

THE CHALLENGE OF ENGLISH IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

EDITED BY

ROBERT PROTHEROUGH
AND PETER KING



The Challenge of English in the National Curriculum

The introduction of a national curriculum for English has been problematic. While there may be fairly widespread agreement about the principle of establishing a written curriculum for English, the nature of this document has caused much controversy, with many people sharing the belief that such a curriculum must be constantly evolving to meet the particular needs of different schools and teachers.

This book considers how particular aspects of a national curriculum can be reconciled with the best practice of the English teaching tradition. It has been written by teachers working within the present context, but who look at the lessons of the past as well as hopes for the future. The chapter topics originate from questions raised by teachers at in-service workshops as the issues which concern them most, and cover the majority of significant aspects of English within the new revised National Curriculum. They tackle issues in speaking and listening, reading, pre-twentieth century literature, writing, assessment, grammar, the use of IT, and drama and media. Contributions range from John Johnson's survey of practical ways to raise the standard of oracy to Nick Peim's suggestions for coping with Key Stage 4, which leads him to a radical questioning of the whole nature of English as a curriculum subject.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Whose curriculum?

Robert Protherough and Peter King

WHOSE CURRICULUM AND WHOSE ENGLISH?

A fairy story. Once upon a time in the Land of Ing the people all did things in their own way, and they argued all the time about which way was best. The Good Fairy got so tired of all their squabbles that she waved her wand and up popped a Magic Curriculum. 'That's the way to do it', said the Good Fairy. 'Hurrah!' shouted the people. So then they all did things the way the Magic Curriculum said, and they all lived happily ever after. The end.

Well, it *was* a fairy story, wasn't it? The imposing style in which a 'national' curriculum was launched may have led some teachers to expect an authoritative and almost permanent statement of principles and practice that all teachers could happily follow. If so, then recent events have shown how misguided they were. It is now impossible to talk of *the* National Curriculum as something definitive. Within five years, four irreconcilable versions of *a* National Curriculum for English have been promulgated (together with an additional variant for Wales) and five committees or working parties have been charged with drafting or revising these documents without ever reaching consensus. The 'revised' Order of 1993 was far more than a revision of Cox's; it was actually grounded in a quite different philosophy from his and embodied different views of what talking, reading and writing actually mean. It is plain, therefore, that even if there may be general agreement about the principle of establishing a written curriculum for English, such a text will have to be tentative, continually changing and evolving, and will have to be adapted to meet the particular needs of different schools and teachers. Those of us who have prepared policy documents and schemes of work (even, in the old days, 'syllabuses') for English departments know that they were always out of date by the time an agreed version was written down, that they were constantly needing to be revised. If we waited until the work on the National Curriculum was 'complete', then we would wait for ever.

As is argued in chapter 3, we cannot now read any document like *English in the National Curriculum* (DES/WO, 1990) as an innocent set of pedagogic guidelines. There are three main reasons for this. First, notions of 'English' and of language have been given a heavy ideological weight. Conflicting social, economic and political forces all make claims on what should count as literacy and how it is to be acquired, and have increasingly dictated the terms in which that debate is carried on. As a subject English has provided the clearest site on which opposing views within the education debate of the last decade could draw up their battle lines. It was the political débâcle over imposed testing arrangements for English in late spring 1993 that brought in support from unions, head teachers, parents and many outsiders concerned for education. The revolt soon became unstoppable and led first to a national boycott of the tests and ultimately to the setting up of the Dearing Review of the National Curriculum and its assessment as a face-saving device for the embattled Secretary of State for Education.

Second, attempts to define and to control what goes on in English have increasingly plainly been seen as attacks on teachers' professionalism. Because English lessons consist of talking, reading and writing, then any attempt to legislate for these activities has a more profound effect on what teachers actually do in the classroom than curriculum proposals do in any other subject area. It has to be understood that the protests of English teachers have been less about the obvious overloading of their time than about the sustained governmental assault on their professionalism, the denigrating of experience and research evidence.

