

4TH EDITION

THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM & THE TEACHERS' STANDARDS

**2025
UPDATE**

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book presents the Teachers' Standards and the National Curriculum for England for key stages 1–4. The National Curriculum is available online at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum>

This book brings together the Curriculum and the Teachers' Standards, two key statutory documents for those training and beginning to teach in England.

The text focuses on the need to provide children with a broad and balanced curriculum. In his foreword, Dylan Wiliam discusses how the curriculum was developed and goes back to explore its original aims. He looks at the current emphasis on the teaching of ALL curriculum subjects by OFSTED and asks some important questions about why this has not thus far been a focus in all schools.

For ease of reference, pages detailing the curriculum for key stages 3 and 4 are shaded.

This Third Edition has been updated to include the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF).

Section 4 introduces this key statutory framework for teacher education and development. This framework informs the structure and content of Initial Teacher Training and the early professional development of teachers in their first two years of teaching. It combines and replaces the previously separate Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Core Content Framework (CCF) and Early Career Framework (ECF).

The book provides some detailed and focused indexes of the curriculum.

FOREWORD BY DYLAN WILIAM

What should students be learning at school?

Dylan Wiliam

To many people in England, asking what students should be learning at school seems a silly question. The government has decided, and it's called the national curriculum. Even academies, which do not have to follow the national curriculum, tend to do so, so what students should be learning seems obvious.

However, even when a school is required to follow the national curriculum, this is not the end of the story, because there are several layers in it. The first, and the one that people usually think about when they hear the words 'national curriculum' are the documents published by the Department for Education about what students should be learning in each subject at various ages. This is the *intended* curriculum. However, a list of requirements about what students should be learning does not determine what actually happens in classrooms. The broad aims of a curriculum need to convert into things that teachers can actually use, such as schemes of work and textbooks. This is the *implemented* curriculum. But what really matters is the lived daily experience of students in school – the *achieved* curriculum – and this depends greatly on the teacher.

For example, with the same national curriculum, and even the same textbook and learning activities, the experiences of students in the classrooms of different teachers can be very diverse. One maths teacher might create the impression that there is only one correct way to solve a mathematics problem – the one given in the textbook – while another might ask students to explore whether the same problem could be solved in different ways. One science teacher might teach power, voltage, current and resistance as completely detached from students' daily lives while another might ask the students to calculate the resistance of a 60W domestic bulb, showing how what they are learning in science connects to their lives. Teachers create curriculum every day, through the choices they make about how to present material to their students, the types of knowledge they value, and how they manage to connect the things that students have to learn to the lives that students live. Indeed, my hunch is that one of the most important characteristics of more effective teachers is that they get their students to care about stuff they didn't care about when they came into the classroom.

What all of this means is that even if a school is required to follow the national curriculum, or some other scheme of work, every teacher still needs to give careful thought to the issue of the curriculum. This will include thinking about what students will learn, and it will also – because time is limited – require consideration of what they will *not* learn. Whose history gets prioritized, and whose history gets ignored (what Elliot Eisner called the 'null curriculum' (Eisner, 1979))? It will also include thinking about what is sometimes called the 'hidden curriculum' – the often unintended messages that students pick up through attending school.

In making these choices, it is important to bear in mind that a curriculum is just a means to an end. The curriculum is simply the way that we get the students to

know the things that we want them to know. The problem is that in most societies there are many things that people want schools to teach students.

In a foreword of this length, there isn't space to do more than simply gloss over the major purposes that people have for education but it does seem that most of the goals that people have for education come under one of four broad categories.

One of the most important aims of education is to allow young people to take greater control of their own lives, perhaps best exemplified by the work of Paulo Freire and his 'Pedagogy of liberation' (Freire, 1986). The idea is that rather than simply training young people to fit into the existing systems, education is the means by which we help people deal critically and creatively with the world they experience, and also how to change that world. This is education as *personal empowerment*.

A second set of reasons for educating young people is, in Matthew Arnold's words, to pass on from one generation to the next 'the best that has been thought and known in the world' (Arnold, 1869) – education as *cultural transmission*.

In democratic societies, education has a third set of roles to fulfill, and that is to ensure citizens know enough about the issues on which they are asked to vote and are able to exercise their democratic rights responsibly. In other words, education is necessary as *preparation for democratic citizenship*.

Finally, education is increasingly important as a way of helping young people find fulfilling and satisfying employment. Education has always been important for employment, but as technology is used to a greater and greater extent in the world of work, higher levels of education are increasingly becoming not just desirable, but actually necessary. Education is also *preparation for work*.

