

The background to the National Curriculum in Modern Languages and the challenge it poses to teachers in England

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Abstract

The school curriculum must be responsive to changes in society and the economy, and changes in the nature of schooling itself. Teachers, individually and collectively, have to reappraise their teaching in response to the changing needs of their pupils and the impact of economic, social and cultural change. Education only flourishes if it successfully adapts to the demands and needs of the time. The National Curriculum was revised under the Education Act 1996 to ensure that any necessary changes would promote stability in schools and enable them to focus on raising standards of pupil's attainment. Most of the changes are designed to make teaching requirements clearer and to increase the flexibility available to schools to develop their curriculum in ways which best meet the needs of the pupils and local community. A stronger emphasis is laid on inclusion. The revised programmes of study have a new structure and design. The format is common to all subjects and sets out the knowledge, skills and understanding and the breadth of study requirements as two distinct parts. The concern in this essay is to examine the background to the National Curriculum in Modern Foreign Languages, and the challenge it poses to teachers. The first chapter begins with a brief description of the framework of the current National Curriculum. Then, it gives an insight of the structure and requirements of modern languages in the National Curriculum. The second chapter focuses on the issue of inclusion challenging teachers and schools alike.

Key words: Britain, education, challenge, language, curriculum, inclusion, IT

National curriculum

The National Curriculum is organized on the basis of four Key Stages. For each subject and for each key stage, programmes of study set out what pupils should be taught, and provide the basis for planning schemes of work. When planning, schools also have to consider the four general teaching requirements that apply across the programmes of study. It is for schools to choose how they organize their school curriculum to include the programmes of study. Besides, attainment targets set out the expected standards of pupils' performance. Except in the case of citizenship, attainment targets consist of eight level descriptions of increasing difficulty, plus a description for exceptional performance above level 8. Each level description describes the types and range of performance that pupils working at that level should characteristically demonstrate. The level descriptions provide the basis for making judgements about pupils' performance at the end of key stages 1, 2 and 3. At Key Stage 4, national qualifications are the main means of assessing attainment in National Curriculum subjects.

In deciding on a pupil's level of attainment at the end of key stage 3, teachers judge which description best fits the pupil's performance. Arrangements for statutory assessment at the end of Key Stage 3 are set out in detail in GCA's annual booklets about assessment and reporting arrangements. Teachers' planning for schemes of work should start from the programmes of study and the needs and abilities of their pupils. Level descriptions can help to determine the degree of challenge and progression for work across each year of a key stage. Teachers are required to report annually to parents on pupils' progress. As far as modern foreign languages are concerned, the programme of study sets out what pupils should be taught in MFL at key stages 3 and 4 and provides the basis for planning schemes of work. When planning, schools should also consider the general teaching requirements for inclusion, use of language and use of information and communication technology that apply across the programme of study.

The knowledge, skills and understanding in the programme of study identify the aspects of MFL in which pupils make progress:

- ❖ acquiring knowledge and understanding of the target language
- ❖ developing language skills
- ❖ developing language-learning skills
- ❖ developing cultural awareness

These aspects of modern foreign languages are developed through communicating in the target language in a range of contexts and for a variety of purposes, as set out in *Breath of study*. Moreover, in MFL there are four attainment targets that are organized under the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The attainment targets for MFL sets out the “knowledge, skills and understanding that pupils of different abilities and maturities are expected to have by the end of each key stage’ as defined by the Education Act 1996 (section 353a). Each level description describes the types and range of performance that pupils working at the level should demonstrate. The level descriptions provide a basis on which to make judgements about pupils’ performance at the end of key stage 3. At Key stage 4, national qualifications are the main means of assessing attainment in MFL. Although MFL is not a statutory subject until key stage 3, the level descriptions for MFL are designed to enable the majority of pupils to make progress more rapidly through the lower levels. The expectation at the end of key stage 3 is therefore the same as for all other subjects.