Third, proposals for the curriculum now have to be seen as statements about the resourcing of education. Teachers have detected a shift in balance away from the English classroom, not only in direct governmental intervention, but also in the indirect pressures on school cultures: the greater power of school management, the control of budgets and of in-service provision, the perceived need to 'compete' – all tending to define objectives, policy, resourcing from outside the English department, and thus reducing still further the autonomy of teachers. The unsteady structure of attainment targets, league tables, teacher appraisal, 'parental choice' of opted-out schools, links teaching and the curriculum to the funding of schools and the salaries of teachers.

From the English teacher's viewpoint, therefore, these years of attempting to understand and implement an ever-shifting curriculum and assessment system have been years of chaos, frustration and anger. Much of that frustration has been caused by trying to argue educational principles against individuals and bodies who are working solely to a political agenda. For example, there were the serious disagreements with SEAC and the DfE over the principles on which the testing system was built. Teachers argued that the national tests were ill-conceived with no

proven evidence of their reliability or validity, but they were confronting a political agenda of forcing simplistic accountability on schools through national league tables. Their concern at being increasingly reduced to operatives who delivered someone else's curriculum was brought into sharp focus by the NCC Review, instigated by the Secretary of State in late 1992. Many teachers objected to the way in which political pressure groups were being encouraged in their attempts to hijack the curriculum in ways which denied the practical good sense of teachers and which pushed aside the principles on which the original Cox committee's report had sought to establish agreement ('enabling rather than restricting', 'starting point not a straitjacket'). The members of the review team, experienced in teaching English, were not free agents; they were overseen by a Review Group 'which guided the detailed work from a policy perspective'. Although other teachers were 'consulted' by the NCC, it is no secret that any advice they gave that conflicted with the official stance was ignored and not even reported. Similarly, in the Dearing Review process the advice of the English working group on some points was simply overruled by the SCAA committee. Political and administrative considerations have been allowed to dominate educational and professional ones.

The experiences of recent years have therefore made teachers healthily sceptical about centralised policies for English, and they find themselves oddly aligned with the one-time DES spokesman Michael Fallon, who says that 'a prescriptive curriculum is a nonsense in a free society'. Even more oddly, they find that Sheila Lawlor pins the blame for the National Curriculum not on the government but on them. It is, she writes, 'the organ for enforcing an educational consensus on all' and has been 'systematically imposed on the content and method of teaching by the regiments of the education "service": teacher trainers, inspectors, education officials and theorists, exam boards and teachers' (*The Observer*, 20 February 1994). It is a strange contortion of events to see teachers imposing a prescriptive curriculum on the country rather than the other way round!

This introduction was written at a time when the Dearing Review put on temporary hold the process of ceaseless change, and therefore offered a suitable time to consider what a curriculum for English might be like.

The sections that follow suggest why English has traditionally been a focus for controversy, place current disputes in a wider context, consider how the curricular debate has posed a threat to professionalism, and finally look ahead to encourage English teachers to reassert the values in which they believe.

WHY ENGLISH IS CONTROVERSIAL

There are good reasons that controversy has particularly centred on the

form and place of English in the National Curriculum and that the 1993 boycott of testing was largely driven by objections to the form of the English tests.

The reasons are inherent in the nature of the subject and its teaching, and five significant points can be briefly outlined.

- First, English is contentious because of the importance generally attached to the subject and related concepts of 'Englishness'. This is not simply because it is seen as 'central' and 'indispensable' in the curriculum, 'the only basis possible for a national education' (as the Newbolt Report put it in 1921), affecting the learning that goes on in all areas and offering essential preparation for adult working life. Arguments about how children should speak and write, what they should read, or what knowledge of language they should have, are really arguments about how education should shape young people's views of the world. Controlling English is seen as one way of controlling society. Professor Cox has rightly said that 'a National Curriculum in English is intimately involved with questions about our national identity, indeed with the whole future ethos of British society. The teaching of English . . . affects the individual and social identity of us all' (Cox, 1990, p. 2). Some groups who share this belief wish to impose a curriculum or methodology that will force particular values down the throats of students or their teachers (as is illustrated in chapter 4 among others). Such a wish is blind to the fact that English resists being used in such a doctrinaire way, because the shared language that we all speak is essentially uncontrollable, as are our reactions to what we read. 'The work of English teaching involves continual pressing for the expression of alternative ideas, inviting challenge to received opinions, seeking strong personal responses, establishing debate' (Protherough and Atkinson, 1991, p. 15).
- Second, what we conventionally call 'English' is controversial because of the continuing debate about just what the subject really is (this is taken further in chapter 11). Many studies have pointed to its 'unique' or 'special' nature, and it is particularly difficult to tie down neatly on paper a subject where there is no real consensus about its content and boundaries. In recent years, direct and indirect pressures have brought about changes in the definition of the subject, its principles and practice, and the shape of its curriculum. Most immediately, English has been reshaped by developments within the profession. These have included teachers' reactions to educational development and research and the dissemination of new classroom approaches through professional organisations like NATE. Teachers have reacted in different ways to the widening of such concepts as 'text' or 'literature' and to the shifting boundaries between their subject and Drama and Media (or

