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Teaching bad writing

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ABSTRACT

This article is a critique of current approaches to the teaching and assessment of writing in schools in the UK. Successive government initiatives, most particularly the latest (impoverished) version of the English curriculum, are seen as having led to a situation in which pupils are taught in a way that does not improve the quality of their writing, and often results in writing which is inflated and unconvincing. The national curriculum and assessment scheme for writing prioritises form over content; it makes grammatical complexity and ostentatious vocabulary the success criteria for assessment, to the detriment of children's writing and learning, and of teachers' practice.

KEYWORDS

Teaching; writing; assessment; national curriculum

The reader in the writer

During the early days of the UK National Literacy Strategy, when I was engaged in the research that led to the book *The Reader in the Writer* (Barrs and Cork 2001), I first became aware of children's writing undergoing a major change. Children were being taught they must use "strong verbs" and "unusual words" to pep up their writing; many had thesauruses permanently on their desks to help them. Never use a normal word when a fancy one will do.

The search for "strong verbs" sometimes led to incongruous writing. One girl wrote: "I felt the warm breeze slicing through my skin and the green breeze swooping over me" (Barrs and Cork 2001, 130). The choice of verbs here is awkward; the writer seems more concerned to find unusual words than to convey the feeling.

Children were also being encouraged to use adjectives and similes, and their writing was often strewn with them. But the images they chose did not always make their descriptions clearer. In a sentence like: "There was water dripping like the howling of wolves" (130), the simile is bizarrely inappropriate. Sometimes, sentences were so packed with similes and adjectives it was hard to see what they were actually about:

Tommy, still as a tiger hunting down its prey in the rich thin grass lay on his bunk, clutching the side like a terrified spaceman flying into orbit. (167)

The QCA technical accuracy project

In an article about the findings of *Reader in the Writer* (Barrs 2002), I commented on a report for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority which clearly indicated the way

things were going. The report – *Technical accuracy in writing in GCSE English (1999)* – was a study of the linguistic features of different grade levels of writing in GCSE English papers. The researchers analysed the linguistic characteristics of A-, C- and F-grade papers, concluding that “A class” writing tends to make more use of abstract nouns, parenthetical commas, subordinate clauses and place adverbials.

Unfortunately, the report presented this analysis as more reliable for assessing effective writing than the holistic approaches generally used by English teachers. The researchers’ claim was surely debatable:

The process of quantifying linguistic features has enabled us to put flesh onto the qualitative judgements that English teachers habitually make. (3)

Yet more problematic was the fact that these linguists then recommended that teachers should directly teach their students the features they had found to be characteristic of A-grade scripts. The pedagogy suggested was both obscure and questionable, with guidelines such as: pupils looking at paragraph linking should be “given a quota in their writing and encouraged to use two place adverbials for every time adverbial” (37). It is hard to imagine a less helpful suggestion for improving writing.

Direct teaching of particular linguistic features is no substitute for substantial and extended experience of both reading and writing. Accordingly, the research in *The Reader in the Writer* set out to explore the influence of children’s reading of high quality literature on their writing development over one school year. However, a persistent focus on form rather than content was increasingly apparent in the teaching of writing.

Educational blogs and their effect on school writing

By 2012–2013, things had advanced even further. During that year, I was involved in a project that compared children’s writing on school blogs with the writing in their literacy books (Barrs and Horrocks 2014). By now, there seemed to be no doubt in teachers’ minds that the point of teaching writing was to meet the criteria contained in the English national curriculum (NC), or in the various commercial assessment schemes, some very bad, that had sprung up around it.

Such schemes broke down attainment levels into sub-levels, specifying in detail the criteria children should meet in order to achieve each sub-level. Schools welcomed these schemes because at that time they were pressured to show, during Ofsted visits, that their pupils were making “progress”, even *within a single lesson*. However unreasonable this demand, many schools felt schemes based on sub-levels took care of it.

But in the schemes we witnessed, claiming to “uplevel” children’s writing and boost their scores, the sub-criteria were different from, and more reductive than, the NC assessment criteria. Such schemes forcefully promoted naïve assumptions about writing: adjectives and adverbs are good and adding more of them makes writing better; writing can be improved by adding more subordinate clauses and varying connectives; good writing always contains ambitious/unusual vocabulary, sometimes termed “wow words”. Children were absorbing these criteria.