The important point here is that education has to do all these things. We can't just pick the one or two that we favour. And many of these purposes conflict. What this means is that there will never be a perfect curriculum. There will inevitably be messy, uncomfortable compromises. What may be possible, however, is that by using a principled approach to thinking about the curriculum, we can try to ensure that the compromises we are making are ones we are happy with.

In the remainder of this foreword, I offer seven principles that can be used as 'tools for thinking' about curriculum. I do not claim that these are the only principles that are important—you may have others that you would like to add, or may think that some of these principles are not that important. However by applying these principles, I hope that you can see where you are making tradeoffs. No curriculum can satisfy all seven principles, but by making the tradeoffs explicit, I hope that they are planned, rather than just being a series of unintended consequences.

Balanced

Perhaps the most important feature of a curriculum is that it is balanced. English, maths and science are important, but they are not more important than art, or music, or dance, or drama, for at least three reasons. First, art, music, dance and drama are sources of personal fulfillment in adulthood in a way that maths and science rarely are. Second, these subjects, with their greater emphasis on creativity, are likely to be sources of employment in the future, because creativity is the one thing we know that machines can't do. Third, we are discovering that art, music, dance and drama make important contributions to a student's ability to read.

Recent research has shown that reading ability is not much more than decoding, and listening comprehension (this is sometimes called the 'simple view' of reading).

Once students can decode text, their understanding of it is primarily driven by their ability to construct a mental model of what is being described and what is crucial therefore is their background knowledge of what is being written about. Art, music, dance and drama are crucial sources of this background knowledge.

Rigorous

Any subject can be taught in a way that reflects the nature of the subject, or it can be taught in a way that trivializes the subject. Asking students in a history lesson to design costumes for historical characters may well keep them occupied, and they may even learn something about the characters for whom they are designing costumes. However, what they are doing is far removed from the discipline of history, because they are unlikely to be grappling with chronology, cause and effect, or reconciling conflicting accounts. An English teacher might discuss with a class what makes a good response to a poem the class has read, and try to incorporate the students' views into the marking scheme in a process that is sometimes called 'co-constructing'. But it is essential that the marking scheme reflects the nature of the discipline. The teacher has a duty of accountability to the discipline being taught.

This is particularly important in the development of what are sometimes called '21st century skills'. There seems to be relatively broad agreement that these include collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving, but too often these are regarded as generic skills, transferable from one subject to another, and they are not. We know that thinking critically in history is not the same as thinking critically in mathematics because no amount of teaching students to think critically in history has any impact on their ability to think critically in mathematics. If we want students to think critically in mathematics, then this has to be taught in mathematics. The 21st century skills are useful, but primarily as a checklist of the things that our teaching of that subject should include.

Vertically integrated

As well as being rigorous (i.e., reflecting accurately the nature of the subject), it is essential that there is clear progression in each subject. In other words, there needs to be a clear answer to the question, 'When someone gets better at this subject, what is it that gets better?' When clear lines of progression are identified, it becomes much easier to see what the 'big ideas' are in a subject, and which aspects of the curriculum are desirable, but do not provide foundations for learning. For example, while the phases of the moon is an interesting topic to study, little of what students learn in future years will depend on a thorough understanding of the phases of the moon. On the other hand, the knowledge that matter is made of small particles is a profound idea, and without a thorough understanding of this, students will struggle to make sense of what comes next. By being clear about progression in a subject, it is easier to see which aspects of the subject are essential for progress, and which are just desirable.

Coherent

Articulating the learning progressions in a subject forces us to think about the internal logic of each subject, but we also have to look across each student's whole

experience to make sure that what they are learning is coherent. For example, science teachers tend to want maths teachers to teach equations and graphs before maths teachers want to teach it. Even when there is coordination between mathematics and science teachers in terms of the curriculum sequencing, if the science teacher is representing graphs using equations, such as $y = 3x + 2$ while the maths teacher is representing the same relationship as a function ($x \rightarrow 3x + 2$) then students are likely to be confused, or, worse, see the two ways of representing graphs as unrelated.

The need for coherence is also clear from what we are learning about the nature of reading. As noted above, the research seems to suggest that once students have learned to read, then improving one's reading is mostly about acquiring the background knowledge that is needed to make sense of what one is reading. The more coherent the collection of curriculum experiences that a student receives, the more learning there will be.

Appropriate

It may seem obvious that a curriculum needs to be appropriate for each student, but this often turns out to be rather difficult to achieve, due to the range of achievement in a class, which is generally larger than most people assume. For example, in a mixed-ability class of 11-year-olds, there will be some students with an achievement level of a typical 6-year-old, and some who would outperform an average 16-year-old. While grouping students by ability is one solution to this, the available research evidence suggests that doing so tends to reduce average student achievement (by producing gains for the higher achievers and losses for the lower achievers, with the losses for lower achievers being greater than the gains for higher achievers, thus slightly lowering average achievement). Given such a range of achievement, making the curriculum equally appropriate for all students is clearly an all but impossible task, but teachers do need constantly to be looking for ways of making learning activities more appropriate for more students.

