research tells us about children's learning. It is not obvious either what progression is: superficially, it would appear that children would progress from statement E1 to M1 to L1, but closer inspection shows that this is not the case. Progression in the areas of learning is not split into the component subjects until the 'middle' stage, which implies that subject knowledge is not developed in the early stage, or that subjects should be taught more specifically in the later stages. Rather than distinguishing 'progression', this section sets out what should be taught in each 'stage'.

We do not see any evidence of sustained debate about what constitutes **key knowledge and skills**, particularly when literacy strategy objectives are migrated word-for-word into the English, communication and languages area of learning.

It is not clear that the new curriculum sufficiently addresses the issue of **transition**. The six areas of learning are not the same as EYFS, so will continue to need bridging between EYFS and KS1. We are concerned that the logical step from this curriculum will be a top down revision of the EYFS curriculum, to ensure that both aims and areas of learning match the primary curriculum with, again, too little consideration of the unique nature of each stage of education.

Transition from primary to secondary is also not sufficiently addressed by this curriculum, except by implying a move to subject teaching in the final year(s) of primary. We do not want to see the primary curriculum becoming more subject-focussed in year 6; rather we would like year 7 to look more like the primary curriculum. Many secondary schools are already developing in this way, and joint professional development opportunities will allow more exploration between teachers of how this can work. The assessment system across the primary age range will also need to change to support a continued focus on areas of learning in year 6.

ATL cannot respond in detail on the **content** of each area of learning. However, we would wish to see more emphasis, across the areas of learning, on global citizenship and social justice. It is a pity that

Citizenship is identified as part of only one area of learning, when in fact aspects of it are developed in all areas of learning. We believe that there are benefits in further clarifying the relationship between PSHE, Citizenship and Religious Education, all of which are concerned with questions of value.

The consultation on the updated non-statutory guidance on religious education points up the fact that RE remains outside the national curriculum, although statutory. We argue that it should be part of the national curriculum, and that the non-statutory national framework should be developed into a light touch national curriculum reflecting the current diversity of religions and beliefs in Britain and the modern world. This would help to ensure greater coherence in the primary curriculum, as it could more obviously be identified within the six areas of learning rather than a standalone subject. Currently, the RE programme of learning is set out in exactly the same way as an area of learning. This gives a consistent feel to each part of the curriculum, but in fact gives an impression that RE is an area of learning of its own. The continued right for parents to withdraw children from RE makes it very difficult currently to address it in a cross-curricular way.

Our recent Conference agreed that contemporary trade unionism should be taught, appropriate to stages of development, in relevant curriculum areas. We believe that this can form part of citizenship development and the economic aspect of Personal, social, health, emotional and economic education (PSHEE).

We are wholeheartedly in favour of making PSHEE a statutory part of the national primary curriculum. We are not convinced that it has been incorporated into the proposed primary curriculum in a particularly meaningful way. It appears that it is covered, mostly, within *Understanding physical development, health and wellbeing*, with references made to the *Essentials for learning and life*, and aspects of economic and business understanding in *Historical, geographical and social understanding*. We are concerned that the emphasis of PSHEE tends towards health issues, for example the first two out of five elements of essential knowledge for *Understanding physical development, health and wellbeing* relate mainly to physical activity, competence and performance, dexterity and nutrition. Whilst an emphasis on health is a vital ingredient of any effective delivery of PSHE education, ATL also believes that the range of challenges to be addressed through PSHE education requires a more extensive and differentiated understanding and public perception of the subject. Well-being is significantly but not exclusively defined through health only.

We are concerned that proposals for PSHE education in primary schools still show a reduction of complex areas of life to rather simplistic learning objectives. For example, according to the proposals for primary PSHE education, children are expected to *learn how to manage their emotions and develop and sustain relationships*. While no doubt a crucial and often lifelong learning objective and key area of personal development, we do not believe that schools can realistically be held accountable for achieving such an *outcome* in individual pupils. We do, however, agree that schools are accountable for their *practice* and that learning *about* managing

emotions and mutually respectful relationships is an important aspect of such practice.

