

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION

Enduring Values in Primary Education

This paper draws on previous NAPE statements from a variety of sources, which relate to our values and further elaborates where we stand in our philosophy of primary education. We recognise that while the educational landscape is forever changing, influenced by a myriad of factors including socio-economic variables, advancing technology and the political context, it remains important to articulate some of the enduring values and principles which inform our approach to current issues. This is not a plea for a nostalgic orientation towards education, but it is a recognition that there are fundamental values which should continue to breathe life into the primary classroom. As a national association we would like to think that our values have equal relevance across the United Kingdom as a whole, but we also appreciate that Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have systems in place which provide very different contexts for educational provision and that all three have advanced in directions which are more enlightened than is the case in England.

Foundations

We are in NAPE committed to a social-constructivist model of learning which emphasises the child's role in building up an understanding of the world and progressively developing skills and conversely the teacher's role in shaping the educational environment, tuning into and challenging the children's thinking, with the wider social context also impinging upon and feeding into the dynamics of learning. This interactionist perspective, articulated so clearly in Pollard, A. and Wyse, D. (2023), which recognises the complexities of the teacher-pupil relationship and goes beyond a simple conceptualisation of learning as a 'product' of teacher instruction, is now taken for granted in professional circles. We may have undergone a revolution since the 60s in the centralisation of the school curriculum and its elaboration into a set of prescribed orders, but much of what is written about the dynamics of the relationship between teacher and taught and the interplay between action, image and symbol in children's learning does not depart too far from the interactionist perspective highlighted in the Plowden Report (1967) and subsequently examined in the seminal work of Jerome Bruner (1973) and Lev Vygotsky (with his emphasis on the role of the parent/carer and teacher as a *scaffold* for learning).

Reciprocity is therefore seen as being at the heart of the teacher-pupil relationship. The dynamic relationship between the teacher and the pupil and education is not to be viewed simplistically as the transmission of knowledge, but rather as a complex interactional process in which there is mutual investment. As argued so strongly in the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, R., 2010), we believe that the primary years are a vital time in how children develop as human beings, not only in academic, but spiritual, moral, social, cultural, emotional and other dimensions. Nurturing all of these, and the qualities to cope confidently and thoughtfully with change and uncertainty, is essential for the complex world in which children live and grow up. Too frequently, the full range of young children's abilities is neither recognised nor developed in schools, a by-product of a climate dominated by the pressures of high-stakes assessment. Doing so requires creative and flexible teachers in environments where relationships of care, trust and challenge are created and learning is active, engaging and introduced in a meaningful context.

A developmental orientation is also fundamental to an understanding of how the curriculum in the primary years has its roots in early explorations through play in its different forms extending from the manipulation of objects to the creation of imaginative narratives. How ever it is organised, the transition from pre-school education to key-stage one should take account of the continuities of learning, respecting the crucial role of play in promoting the child's journey towards academic independence and social maturity and recognising the multiplicity of ways in which the wider school community through teacher assistants, learning mentors as well as peers, support the processes involved in learning. One cannot under-estimate, as well, the critical support provided by the wider family, including very often the grandparents, in establishing a firm foundation of competencies, long before the child starts school and further maintaining this support through the primary school years.

Curriculum

NAPE is committed to the celebration and exploration of best practice in primary education and the early years and its core values are bound up with inclusivity of approach, the centrality of a broadly based and balanced curriculum across the key stages and respect for the professionalism of the teacher in making judgements about curriculum implementation in the classroom.

If we are to do justice to children's entitlement to richness of learning experience, we have to recognise the complexities involved in arriving at an appropriate curriculum and in particular the dynamic interplay between the teacher's aspirations for disciplines and the pupil's own emotional investment in the process of learning, nourished by maturing conceptual awareness, a sense of cultural identity and the social fabric of schooling. We regret the erosion of the arts and humanities over recent decades in the primary years in English schools, despite the principle of pupil entitlement enshrined in the national curriculum to a broadly-based and balanced education, a principle which is taken very seriously beyond the English borders. We concur with Dr Tony Eaude's articulation of the case for a more enlightened curriculum which extends beyond the confines of the neo-elementary version which has held sway in too many schools:

A narrow often dull, curriculum impoverishes every child, but especially those whose horizons are limited. As a society we must rethink what we hope to achieve through schooling, to try and ensure that children are, and become, rounded and responsible people.....This will require a transformation of what and how children are taught; and requires the potential and creativity of children and their teachers to be unlocked from the current constraints.