Writing on the class blog, however, was viewed by both pupils and teachers as more informal than literacy book writing. Not assessed in the same way, it promoted freedom

and experimentation. Teachers in the project felt that writing on the blog had helped children's writing in general:

It has helped them all become more confident writers. It helps their writing stamina and gives them more opportunity for writing. When writing in books some children are reluctant, especially boys, but this isn't so on the blog. Everybody likes doing it. (Barrs and Horrocks 2014, 48)

Blogging also made the pupils more conscious of one another's writing – the communal, sharing aspect of writing. They rarely read each other's books but on the blog they read one another's work and added comments. The blog also enabled them to communicate with other writers and respond to their writing. They were becoming a writing community, and as a consequence more aware of their own writing.

Good writing

As we discussed writing on the blogs and in their literacy books with children, we learned more about their personal theories of what they had to do to improve their writing. We became interested in how teachers and pupils in these classrooms defined good writing. As part of an exploration of this question, we asked our four teachers to give their personal definitions of what makes for good writing. One teacher wrote:

[Good writing] has a good idea, something interesting which has substance and a meaning to the author and/or others. Their imagination and creativity drives it along to some kind of conclusion.... Feelings and emotions are included and readers feel these. (40)

The four teachers clearly agreed what makes for good writing:

- genuine content and ideas
- real meaning and purpose
- a strong sense of a reader/audience
- imagination, originality and creativity
- fluency and momentum

These were not, unfortunately, the key factors in children's responses, which reflected the teachers' marking of their literacy books, and the learning objectives and targets that they were used to:

It would need "wow" words to impress me.

Good sentences full of adjectives.

Describing. Good punctuation.

Vocabulary that catches attention.

Description and similes. (ibid., 41)

Writing examples

In the children's literacy books, these features were marked. A piece about a wildlife park by Rakeem, a 6-year-old boy, began:

I raced buoyantly out of my house back into the caged domain. I climbed the elder tree hoping it was still sturdy. I couldn't wait to see what animals were roaming about – But it was the same charging zebras that were being persecuted by a hyena pack with an anxious alpha...

Then the narrator observes a much smaller creature; a chameleon:

But suddenly I witnessed something I had never encountered in my life. It was rather small and his body was a boring plain green. It had eyes like the sun and a tail that was a spiral like on a sea shell...

What follows is a description of this small animal meeting “an enormous carnivaging lion”. (24)

Rakeem had chosen this piece as his favourite from the whole year. It's written in a bold and lively style, being showy and designed to impress. This style indicates his belief that good writing must have “vocabulary that catches attention” – to an extent that sometimes detracts from meaning (e.g. “the caged domain”). Some of Rakeem's vocabulary choices are outlandish. It seems likely he found the noun “carnage” (from which he then improvised a participle) – and several other words used in this piece – by clicking on an online thesaurus.

In the lists of targets given at the top of pupils' work, there was often one about using “impressive vocabulary” or “adventurous vocabulary” (the “wow words”) and students often engaged in online word searches for this purpose. However, they did not always know enough about the words offered by the thesaurus to choose wisely. Many times children used inappropriate words (sometimes without knowing the meaning) that came straight from the thesaurus.

In the commercial assessment scheme being used, “adventurous vocabulary” was strongly emphasised. Like most of the children in the class, Rakeem was aware of his assessed level and was deliberately seeking features associated with the next sub-level. The teacher wrote, at the end of one of the pieces in his literacy book: “5C, a good argument with some strong points.” Rakeem's reply: “Thank you I tried to get 5B” (ibid., 26).

Commission on assessment without levels (CAL)

The research on blogging and writing took place in 2013. The new NC for English (DFE 2013) appeared in October 2013, and the NC system of levels was removed in September 2014. For a long time, this system had been viewed by teachers and inspectors as producing negative results, and this was finally recognised by government. The UK Schools Minister at the time said that “removing levels decreases central prescription in the way schools teach and assess” (Gibb 2015).