Cultural) Studies (a topic addressed in chapter 10 of this volume). The Cox Report pointed out that there are at least five distinct models of 'English', each with its own particular emphasis, that currently animate the work of different teachers. There are particular difficulties in balancing the different contributions that English is expected to make to so many 'areas of experience' in the curriculum. English draws its theoretical support from a whole range of disciplines, the social sciences and sciences like linguistics as well as humanities and the arts; it is concerned with the personal and subjective as well as the objective. It is therefore particularly hard to fit such a subject into any generalised view of the curriculum that treats all subjects as alike, as though all can equally be defined in terms of behavioural objectives, ten-level sequential development and skills that can be neatly defined and tested.

- Third, English is contentious because of its particular openness and responsiveness to influences from society and its shifting educational goals. Policies for English have to be framed and evolve in changing local, national and global contexts. Shifting views of the function of education in general (the relative importance attached to preparation for work in a competitive economy, socialisation within a cultural heritage, or personal development and pleasure in learning) significantly affect the way that English is realised. It is a subject about which expectations are rightly high, and allegations of falling 'standards' in reading or inaccurate spelling can always make headlines in the popular press. In part this is because English is a subject about which everybody feels entitled to have an opinion, from the heir to the throne downwards, unlike Physics or German, say. So it is that, for example, in recent years English teachers have responded to the pressures from different groups to frame a curriculum more concerned for the rights and needs of ethnic minorities, to reshape conventional assumptions about gender, to offer the higher levels of functional literacy thought to be required in industrial societies, and to prepare students to exploit information technology (see chapter 9). Simultaneously, and overlapping these direct pressures for change in subject English, it has been influenced by the growing sense of world crisis, the communications explosion and wider social developments. English teachers, like others, feel themselves faced by greater questioning of their professionalism, demands for accountability in times of recession, more vocal concern for parental rights, the vision of education as a lifelong process. English lessons are increasingly grappling with broader issues like concern for the environment, nationalist conflicts, social mobility and unemployment, or the problems of juvenile crime. Any national policy for English has to be framed within the context of a particular society, culture and time, and must model those choices that may be possible within the material constraints of factors like budgets, buildings,

teacher supply, and student enrolment. It is manifestly difficult to create a coherent English policy within a culture that is itself socially divided, that lacks common values and that has no shared view of educational goals.

- Fourth, English is controversial because it calls into question conventional methods and criteria of assessment. It was no accident that English teachers were among the first and the strongest proponents of coursework assessment and were sceptical of the value of narrow skills-based testing. An English programme has many possible criteria for success, and it is extremely difficult to decide how far any of them have been met. If the aim is to produce individuals who are sensitive, articulate, responsive, imaginative, reflective language users, then when are they believed to have reached that point? When can the programme be said to have 'succeeded'? Teachers of language are by training equipped to be sceptical of those perennial slogans ('restoring the basic skills') consisting of resonant emotional metaphors that can be adapted to a range of meanings. Nobody can be against 'raising standards' or removing 'inequalities' in the name of 'social justice' or pressing for 'excellence'. All depends on the measures that are proposed to achieve these laudable aims. How precisely are their effects to be assessed? Attempts at monitoring can lead to an overemphasis on those goals that can be measured and those results or skills that can be tested as is argued in chapter 6.
- Fifth, English is controversial because of the distinct way in which its teachers see themselves and their work. This is not simply because by training they are likely to be articulate and prepared to look critically at proposals that affect them. From the time of the Newbolt Report onwards, English teachers have traditionally had a 'high' view of their role as concerned with changing lives rather than simply imparting knowledge. Effective English teachers see themselves as 'different' from teachers of other subjects, marked by a distinct personal relationship with their subject and their students. In a recent survey, over half believed that they worked in the classroom in ways that marked them off from others. In considering potential entrants to the profession 80 per cent of them saw qualities of personality and attitude as the dominant qualifications. It is also significant that the most important influence on their development as teachers was seen as other English teachers (rather than their studies, advisers or professional tutors) which – together with a high ranking for professional associations – suggests the importance they attached to a co-operative learning community and a sense of group solidarity (Protherough and Atkinson, 1991, chapters 1 and 2). As will be suggested in following sections, the evolution of an English curriculum and its associated methodology had until recently taken place within that community.

