

Subjects in the new National Curriculum

English

Spoken language is marginalised. There are some references to speech as performance, or as an adjunct to literacy, but no serious thought to developing children's ability to communicate or language to develop thinking.

The aims are mainly expressed in terms of technical competence e.g. 'write clearly, accurately and coherently', 'making formal presentations, demonstrating to others and participating in debates'.

(cf Finland: 'a community-oriented view of language', 'builds his or her identity and self-esteem' 'becomes an active and ethically responsible communicator and reader who gets involved in culture and participates in and influences society').

Reading: overwhelming emphasis on the role of synthetic phonics, neglecting complementary strategies needed for comprehension. (This despite the DfE admitting there is no research evidence to show that a rigorous synthetic phonics program improves comprehension, as opposed to reading aloud.)

Writing: focus on accuracy to the neglect of expression. Writing is seen as an artificial process of combining the linguistic bits (rules, sub-skills etc.) into a text, to the neglect of imitating inspirational models.

The insistence on accuracy and technical terminology exceeds, for many children, their real stage of literacy or language development, eg

Y1: capitals of proper nouns and I; using 'plural, sentence, suffix, clauses, personal pronoun' when speaking about their writing; spelling days of the week accurately (Tuesday, Wednesday!)

Y2: there / they're / their, quite / quiet,

Y3: distinguish accept / except, affect / effect

Mathematics

KS1-2 largely arithmetic fluency, with a little geometry and statistics (algebra quickly introduced Y6).

Contradictory about pace: 'the majority will move through the programmes of study at broadly the same pace' + 'decisions about when to progress should always be based on their readiness to progress to the next stage'.

Very rapid progression expected re fluent calculations. Little encouragement to relate *symbols to reality*.

Y1 'instantly subtract 7 from 16'

Y2 'count in steps of 2, 3, 5 and 10, forward and backward, count in quarters up to 10

Y3 mental calculations with large numbers eg $12,462 - 2,300 =$

Targets are set younger than the most advanced performers internationally! eg

Y2 expected to manipulate fractions eg $\frac{5}{7} - \frac{2}{7} = \frac{3}{7}$ while foundations are laid more carefully in Finland, relating symbols to reality: at the same age, 'know simple fractions, such as one half, one third and one quarter, and know how to present them by concrete means'

or Y5 shift between different representations of fractions $24\frac{1}{2} = 24.5$ while Finland's children allowed two more years to relate fractions to decimals to percentages.

Science

The most professional section because the subject association (ASE) were allowed two weeks involvement, due to pressures from the science and engineering lobby. Consequently, includes many good ideas on how to teach. However, no chance to verify whether the content could be covered properly in the available time, or whether expectations are age-appropriate.

May be so heavy on content that teachers will resort to memorising facts by rote learning, eg Y4 includes:

- *classification of living things;*
- *risks resulting from changing environments, nature reserves, overpopulation and deforestation;*
- *the human digestive system;*

- *teeth of animals with different diets;*
- *various food chains;*
- *solids, liquids, gases and change of state (temperatures);*
- *evaporation and condensation in the water cycle;*
- *sound – pitch, transmission of vibrations, musical instruments, insulation;*
- *electricity – appliances, constructing a circuit, switches, conductors and insulators, safety.*

Extremely high targets for upper primary, eg Y5:

compare and group together everyday materials on the basis of their properties - hardness, solubility, transparency, conductivity (electrical and thermal), and response to magnets;

demonstrate that dissolving, mixing and changes of state are reversible changes

explore reversible changes, including, evaporating, filtering, sieving, melting and dissolving, recognising that melting and dissolving are different processes. Pupils should explore changes that are difficult to reverse (eg burning, rusting) and other reactions (eg vinegar with bicarbonate of soda). They should find out about how chemists create new materials.

NB primary science in Finland is Environmental and Natural Studies, relating to children's health, local environment, and a practical introduction to maps and scientific experiments. In Singapore, science begins at grade 3 (same age as our Y4). The requirements are much easier, e.g. grades 3-5 (=Y4-6) 'metals are good conductors of heat but wood and plastic are bad; state the functions of leaves, stems and roots; list some common sources of heat.

Other subjects

The Government's promise to slim down content has only been carried out where it was least needed – programmes of study which were already very short have been cut back further, risking marginalising these subjects.

Sometimes this is through a more concise summary, but activities which the present government might believe too modern, progressive or creative (even enjoyable) appear to have disappeared.

Also an ideological shift, eg away from a multicultural perspective, and more exploratory and creative approaches are dismissed. For example:

Art

new aim: 'Art and design contributes to the wealth of our nation'

KS1 a more purposeful, less exploratory tone (no more 'try out' or 'investigate')

a narrower range of activities (collage, print making, digital media, textiles, photographers have gone)

KS2 'The roles and purposes of artists, craftspeople and designers working in different times and cultures' has become 'great artists, architects and designers in history'

Similar reduction of activities as KS1 – narrowed to 'drawing, painting, sculpture'

Citizenship now gone from primary, losing activities such as 'share their opinions on things that matter to them', 'consider social and moral dilemmas that they come across in everyday life'

Computing a switch from creative application to techniques of programmes, often in ways which are not appropriate to children's age eg KS1 'understand what algorithms are', 'create and debug simple programs', 'use logical reasoning to predict the behaviour of simple programs'.

Design and technology Entire tone has changed, from 'They explore how familiar things work' to rigorous formal demands 'design purposeful, functional, appealing products based on design criteria' (KS1)

Geography Previously KS1 began with children's local experience eg 'What is it like to live in this place? identify buildings in the street, a pedestrian crossing near school gates' and from there, contrasts with another UK or overseas locality. Now, priority on accumulating facts 'name and local the 7 continents and 5 oceans; name, locate and identify characteristics of the 4 countries and capital cities of the UK'. “

Similarly, KS2 'Russia, North and South America' 'UK counties'

History is the one subject where Gove had to back down from a narrow nationalistic study (English history to 1700 in great detail in KS1-2). This now runs to 1066, and international elements have been restored (Ancient Greece, an early civilisation, a non-European society). Some of the detail has been removed, and some thematic studies added (local history; an aspect such as crime and punishment to extend beyond 1066).

Even so, the new version is less child friendly (no more 'changes in their own lives and that of their family', 'people in the most distant past who lived in the local area').

A failure to think in terms of age of the child: how will KS1 children understand the 'national significance' of the Great Fire of London?

Music Still quite practical, but some enjoyable elements removed eg rehearse and perform with others; movement, dance and expressive musical language, listening to music from different times and cultures.

PE Similar shifts eg exploratory aspects of movement are curtailed to 'perform dances'; 'explore basic skills, actions and ideas' has become 'master basic movements'.

Some issues to explore

How to respond to the imbalance and lack of breadth?

How will schools cope with 'too much too young', especially given pressure from Ofsted? How can they protect children, especially the more vulnerable?

How can schools provide for holistic child development?

How can creativity be sustained?

Where is the space to engage young citizens?

How can we avoid rote learning supplanting

problem-solving and critical understanding?

What will happen to modern technologies and genres?

Is the new curriculum 'Not right for our children' or could it be damaging to all children?