Schools welcomed the report of the Commission for Assessment without Levels (CAL 2015), issued in September 2015, for stating:

The successful implementation of the new NC requires a radical cultural and pedagogical change, from one which has been too dominated by the requirements of the national

assessment framework and testing regime to one where the focus needs to be on high-quality, in-depth teaching, supported by in-class formative assessment. (my italics)

There was initially some euphoria that schools would be freed from the pressure to constantly assess children's progress against attainment targets.

The new national curriculum

State schools are being given a reduced and impoverished curriculum.¹

The new curriculum, however, with its associated SATs (standardised assessment tests), seriously disappointed teachers who had hoped to engage in "high-quality, in-depth teaching". Although the CAL suggested that the curriculum would no longer be dominated by the national assessment framework and testing regime, in fact, assessment was still to dominate, and become narrower than ever.

Leading up to the introduction of the new NC some of the best-known educationalists in the country had been consulted. They were asked "to trawl the curricula of the world's high-performing countries, to collect core knowledge, and put it in the right order" (Pollard 2012). But when these experts failed to come up with the expected "advice" their report was dispensed with. Accordingly, draft curricula for Primary Maths, Science and English were announced which bore no relation to their recommendations.

A key influence behind the draft curricula was the work of Hirsch (1988), an American academic who strongly advocated a core curriculum consisting of specific cultural "knowledge" that all citizens should hold in common. Nick Gibb, then UK Minister of State for Schools, explained (Gibb 2015a) in detail the attraction of Hirsch's ideas:

As with so many other professions, education has developed a language of its own, erecting barriers to entry for the interested layman. To implement an effective programme of reform, it was imperative that I and my colleagues learnt this language – and Hirsch was our tutor.

Back when I was in opposition, it would not have been immediately obvious that [...] the 2007 National Curriculum overlay of "Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills" (QCDA, 2007) was arrant nonsense. To the uninformed outsider, "independent learning", "learning to learn", and "individualised instruction" all sound misleadingly like reasonable ideas. However, reading Hirsch provided me with the mental armour to see these ideas for what they were, and fight them accordingly. (Gibb 2015a)

Hirsch had been arguing that the point of education was to acquire "intellectual capital", and that his "Core Knowledge Curriculum" would ensure all had access to a common stock of "knowledge". Out went concepts, skills, competences and processes; in their place was a "straightforward" view of education – build knowledge content through *transmission* teaching. For Hirsch drills, recitation and memorisation were no problem – rote learning seemingly was an efficient way of acquiring knowledge. Impatient with notions of comprehension and critical literacy, Hirsch claimed that wide *knowledge* leads to language mastery.

The NC based on these principles now consists of subjects where the knowledge content to be learned is specified precisely – no emphasis on how children learn or on effective ways of engaging them with topics that are often remote from their prior experience. The *New Visions for Education* group countered:

The national curriculum reforms emphasise the acquisition of knowledge, viewed as inert bodies of factual information and standard procedures rather than dynamic objects of understanding, analysis and application. High stakes testing of this type of content will make pupils space for learning overwhelmingly memory-heavy; leaving little room for creative and critical thinking, discussion, problem solving and self-directed learning. (New Visions for Education Group 2013)

What does this mean for teaching writing?

There's no freedom and no time to explore language in a way that would help children to write well.

English has generally been viewed, in the past, as different in important respects from other curriculum subjects, in that it covers so many areas, from the aesthetic to the functional. Cox (1989) described it as encompassing “language use, language study, literature, drama and media education” and ranging from:

the teaching of a skill like handwriting, through the development of the imagination and of competence in reading, writing, speaking and listening, to the academic study of the greatest literature in English.

The Cox Report (1989) divided English into four language modes – Speaking and Listening, Reading and Writing – something followed in all subsequent revisions of the English curriculum, including the current one. In each version, it's been acknowledged that English is concerned with language use (including critical and creative uses), language development and language study across all four modes. As well as setting out some content to be learned, previous versions had considered the skills and processes to be developed.