The enquiry cited in Protherough and Atkinson (1991) found that the successful teachers surveyed, although very different in background and educational experience, described changes in their own practice in very similar terms that embodied the implicit values of that particular cultural group. Although they were well aware of the need for English programmes to have what they called 'structure', 'coherence' and 'sequence', what they valued for themselves was the 'freedom', 'variety', 'range' and 'diversity' available to English teachers. It is not surprising, then, that when asked what the most urgent problems were that faced English teachers, the most frequent response was to mention the coming of the National Curriculum, seen in terms of 'imposed' models and 'interference' with teachers' autonomy (Protherough and Atkinson, 1991, chapter 9).

THE CONTEXT OF POLICY FRAMING IN ENGLISH

The short history of English as a subject is largely the story of successive attempts at particular moments to give some form to an ever-changing stream of ideas about how the subject is to be learned and taught. Such policies, of which models for the curriculum form a part, always look in two directions: diagnosing on the basis of the past and prescribing for an uncertain future. For implementation they depend on a degree of accord between policy-makers, administrators, teachers and society as a whole (and, of course, policies for English are ultimately inseparable from policies for other subjects and for education generally).

The continuing consultations and reviews of the curriculum have always posed a number of questions. First, what is to be the balance between centralised and regional or local decision-making? There has always been a 'triangle of tension' between central government, local administration and individual schools and colleges. Second, whose voices should be heard in framing a policy and which should be dominant? Third, what is the relationship between the formulation of policy and its actual implementation, and how will that be monitored? Fourth, what is to be the balance between professional approaches to the framing of policy, concentrating on input (the style and quality of teaching; the motivation, skills and training of English teachers) and the bureaucratic, emphasising output (assessing the efficiency of the system by testing, norm-referencing and benchmarks)? Our argument is that the answers given to these questions since the 1980s have been radically different from those offered at any earlier time, and that this change underlies the present discontent.

Over eighty years ago, the Board of Education's first major official report on *The Teaching of English in Secondary Schools* (Board of Education, 1910) admirably established a tradition for defining the principles of a

curricular policy for English. Among the forward-looking suggestions were the (then revolutionary) ideas that literature and composition are 'organically interrelated', that children should be encouraged to talk to one another in class, that English should be studied as a living language without too much attention to grammar, that Literature must be based on 'first hand study', that Shakespeare's plays should be read through rapidly and practically without comment, that surface errors in writing are less important than failings of style and structure, that revision of writing should be encouraged, and that teachers must not allow themselves to be dominated by the supposed requirements of external examinations.

At the same time, the third paragraph made a significant disclaimer, in saying that the report:

does not profess to frame a syllabus of instruction or to prescribe in detail the methods by which teachers should proceed. Any such attempt would be useless, if not actually harmful, for several reasons. In the first place, English is the last subject in which a teacher should be bound by hard and fast rules. No subject gives more scope for individuality of treatment or for varied experiment; in none is the personal quality of the teacher more important. In the second place, schools themselves differ materially from one another [and] these differences must be met by corresponding varieties of method. . . . *In this diversity of conditions, no external authority can or ought to offer detailed guidance. General principles must be translated into practice by the teacher.* [Our italics]

A tacit convention was thus established between teachers on one side and those on the other side with statutory duties to ensure effective schooling, nationally or regionally, that there would be continuing discussion and consultation about principles, but that for a variety of reasons there would be no central prescription of curriculum or methodology. For many years, the education ministers of different parties generally acted in an 'arm's-length' way upon professional advice, essentially rubber-stamping the decisions put forward by the DES and HML. The post-war years of educational expansions were repeatedly described as a time of partnership and consensus. It was ironical that the partnership ended in the 1980s just at the time when increased public expectations of the system should have strengthened it. The failure to achieve professional consensus about policy within English teaching was accompanied by a wider failure to convince those outside the profession, that thus opened the way for more direct political intervention. This is generally dated from the speech of James Callaghan at Ruskin College, Oxford, in October 1976, initiating the so-called 'great debate' over education policy.