(Primary First, Issue 31, 2021)

We note with interest OfSTED's recent/y expressed plea for a more broadly based curriculum in the primary years and welcome this shift of emphasis:

Primary schools judged as requires improvement sometimes focused extensively on teaching reading, writing and mathematics at the expense of other subjects in the curriculum, even for pupils who had the capability to tackle a wide range of subjects.

(Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2019/20)

We also welcome the deepening awareness of the pastoral role of the primary school, alongside its academic responsibilities in promoting a sense of well-being. The Cambridge Primary Review (2010) articulates the multi-faceted nature of this responsibility with clarity:

To attend to children's capabilities, needs, hopes and anxieties here and now, and promote their mental, emotional and physical well-being and welfare.....It is about inducting them into a life where they will be wholeheartedly engaged in all kinds of worthwhile activities and relationships, defined generously rather than narrowly.

An emphasis on positive and healthy relationships allows children and students to be safe and mature into adults where they can be aware of unhealthy matters, for example: female genital mutilation, forced marriage, honour-based violence, coercion into unwilling practices, domestic abuse, poor sexual health, financial oppression or any form of social injustice. A central dimension in the ethos of a school is the extent to which it draws on a range of strategies for creating a climate of *safeguarding* where human respect informs all aspects of communication and expectations are transparent about the non-acceptance of bullying or any form of racism.

The challenges of climate change have highlighted the importance of education for sustainability and ecological awareness. The values bound up with conservation of the environment in all its diversity are critical for the planet and the primary teacher has a crucial role in inducting a sense of ethical agency as well as a deepening understanding of the natural world.

We regret the way in which teacher professionalism has been progressively undermined by government in Westminster in recent decades, especially in the core areas and most notably in relation to the teaching of reading where its advocacy of *synthetic phonics* as an all-pervasive panacea has flown in the face of research evidence regarding the range of factors involved in learning how to read. Margaret Clark's conclusions are as relevant today as they were in 2015:

England is not the only country where evidence from research is being ignored, simplistic tests are driving the curriculum, available resources for schools are being spent on commercial products linked to the tests and schools are being ranked on the basis of such tests. How do people with knowledge that should count make themselves heard? (Primary First, Issue 12, 2015)

Policy, Systems and Governance

The shaping of educational policy should be framed within a set of ethical values which we in NAPE see as bound up with the education of the whole child, inclusivity of approach and commitment to equality of educational opportunity. However, the way in which those values are transformed into a set of policies must be informed by the rigorous scrutiny of research evidence and not the language of rhetoric which characterises too much political discourse.

We are committed to the principle of schools enjoying an open and supportive relationship with the communities they serve and we see this principle as potentially being under threat in multi-academy trusts where governance can be restricted to a slimmed down executive with minimal parental or local representation and where accountability can be perceived in commercial terms and not in relation to local democracy. We welcome the government's increasing appreciation of the significant yet voluntary role played by governors, whose layers of expertise can contribute positively to the wellbeing of the school system.

The benefits of collaboration between schools have been seen as a laudable by-product of academisation - one must not under-estimate the benefits of mutual support and cross fertilisation of ideas and expertise which can be generated by academy structures. However, this can be achieved within the maintained sector as well and indeed many schools are generating collaborative links both within LA boundaries and beyond which are contributing significantly to staff development.