But the new emphasis on content alone means the writing curriculum has become a curiously hollow document. We regularly view writing as (1) composition and (2) transcription, but in this new curriculum (DfE 2013) the order is reversed. The programme of study now consists of: first, transcription (spelling and handwriting), then, composition (articulating ideas and structuring them in speech and writing).

Little more is said in general terms about the content of the writing curriculum; what fill the most space are the statutory requirements for spelling and handwriting (transcription) and vocabulary, grammar and punctuation (for composition). These are mainly contained in appendices, which take up 50 pages of the 85 pages given to the Key Stages 1 and 2 writing curriculum for children aged 5–11. David Crystal, one of a team of language experts that was asked, in 2011, to provide some initial perspective to the government team tasked with taking the curriculum forward, feels that the view of language behind the test of English grammar, punctuation and spelling, has “put the clock back half a century” (Crystal 2013; Mansell 2017).

What does this mean for assessing writing?

Children are writing badly and insecurely, they're dependent on the success criteria. This is a curriculum written by adults for adults, it doesn't have success criteria that children can understand. A lot of dependence is being created in children and in teachers.

The role of assessment in a content-driven curriculum like the new NC is straightforward. It is simply to test that the curriculum content has been “mastered”. The many years of careful research and development in the field of assessment, which led to a thorough and thoughtful view of the uses of different assessments for different purposes, has been consigned to the scrap heap. What matters is only that test item answers should be correct.

This leads to standardised testing composed of what Wynne Harlen (2014) has termed “closed items” – just one right answer. In this kind of test, reliability is high. Validity, however – whether the test assesses effectively the range of learning and skills required in a particular subject – is ignored. These tests assess a narrow range of specific features, chosen to see whether pupils can meet particular standards, but give no information about their broader abilities in normal writing situations. That’s certainly true of the spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) tests, (28 pages of questions on specific features of grammar, punctuation and spelling in 2017) and is one reason why the House of Commons Select Committee (2017) called for their withdrawal.

The tests are inadequate for any but the crudest purposes. But what is worse is their effect on teaching and learning. Wynne Harlen again:

Negative impacts arise when what is assessed reflects only easily tested aspects of learning, compounded by attaching rewards and punishments to the results, acquiring “high stakes”. The pressure on teachers to increase test results is transferred to pupils, even if the tests are not high stakes for pupils. Research shows that when this happens, teachers focus teaching on the test content, train pupils in how to pass tests and feel impelled to adopt teaching styles which do not match what is needed to develop real understanding. Initially this effort increases test scores, as reported for the national tests in England by Wyse et al. (2010) but soon level off as the effect degrades. Then the results become meaningless in terms of intended learning. (Harlen 2014, 9)

The deep trouble of our assessment system now – and this latest form surpasses any previous version in this respect – is that teaching to the test is not only regarded as normal but is officially encouraged and promoted. It used to be recognised that there were two major reasons why teaching to the test was not a good idea: (1) it narrows the curriculum to what is to be assessed, and (2) if pupils have been coached for the test it can no longer be regarded as reliable – it is useless as an evaluation of pupils’ understanding. Yet now we have ended up, after so many changes of tack and millions spent on successive systems, with a set-up that positively encourages, even directs, teachers to teach to the test, resulting in an even more impoverished curriculum and a system that deskills teachers, making of them mechanical operatives rather than professionals. This system has abandoned any attempt to assess children’s progress in writing across a range of contexts, and in relation to broader and more informative criteria.

Teacher assessment of writing

We’re running the risk of teachers being told they don’t have the skills to teach writing – we’ve then created a generation of teachers that can only use schemes and are completely deskilled.

We might hope that the area in which teachers could get on with the teaching of writing in a wider sense would be in the broader writing curriculum, where they are to make a “rounded judgement based on knowledge of how the child has performed over

time and in a variety of contexts". While these assessments will take into account SPaG, they are also intended to evaluate writing style and creativity.