The handbook for secondary teachers also set out in general terms how the National Curriculum can promote learning across the curriculum in a number of areas such as spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, key skills and thinking skills. Six skills areas - communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning and performance and problem solving - are described as key skills because they help learners to improve their learning and performance in education, work and life. These key skills are embedded in the National Curriculum and the teaching of MFL also promotes these skills in various ways. The National Curriculum for MFL provides a challenge for pupils and teachers alike. The emphasis on skills and processes in the programme of study requires teachers to look not just at how they teach but at how pupils learn. The entitlement of all pupils to a rich and stimulating experience using a variety of approaches and activities challenges teachers. The levels and statements of attainment require them to address questions of progression and differentiation across all four skills.

Consequently, teachers must re-evaluate their classroom practice in order to provide a wide range of appropriately targeted experiences for pupils. Various researches have been carried out to support teachers and pupils in responding to the challenge. Practical support and guidance can be found especially for the value of IT on education including special educational needs in various works (Watts, 1996; Brooks, 1997; Atkinson, 1992; McLagan, 1994; Vahid & Harwood & Brown, 1998; DfES, 2001; Lunt, 1990) and in miscellaneous periodicals (Lewis, 1999; Dickinson, 1996; Ainscow, 1993; Harris, 1995; Shearman, 2003; HMI, 1992; Manthorp, 1992; Grey, 1997; Waltham, 2001) The National Curriculum includes for the first time a detailed, overarching statement on inclusion. The new statement sets out three key principles for inclusion that are essential to developing a more inclusive curriculum. In planning and teaching the National Curriculum, teachers are required to have due regard to the following principles:

- ❖ Setting suitable learning challenges;
- ❖ responding to pupils’ diverse learning needs;
- ❖ overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils.

This statutory inclusion statement on providing effective learning opportunities for all pupils outlines how teachers can modify, as necessary, the National Curriculum programmes of study to provide all pupils with relevant and appropriate challenging work. Advice and help are given in *Setting suitable learning challenges* about the curriculum flexibility available and the action that teachers should take to ensure that all pupils are presented with learning opportunities relevant to their attainments to enable them to achieve positive outcomes. In *Responding to pupils’ diverse learning needs*, specific reference is made to the action necessary to ensure that all pupils are enabled to achieve, including boys and girls, pupils with special educational needs, pupils with disabilities, pupils from all social and cultural backgrounds, pupils of different ethnic groups including travelers, refugees and asylum seekers. In *Overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment*, specific reference is made to the provision that should be made to meet the individual requirements of pupils with special educational needs, pupils with disabilities and pupils for whom English is an additional language. Non-statutory information on inclusion that is specific to a subject is included in the subject booklets. All these principles on inclusion challenge teachers of modern foreign language as well as others in all other subjects.

Inclusion

Teachers must not forget that children present a rich and diverse range of strengths and needs and should be equally valued, whether or not they have special educational needs. There is, therefore, a very real purpose in education to draw out and develop the best in every child, and as each child differs in intellectual make-up, it follows that different provision must be made. Thus, all children should have access to facilities appropriate to their individual needs, whether or not this is carried out under the umbrella of an inclusive educational system. Increasing inclusive education within mainstream education is not a new process. It is simply new vocabulary for an old ideology, which is continually being tried, tested, evaluated and revised by government of the day.

As is the phrase 'special needs education', only emerging in the 1970s, it gradually made the older term 'special education' and everything associated with it seem outdated and inappropriate, just as it itself is now, appropriately for its time being superseded by the term 'inclusive education'. Remember 'remedial education', 'comprehensive education', 'special classes', 'special treatment', 'the whole school approach', 'integration' and 'differentiation?' (Dyson, 2001) Words and phrases come and go but the ideology lives on. Recently Mel Ainscow (2000) summed up the development of special education as an 'historical road', addressing the needs of those learners who remain marginalized by existing educational arrangements'. He reminds us what 19th century special educator argued for, and that they helped to develop provision for children and young people who were excluded from educational plans and how much later on, this provision was adopted by central governments and local authorities, while provision for children grew in mainstream schools. The very 'notions of integration' developed during the latter part of 20th century. So it can be argued the current emphasis on inclusive education is but another step along the 'historical road' of special education.