The government should review its policies regarding academisation and the role of the local authority in supporting its schools. We value the potential role of LAs in holding schools to account as well as intervening constructively where schools are identified as needing to make significant progress. We support the stance taken by the NAHT on the importance of schools making their own decisions about academisation:

..... schools should have the right to choose the governance structure that works best for them. High performance can be found across all different types of school, and there is no clear evidence to suggest that one type of school structure is inherently better than another.

(NAHT website, 'End Forced Academisation', (January 2023)

We share the government's emphasis on the importance of the governing body having a range of appropriate expertise as well as commitment to its roles and responsibilities, but this should not be at the expense of its democratic function. With appropriate induction, training and support, it should be feasible for governors to develop significantly into their roles from a position of relative unease and uncertainty.

In summary, the capacity of the governing board to fulfil responsibilities effectively is bound up with the extent to which it represents the distinctive range of perspectives which characterise the wider school community. This communal voice has the potential to be articulate, breathing life and spirit as well as expertise into the process of governance and it is crucial that for the sake of the educational health of our schools, it is preserved alive and kicking, rather than allowed to wither away on the altar of corporate efficiency.

Assessment

NAPE recognises the intimate relationship between assessment and learning and is committed to the cultivation of the teacher's expertise in formative and diagnostic assessment and the tracking of pupil progress across the curriculum as a whole. Summative, including standardised test procedures, have a role to play in the school's monitoring of performance and while central government on grounds of accountability has the right to check on national standards, the current SATS system is flawed, narrowly conceived and damaging in its impact on pupil and staff morale. A future government would do well to take some inspiration from alternative approaches to assessment in use in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The sooner it is radically reviewed, the better! We heartily endorse the stance taken by Sir Tim Brighouse and Prof. Mick Waters (2022) in their advocacy of a re-appraisal of assessment across primary and secondary years:

Primary assessment should start with low-stakes diagnostic tests as a base-line at age 6, carried out internally and assessed and moderated externally.

Currently, schools are judged centrally on their effectiveness in relation to academic progress by measures which are restricted to a sampling of the core skills. The richness of human potential across a broad range of skills and qualities is ignored and in its place we are confronted with a minimalist version of human endeavour, to be supplemented by tests of phonetic competence in KS1 and of knowledge of multiplication tables in year 4. The former fails to do justice to everything we know through research about what makes for a successful reader while the latter reduces the breadth and complexities of mathematical mastery to the retention of a limited number of mathematical statements (however helpful they may be in the calculation process).

Overview

Underlying our approach to primary education is a fundamental premiss that the educative process is far-reaching in its scope, as much to do with the cultivation of personal, social and emotional relationships as it is with the enhancement of academic skills and knowledge. Individual autonomy may be seen as a goal in relation to the mastery of cognitive operations but that is complemented by the significance of the maturing awareness of one's interdependence with the social fabric of society, which extends beyond these shores, and of one's obligations and rights within the community. Induction into the disciplines of the curriculum is a crucial dimension of the primary school journey and we appreciate that the journey is sometimes but not always best nourished through an integrated approach which facilitates the interaction between different forms of expression and enquiry: this synthesis has the potential to enrich the learning process, providing both coherence and stimulation.

The challenges for the primary teacher in master-minding this exercise are formidable and one admires the way in which so many members of the profession, frequently in collaboration with other colleagues, are able to tune into the children's wavelength and inspire them to flourish and move forward. Cremin (2021) has highlighted the significance of a *climate of openness* as a critical variable in creative pedagogies. It is this quality of reciprocity which we see as fundamental in the primary classroom, providing both emotional security and cognitive challenge. It is revealed in the way in which the teacher addresses the kaleidoscope of learning needs in the classroom; it is reflected in the teacher's harnessing of body language to engage the pupils, whether it's the re-assuring smile or the sympathetic hand -squeeze at a moment of crisis; it underpins the use of language to promote and extend understanding with the teacher elaborating on the children's ideas to create a shared journey; and it is demonstrated in the way in which children's endeavours are celebrated, sometimes through the positivity of language and sometimes through the medium of display. It is this dynamic interplay between the teacher and the taught which is at the heart of primary education at its best.

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Robert Young

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