Although this sounds more liberal, assessment criteria dictate practice. Pupils' writing must be evaluated in relation to the writing framework, which privileges grammar and punctuation over style and creativity. To meet the "expected standard", pupils' work must show, for instance, that they can use grammatical structures such as passive verbs and modal verbs appropriately, use verb tenses consistently and correctly, and use a range of devices to build "cohesion" including "adverbials of time and place, pronouns, synonyms". They must also "use the range of punctuation taught at KS 2 mostly correctly"; this includes colons and semi-colons. Set against this are some remarks that indicate that writing is more than just a technical exercise; pupils are expected to "write effectively for a range of purposes and audiences, selecting language that shows good awareness of the reader". But in general, the more you read it, the writing "framework" becomes a confining cage, not helpful scaffolding.

Students aware of such technical accuracy are unlikely to focus on the main point of their writing – what they want to say, their purpose, their meanings, and how to express their meanings to their audience. Instead, each piece of writing becomes an exercise in meeting the criteria; criteria which do not often help the writing. This can be observed in primary school classrooms throughout the country, but here I draw on the Standards and Testing Agency's (STA) own exemplars of writing (STA 2017).

Expected features at KS2

They have narrowed everything down to the most "objective" markable criteria.

Official examples of what certain terms mean demonstrate how inappropriate and archaic are some of the expectations these standards enshrine. To demonstrate "formality of style" (which is a marker of writing by pupils "working at more depth"), a pupil might use one of the following features:

Modal verbs: "Should it rain, we may have to cancel the picnic".

Subjunctives: "They requested that he leave immediately".

Passive constructions: "It is widely believed that..." (Standards and Testing Agency 2017)

We are talking about 11-year-olds here. Is this the kind of constipated language we want 11-year-olds to be able to use? It derives from some primer of linguistic etiquette, certainly from before the Second World War. Even in the 1950s, grammar school pupils were not being taught the vestigial English subjunctive.

Interestingly (fronted adverbial), in the research for *The Reader in the Writer*, we too used the incidence of modal verbs as an indicator of increasing maturity in writing. But this was a research measure, not direct pedagogy – we were using modal verbs as a measure of children's writing becoming more thoughtful and reflective. Modal verbs suggest a way of thinking that is provisional, giving a more speculative dimension to a text and suggesting different possible outcomes. Had we set out to teach modal verbs to the students we were working with, we would have destroyed the measure. Modal verbs reflect a significant move in children's thinking as well as in their writing, but only

if their appearance actually signals development in thinking, not if they are taught as superficial decoration.

KS2 exemplars

The moderators came but they looked only for punctuation and grammar in the books, they didn't read through whole pieces of writing.

The Department of Education writing exemplars at KS2 are one of the models given to teachers for “writing that meets the standard”. Mari Cruice’s analysis (Cruice 2018) of what these exemplars reveal about official thinking focuses on one exemplar; “Morgan’s balanced argument” about graffiti reveals Mari’s sense of the writing’s inauthenticity:

I just don't believe that Morgan has been encouraged to come up with his own opinion. The writing is not credible. ... His words feel hollow and his voice sounds borrowed. The Standards and Testing Agency celebrate a “more formal style that is appropriate for this piece”; they appreciate the “precise vocabulary choices ... which establishes the authority of the writer”; they note the “multi-clause sentence containing co-ordination and subordination”. But have they stopped to ask whether good writing can be measured by a list of technical devices, or whether there is something more nuanced, more subtle and more human happening when a person seeks to communicate their view of the world to another person via words on a page. (Cruice 2018, 51)

It is the “borrowed” aspect that seems to mark so much of the writing being done in classrooms now as children of 10 and 11 try to “walk around in someone else’s shoes”. In these assessed exemplars, this hardly leads to effective writing.

In an exemplar of writing by “Leigh” (he is writing about a workshop at the Globe Theatre) (Standards and Testing Agency 2017), we can see him trying hard to pack in the expected features (fronted subordinate clause, conjunctions, passives, multi-clause sentences), with doubtful results:

As any normal actor would do, my class (yr. 6), were told by Olivia to warm up. However, we had to clap and stomp at the same time but the only communication we were allowed to use was eye contact, which is quite difficult in my opinion.