ATL is not convinced that the statutory framework for primary PSHE education should justify this area of learning with reference to children learning *to compete fairly and to cooperate as individuals and in groups and teams*. The emphasis within PSHE education, in our view, should firmly be on the need for a collaborative approach and a strong sense of education staff and pupils being engaged together in an endeavour to understand and make sense of something of importance to all in their shared humanity.

We would not wish to see PSHE education reduced to a subject that primarily handles questions of information rather than enables students to take an overview of the whole range of views and values that may directly or indirectly affect their lives.

We are pleased that the development of languages is not confined to modern European languages, but offers the opportunity for children to explore those community languages that they might hear around them every day. 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.

Implementation

We realise that this is a consultation on the content of the primary curriculum. However, QCDA cannot develop a curriculum without considering the impact that changes will have on teachers in classrooms, and ATL must reflect the concerns of our members as they consider how they might implement any changes.

Any revised curriculum must impact on accountability measures. In particular, the expert group recommendations on assessment and testing must be revisited to ensure that changes to the assessment system and the way in which children's attainment is reported reflect revised areas of learning and the identified key knowledge and skills rather than subjects. Single level testing, and the development of Assessing Pupil Progress will need to be revisited to ensure that the message of cross-curricular learning is reinforced and not undermined by the ways in which learning is assessed and reported. Ofsted inspection will also need to be reviewed, both in terms of the new school inspection system and the thematic reviews over time.

Members are rightly concerned about the workload implications of a new curriculum. We acknowledge that any change is likely to take time and additional work to embed, and members are happy to take on that workload where they support the intention of the change. We believe that these proposals will lead to a lot of changes in paperwork but not necessarily to changed practice, more professional reflection and improved outcomes.

Implementation is likely to be a greater burden for small schools. Here, resourcing, particularly for ICT across the curriculum, is likely to be more limited; teachers may have responsibility for subjects which do not fit neatly into the specific cross-curricular approach suggested by QCDA;

pupils may be vertically grouped in large classes rather than taught in year groups; and training will need to be organised so that it reflects these concerns. None of these issues is insurmountable, and some may even be helped by a more flexible approach to the curriculum. We would encourage QCDA to ensure that any guidance that may be developed reflects the different nature of schools.

Conclusion

ATL calls for:

- ♦ A clear statement of the aims and values, with a better explanation of what each one means within the primary context.
- ♦ A reduction in the 'statutory' content of the revised curriculum. Although much of what is in the curriculum will be useful for teachers, ATL would like to see a clearer indication of the key aspects to be covered, with more space left for teachers to use their professional expertise and judgement. For example, 'curriculum progression' statements could be retained as guidance, for use as a springboard for local curriculum development over time. This ensures that teachers are not overloaded with a requirement to start from a blank page, but ensures that the curriculum as taught is developed by those with the professional expertise, classroom teachers.
- ♦ CPD to begin with opportunities for teachers to reflect on the aims and values, and to develop their own/school/local answers to the question 'how does this area of learning contribute to the achievement of curriculum aims'. We would encourage development of CPD to include consideration of the aims proposed by the *Cambridge primary review*.
- ♦ A review of the primary assessment system which acknowledges the new 'core'. ATL's policy, *Assessing to learn: teachers at the heart of assessment*, suggests that this may mean national tests in key skills on a when-ready basis and at the level of functional competence.
- ♦ An acknowledgement that personal, learning and thinking skills underpin everything else in the curriculum, and should come before literacy, numeracy and ICT capability.
- ♦ The development of CPD where it is needed for teachers to consider how to embed ICT skills across the curriculum.

If the revised curriculum is to lead to real change, then QCDA must use the next year to listen honestly to teachers, across the range of schools, as they begin to work with the revisions, and to make real changes where those are necessary. ATL is committed to working with QCDA to ensure that members' views and experiences are heard.