Focused

The national curriculum, like curricula all over the world, has too much stuff in it. Why this happens so consistently is obviously a matter of debate but one factor I think is important is that national curricula tend to be designed so as to make sure there is plenty to keep all students occupied. Because some students learn faster than others, this means that there is far too much in the curriculum for most students to learn at any depth. Of course, teachers could just teach the curriculum at the rate that is needed to ensure that everything is 'covered', but the result is generally a curriculum that William Schmidt described as 'a mile wide and an inch deep' (Schmidt *et al*, 1997). To maximise student learning, it is necessary, as noted above, to take some tough decisions about which aspects of the curriculum are essential, and which are desirable. If all students have mastered the essential elements, then they can move on to the desirable ones, but if they have not, then time is likely to be more fruitfully spent making sure that those aspects of the subject that are essential for future progress are well understood.

Relevant

Finally, the curriculum needs to be relevant to students. Some students are, for a variety of reasons, intrinsically motivated to learn certain things. For these students we should, of course, do all we can to sustain this intrinsic motivation. But the fact is that not enough students are intrinsically motivated to learn all the things that society has decided they need to learn, and that is why we need to make curriculum relevant. Of course, this is easier in some subjects than others, but effort expended in helping students understand why they need to be learning something (apart from passing tests and exams!) is rarely wasted.

Conclusion

By now it will be clear that it is impossible for a curriculum to satisfy all seven of these principles. However, by bearing the principles in mind, you will become more aware of the compromises you are making in designing effective learning experiences for your students. The principles may also suggest where you can make adjustments – for example by giving more attention to one principle and less to another – which will help you innovate in a more principled way rather than just ‘trying something new’. The difference between a collection of topics to be studied and a well-designed curriculum is the same as between a pile of bricks and a house. The elements are important; how they are assembled is much more so.

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3 THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN ENGLAND

Aims

- 3.1 The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said; and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.
- 3.2 The national curriculum is just one element in the education of every child. There is time and space in the school day and in each week, term and year to range beyond the national curriculum specifications. The national curriculum provides an outline of core knowledge around which teachers can develop exciting and stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills as part of the wider school curriculum.

Structure

- 3.3 Pupils of compulsory school age in community and foundation schools, including community special schools and foundation special schools, and in voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools, must follow the national curriculum. It is organised on the basis of four key stages and twelve subjects, classified in legal terms as 'core' and 'other foundation' subjects.
- 3.4 The Secretary of State for Education is required to publish programmes of study for each national curriculum subject, setting out the 'matters, skills and processes' to be taught at each key stage. Schools are free to choose how they organise their school day, as long as the content of the national curriculum programmes of study is taught to all pupils.
- 3.5 The structure of the national curriculum, in terms of which subjects are compulsory at each key stage, is set out in the table below:

	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3	Key stage 4
Age	5 – 7	7 – 11	11 – 14	14 – 16
Year groups	1 – 2	3 – 6	7 – 9	10 – 11
Core subjects				
English	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mathematics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Science	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foundation subjects				
Art and design	✓	✓	✓	
Citizenship			✓	✓
Computing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design and technology	✓	✓	✓	
Languages	✓	✓	✓	
Geography	✓	✓	✓	
History	✓	✓	✓	
Music	✓	✓	✓	
Physical education	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 1 Structure of the national curriculum

3.6 All schools are also required to teach religious education at all key stages. Secondary schools must provide sex and relationship education.

	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3	Key stage 4
Age	5 – 7	7 – 11	11 – 14	14 – 16
Year groups	1 – 2	3 – 6	7 – 9	10 – 11
Religious education	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sex and relationship education			✓	✓

Figure 2 Statutory teaching of religious education and sex and relationship education

Key stage 4 entitlement areas

3.7 The arts (comprising art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts), design and technology, the humanities (comprising geography and history) and modern foreign language are not compulsory national curriculum subjects after the age of 14, but all pupils in maintained schools have a statutory entitlement to be able to study a subject in each of those four areas.

3.8 The statutory requirements in relation to the entitlement areas are:

- schools must provide access to a minimum of one course in each of the four entitlement areas
- schools must provide the opportunity for pupils to take a course in all four areas, should they wish to do so
- a course that meets the entitlement requirements must give pupils the opportunity to obtain an approved qualification.