The field of special needs education is further complicated by ethical and political issues. It is all very admirable for Government to make broad statements - in the Education Green Paper 14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards - to develop a coherent, flexible phase of learning, which meets the needs of all young people and of the economy and society (DfES, 2002). Even world bodies and organizations have served to re-enforce such statements. In the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Salamanca World Statement on Special Needs Education 1994, it calls upon governments to adopt the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise. In the course booklet MBA in Education Management by distance learning, John O' Neill (1996) analyses the issue of managing special educational needs and refers to the crucial impact of Salamanca Declaration worldwide. The needs of individual children are paramount, but meeting a child's individual educational needs depends primarily on how these needs are interpreted, identified and assessed by all concerned including teachers, schools, outside agencies.

Herein lies the 'dilemma' that has plagued the 'historical road' in the field of special needs education. A field which has endeavoured to resolve this diversity of needs. Inclusion is most likely to be achieved when this diversity is wholly recognised and regarded positively. A child should have their individual needs identified promptly and there should be no delay in the educational provision, along with the appropriately qualified learning support. Specialist provision should be seen as an integral part of overall provision, aiming wherever possible to integrate children into the mainstream by successfully increasing and adapting the skills and resources available in mainstream schools. Inclusion must encompass teaching and a curriculum appropriate to the child's needs. Teachers should not be afraid of seeking advice from the designated teachers and outside agencies if they encounter problems. Although support and advisory work is one of the major component of the inclusive approach, there has been a somewhat limited discussion of what it may entail. There may be instances of conflict between support and mainstream teacher over lesson content, or teaching method and further concern over the preservation of professional autonomy. The research carried by Len Barton highlights the impact of National Curriculum and its provision:

Teachers felt they did not have enough time or resources to provide individual help and could not implement a more detailed and specialized approach to learning and other difficulties... Challenges to established practice and changes in resource allocation may conflict with the views and teaching approaches of some teachers (1998: p. 154-156).

Undoubtedly, a wider range of learning style requires as many different ways to access the curriculum as possible. Changes in recent years mean that nearly all teachers will have pupils with special needs in their classes. National Curriculum for MFL gives an indication of strategies and approaches that modern language teachers in mainstream class can use to help those children learn successfully. The task of teachers, schools and LEA is, as Ingrid Lunt states, to provide as supportive and flexible a learning environment as possible so that as many pupils as possible have full access to the full curriculum (1990, p. 7).

In a democratic society, we all understand and strongly believe that every citizen has equal rights as an individual and notwithstanding, this also includes the children we class as having special needs. It is how we propose to include and educate this group of learners that creates a critical 'dilemma' for governing bodies and teachers alike. A dilemma which is both ethical and political. By the very nature of classing this group of learner into a 'category' per se, we are already in danger of making them 'different' and yet, the whole ideology of 'inclusive education' fights to see them as having a 'commonality' with the majority of learners by offering them an education with mainstream. Today, we have a far more flexible attitude toward ability and how it can develop and we acknowledge the importance of other factors such as motivation and creativity when educating our pupils. This flexibility has, in part, come about due to the change in today's workforce.

Inclusion would have been an appropriate solution for the educational challenges of 19th century and early 20th century, even though educators did, indeed, argue for the de-marginalisation of excluded learners and helped develop provision for them. Times change and today the workforce needs to be better educated overall and more flexible and mobile. An inclusive education system is arguably the correct route to take in 21st century. However, is this out of a sense of ethical and moral duty of social and economic duty! The Government's 14-19 Green Paper clearly reflects its duty, as stated in its introductory statement:

Most people need to be better educated than ever before. To improve economic competitiveness and promote social justice, we need to develop the skills and talents of young people across the full range of abilities. Young people need to continue their education and training post-16, and must challenge to reach their full potential. That is as true for those who face significant barriers to learning as it is for natural high-flyers" (DfES, 2002).