The assessor comments, in relation to the first sentence:

The fronted subordinate clause and the passive [we're told] are not employed effectively here. The sentence structure that Leigh has chosen is unnecessarily complicated. (Sentence 1)

Indeed, and he’s probably chosen it because complication has been presented to him as necessary for the “expected standard”: use “a wide range of clause structures, sometimes varying their position within the sentence”. The commentary on the second sentence, however, is almost congratulatory:

A multi-clause sentence incorporating co-ordination and subordination is used to good effect here... The passive relative clause, with omitted relative pronoun (we were allowed to use), succinctly conveys the fact that communication was restricted, whilst the second relative clause comments on the limitations of eye contact. This demonstrates excellent control of language... (Sentence 2)

In another piece of writing, a science fiction story, here is Leigh's opening sentence:

In 2621 on the planet Zordo, a young but poor boy carefully fixed his droid, wich which was the only source of income he had left.

The assessor comments:

The opening sentence includes a fronted adverbial, an expanded noun phrase (a young but poor boy) and two relative clauses ((including one with an omitted relative pronoun), providing a succinct but comprehensive introduction to the main elements of the story.

The assessment seems to imply that the grammar alone introduces the main story elements. The wood has disappeared and all we can see are trees. These assessor comments are from the "grammar and punctuation" comments, which predominate in the commentary. But the "composition" comments too, because they also relate to structural factors, are skewed towards countable criteria – the "range of devices used to build cohesion"; the "grammatical structures that reflect what the writing requires (including passive and modal verbs)". Designed to cut out human judgements and be based on objective measures, they yield data! Morgan and Leigh both know how to play the game and do their best to ensure that their writing in different genres is replete with features they have been taught to use. But it's clear that this is not doing much for their writing.

By comparison, the exemplar of "Frankie", who is working above the expected standard, shows a more confident writer, one who rarely employs multi-clause sentences. More likely to use a series of short sentences or a compound sentence, Frankie's writing has an interest and tension lacking in Morgan's and Leigh's scripts. It has momentum. Frankie knows what she wants to say and doesn't allow multi-clause sentences or fronted subordinated clauses to slow her pace:

My racing heart thuds underneath my silky tutu. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Then suddenly the stage director is at the door, calling my name. My name. My stomach gives an unexpected flutter and I take a deep breath.

Indeed, the commentary recognises the strengths of her writing, in creating atmosphere and tension:

Single-word sentences help to build tension. This is followed by "then suddenly", interrupting the thoughts of the reader and quickly. Single-clause sentence and repetition of vocabulary build tension and underline the importance of the dancer being called to the stage.

Frankie writes in a clear and fluent style throughout her pieces. She is not looking over her shoulder; her focus is on what she wants to say; perhaps there was less teaching to the test in her class. She certainly gives no sense, compared with the other exemplars discussed, that she is hyper-conscious of the grammatical features that are given so much importance in the assessment framework.

Critiques of the writing curriculum

There is beginning to be some acknowledgement of the fact that the curriculum is being denuded.

Teachers and academics are not the only people who have noticed something wrong with the assessment of writing in the English curriculum. The House of Commons Educational Committee specifically addressed writing in their report on Primary Assessment (2017):

The balance of evidence we received did not support the proposition that focusing on specific grammatical techniques improved the overall quality of writing. We support the Department's proposal to use a "best fit" model for teacher assessment of writing. We recommend the Department should make the Key Stage 2 spelling, punctuation and grammar test non-statutory, but still available for schools for internal monitoring.

After considering this recommendation the Department rejected it, though it did back-pedal on some of the criteria related to multi-clause sentences and fronted adverbials (now a standing joke – some teachers call them 'Sweet FAs').

In addition, there have been cogent critiques of the writing curriculum – and the English curriculum as a whole – from the subject associations, both UKLA and NATE (Richmond 2015; Cruice 2018). And there have been detailed critiques of the assessment system in general from members of the "expert panel", from the *New Visions in Education* group, from the organisation More Than a Score (2017), from the Pearson Report (Milliard et al, 2017), and from Robin Alexander and the *Cambridge Primary Review Trust* (Alexander 2016). Both the present and the previous Chief Inspectors of Schools have queried the amount of time now being taken up with assessment in schools, and the negative effects on children's learning.

The role of teachers

Some schools and teachers go out of their way to make time and support good independent writing, but it doesn't count in the assessments.