On consulting the 14-19 Green Paper, not much is given to those "who face significant barriers to learning," but more is given to those who are "natural high-flyers." A pupil who has learning or behavioural difficulties and has problems accessing his education fully in school is probably what most people think of when they hear the term special educational needs. However, it is equally true that an able pupil, whose potential is either not recognised or developed, also has special needs in relation to his education. For instance, the more able pupils need extension work for use in class or more challenging work; teachers need to ensure that their needs are also catered for. The issue of differentiation is central to successful methodology. However, it is also enormously demanding, frustrating and exhausting (as well as being rewarding and satisfying) (Vahid *et Al*, 1998: pp. 41). Although, new measures will ensure that slower paces of learning will need to be offered in all schools and that recognition of achievements will be granted in new award schemes to reflect the socio-economic changes, which are required for today's workforce.

The sweeping changes that the Government now proposes for the educational system reflect a growing need to motivate disenchanted and disruptive learners by offering a flexible education which will broaden the skills acquired by all young people to improve their employability, bridge the gap identified by employers and overcome social exclusion(DfES, 2002). Here lies the key question – Is it social inclusion? Or merely educational inclusion? Or perhaps, they go hand in hand? The major part of the 14-19 Green Paper reads like a government mission of building a modern Britain based on economic success. It is true the document does indeed compare UK statistics with other European countries. This document like so many others is just another vain attempt by yet another government to improve its standing economically on the global stage. Thanks to the DfES Green Paper in 1997 on SEN within mainstream schools and the revised SEN Code of Practice in January 2002, some progress appears to have been made during this time on the "historical road" to inclusive education. The progress of inclusive education depends on various issues, some of which will, however, continue to be debated about for many years to come.

Firstly, both schools and LEAs are at different starting points in considering the issue of inclusion. Secondly, different factors bear on the scope for inclusion for those with different types of SEN, as issues of whether and how the needs of a child will be met in a mainstream school. For those with physical disabilities, improved access to and within the school buildings is fundamental. Pupils with mild or moderate learning difficulties or hearing impairments and some with severe and complex needs require appropriate qualified learning support. Thirdly, new technology needs to be taken into account as it can help improve access to the curriculum and strengthen a pupil's communication. The particular role of IT in supporting the language learning of children with special educational needs has been addressed in many books. They gave an indication of the potential effect of IT on education outcomes. Learners using IT seem to show increased motivation and enthusiasm for language learning. There are a variety of ways in which IT can enhance language learning and yet many language teachers are still unsure if they have the necessary skills to do IT.

It is hardly surprising then that a 1991 DES survey revealed that 65% of modern foreign language teachers said they felt they lacked confidence in using IT. In Heather McLean's recent article in the TES, we discover how new technology such as ICT is able to give pupils a means of artistic expression. Bob Overton has used his imagination to make the most of his ICT resources and unlocked doors for pupils. Describing his methodology, he says: this is all about using technology and what's in your head to get a child to express himself in whatever form of communication is necessary. The question is how to get that expression, in whatever form, out (McLean, 2003). Bob Overton's methodology is providing opportunities for children to achieve effective learning, while at the same time equipping them for the modern age with the necessary new technology. Taking these issues into account, during the course of the last decade there have been and still are, throughout the country, initiatives to promote inclusive education by providing effective learning opportunities for all pupils whether it be within mainstream or within special schools.

Inclusive education initiatives do not have to take place in a mainstream environment. On the contrary, new learning techniques are being pioneered within special schools such as Ash Field School, which provide opportunities for effective learning that would not otherwise be available within mainstream schools. On the other hand, with the appropriate learning support, many pupils are also thriving in a mainstream school setting while at the same time enriching the whole school community. Crown Hills Community College in Leicester has its own Hearing Impaired Unit and resource base, staffed by specialists. The field of technology is continually moving on and it is important that teachers are kept informed of the new developments which might enhance learning. Crown Hills aims to integrate hearing impaired students into the mainstream school setting and currently many of the lessons are successfully conducted using Sound System technology between both pupil and teacher or between the whole class and the teacher. A central role for teachers is to facilitate linguistic development in these children. This is done through the teaching programmes they provide or their advisory work with others, such as class teacher and parents.

Supportive teaching environment are often characterized by opportunities for child involvement, initiative, activities which are dependent upon the individual child's needs and interests rather than teacher's. Hearing-impaired pupils also need to hear and/ or see plenty of meaningful language. It is important that language is concrete and relevant. It is also important to explore every avenue that can help the pupil to make sense of language; this might involve visual clues, gestures and plenty of examples to illustrate the point. The fostering of linguistic skills in hearing impairment, as NCET states, is a crucial part of the teacher's role. This is because of what language does, not because of what language is (NCET, 1993: p.5). The Hearing Impaired Unit serves a catchment area wider than that of the College and admissions to the Unit are determined by the LEA, where specific lessons on literacy and numeracy are given either one to one or in small groups by a team of specialists in the teaching of hearing-impaired children. The DfES 1997 Green Paper: *Excellence for all Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs* clearly identified the inclusive approach: the ultimate purpose of SEN provision is to enable young children to flourish in adult life. However, the government believes that there are therefore, strong educational, as well as social and moral, grounds for educating a child with their peers. We aim to increase the level and quality of inclusion in mainstream schools (DfES, 1997).

There continues to be a variety of views on where individual children with SEN might best prosper. The Government, in its 1997 Green Paper, does indeed recognise wholeheartedly the specialist support and does envisage a new role for special schools in its path to inclusion. (B) Whilst there are many examples of less formal arrangements of co-operation between special and mainstream schools since the government's statement in the DfES 1997 Green Paper, evidence which demonstrates how this has worked, its effectiveness and the conditions required to encourage successful partnerships is somewhat limited. In North Staffordshire partnerships between Horton Lodge Community special school and a number of local schools has been in place for many years (Question, 2002), as has collaboration arrangements between Ellesmere College special school and many of the Leicester city schools. Horton Lodge has given a commitment to supporting staff in mainstream and has established procedures, which have allowed for successful inclusion to take place. Teachers from Horton College have carefully monitored pupils who have transferred from the special school to a mainstream setting and mainstream teachers are provided with a regular supportive specialist contact.

Ellesmere College has also established successful links with many of the mainstream schools in Leicester city LEA. In particular, offering Post-16 students with less complex learning difficulties, the opportunities to undertake vocational GNVQ courses in a mainstream setting, while at the same time providing the expertise, advice and support to the mainstream schools. Contact with the local business community has also enabled several Post-16 students to carry out limited work experience supported by the specialist advice received from the school itself. Initiatives like these are student specific and every student needs to be considered on an individual basis. Collaboration between mainstream schools and specialist schools is definitely a positive way forward towards greater inclusion. Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that there are many different children for inclusion, and that they will all need specific strategies in order to be included. Until more research is undertaken on the most appropriate models of dealing with SEN in the context of a modern multi-activity classroom, until mainstream schools then review and adapt their approaches to these models and until adequate and appropriate training is given to existing staff, then and only then can the field of Special Educational Needs achieve greater inclusion.

Conclusion

At this point, and by way of conclusion, this essay is an attempt at a descriptive and reflective enquiry, but the analysis in such a brief space certainly requires considerable compression and omission. The synthesis of my reading, observation and practice indicate the background to the National Curriculum and the challenge it poses to teachers.

National curriculum and its provision pose various challenges to teachers especially those having children with special needs in their class. The issue of inclusion was, therefore, explored in some depth.

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