Teachers are implementing a curriculum which is built on a reductive, ideological and pedestrian view of literacy and they know it. Its most problematic aspect is its complete disregard for the creative and expressive aspects of English, and of writing in particular. Out of this negative situation, some teachers do manage to salvage pleasure in learning for children, but they are concerned about the lack of time to teach in a way they believe would promote good writing. Most teachers and heads I talked with while researching this article still found time to emphasise the arts, but they were not typical. One of their main concerns was the effect on children of the regime they were working under, particularly on children's confidence and enjoyment:

As soon as they learn to write they're worrying about correctness.

Children with little writing experience get stuck. They write quite well when they write freely but have problems with sentence structures. They can't start sentence with fronted adverbials – they worry about it.

They're completely having their pleasure in language removed.

These teachers were concerned about their own job satisfaction, the lack of professional autonomy in their work – and about the impact of all that on the way they teach and the way their children learn:

The sense of autonomy and creativity is removed from me.

The stakes are so high that many people are conformist and compliant. It would be career suicide to ignore this pressure.

Schools are doing what they can to preserve as much breadth in the curriculum and pleasure in learning as possible. They are continuing to read to children and base writing on books that have been read. To prioritise the arts, individual teachers need their head teachers' backing in "working around" the set curriculum, but this is not always forthcoming:

Senior leadership are happy if a piece of writing is high scoring; there are no concerns for quality.

It's a data driven system. Some inspectors recognise good teaching and learning but mostly they focus on the data.

In one school, I visited some teachers belonged to the National Writing Project, a national network of teachers' writing groups, and were gaining a different view of the satisfactions of writing, both for themselves and for the children they taught. It was a way of retaining some "autonomy and creativity". Other teachers were gaining support and stimulation from their membership of subject associations like NATE and UKLA, which provide space for reflection, for sharing, and for the generation of new ideas to enhance practice.

A better way?

Our current NC has taken us down a dead-end street – a change of direction is needed. The drift of teachers out of the profession is one indicator that something has gone very wrong in schools. As I write, in May 2018, there seems to be a growing awareness of just how counter-productive the government curriculum and assessment strategy is, and how extreme and ideological. Recently, the head of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Paul Drechsler (2018), said in a speech to an education conference:

Just last week, the inventor of the PISA tests, Andreas Schleicher, said that English policymakers are reacting to his test results in a different way to other nations. In other countries, policy-makers are trying to improve performance by encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning.

The OECD are clear that we are now doing more rote learning than almost anywhere else in the world. Yes, times tables are important. But if memorising facts is all students are doing, there's much they are missing out on. (Drechsler 2018)

Drechsler called for policymakers to prioritise teaching that encouraged thoughts, questions, creativity and teamworking:

Let's dump the ideology – no more fixation on school structures and exam reform. It is time for a national, rational debate on how we help our young people succeed. And then let's reform the curriculum to deliver the results we need. (Drechsler 2018)

In this reform, we need an approach to English that recognises its relation to the arts. English has many features in common with drama, art and music. It develops pupils' ability to develop an increasingly sensitive and critical awareness of language in responding to language and literature. Poetry offers opportunities for creative interpretation and performance and is central to English.

We certainly should be able to find a better way of arriving at a NC than the secret machinations and back-of-an-envelope approaches adopted to design the NC, some of which were recorded and published by the Liberal Democrats in *The Gove Files* (2015).

Reform of the policy process itself is what's needed, according to Robin Alexander (2016). It's significant that he and the President of the CBI (Drechsler 2018) are coming to the same conclusion. Perhaps there's some hope of a change – and a step change, that this time will lead to a curriculum that is not entirely data-driven and prioritises the enjoyment of learning. A twenty-first-century curriculum, what's more, developed with the advice of education experts, teachers and parents.

Note

1. This and subsequent quotations at the heads of sections are taken from interviews I held with teachers (who wished to remain anonymous) during the writing of this article.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Dr Myra Barrs is a freelance writer, consultant and researcher. She was previously director of the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (London, UK). Her publications include books and articles on literacy, assessment, play and drama, early years education in Italy, and the work of L.S. Vygotsky.

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