A string of policy papers from the Department of Education and Science, Her Majesty's Inspectors and subject associations centred on the future form of the curriculum. The repeated theme was the need for a curri-

culum that would be broad, balanced and coherent, and that would provide greater continuity across the different phases of education to the age of 16. Among the different subject papers published by HMI, *English for Ages 5 to 16* (DES, 1984) was unique in producing such massive and vigorous reactions that it had to be followed swiftly by another entitled *English for Ages 5 to 16: The Responses* (DES, 1986). The original document defined the aims of English teaching in terms of 'achieving competence in the many and varied uses of our language', briefly applied this to speech, reading and writing, and added 'a fourth aim which applies over all the modes of language . . . to teach pupils *about* language'. The bulk of the pamphlet was given over to defining objectives that pupils of 7, 11 and 16 'should' know or be able to do (sixty of them at age 16), and detailing some principles of assessment that occupied about a third of the whole. The many critics attacked the functional emphasis, especially in 'knowledge about language', and the comparative disregard for literary studies, for media studies or for cultural diversity. The proposed statements of essentially behavioural objectives, according to the *Responses* paper, 'evoked widespread disfavour especially from the profession', and there was 'clear professional dissent from the notion of periodic testing'. The debate brought into the open the wide divisions in society over the formulation of policies for English. Whereas only a quarter of the responses from schools and colleges broadly approved of the report, three-quarters of the letters from the public were unreserved in their approval of it. Kenneth Baker and others were to cite such instances in order to claim that there was public concern over the teaching of English and that the subject was too important to be left to the professionals.

THE POLITICISING OF ENGLISH TEACHING

In the 1980s Sir Keith Joseph started to use the powers formally vested in him as Secretary of State to curtail discussion with professional groups and to formulate policy directly through legislation. Although he said that the Curriculum Matters series was intended to initiate a 'consultative process', he made plain in his introduction to the English volume that 'the development of agreed national objectives for English teaching is . . . a particularly important part of the Government's policies for raising standards in schools'. It was his successor as Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker, who eventually used the powers of his office to make those 'agreed national objectives' mandatory, within the framework of the 1988 Education Act. In keeping with the market ideology of the government, that Act claimed to be devolving power from the 'producers' (teachers, local authorities, advisers and what were called disparagingly 'educationalists') towards the 'customers' (assumed without debate to be the parents of school children). Strangely, however, the

customers were given no say about control of the National Curriculum, which was firmly centralised in the hands of the DES and the Secretary of State for Education. Indeed, perhaps the strangest aspect of the speedy introduction of the National Curriculum (and the continuing series of changes and modifications that have followed) was the lack of any significant rationale for the form it took, either in principle or in research evidence.

This is just one dramatic example of the recent deliberate redefinition of the traditional balance between autonomy, power and accountability in education in the English-speaking world. Both in the United States and in Australia there have been determined attempts to introduce explicit national (federal) curricula and modes of assessment against regional and professional opposition. In the 1980s such an overtly political wish to formulate or revise policies was driven by economic pressures, by cultural malaise and by growing suspicion of the professionalism of those involved in education. There was much negative media publicity throughout the English-speaking world suggesting that many schools and Higher Education institutions failed to give value for money, were not sufficiently accountable, and were underproductive. Such critical judgements of the past have not yet been accompanied by any coherent new policies for English, largely because of deep ambiguities within conservative thinking. There is a major tension between those committed to freedom of choice, individual rights and market forces and those pressing for strong authoritarian government, discipline and hierarchy. Detailed control of the English curriculum is clearly not compatible with the desire to provide greater variety and choice in education. So Michael Fallon, who was Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the DES 1990–2, during the establishment of the National Curriculum, could write in 1993 that 'It is time that the curriculum was handed back where it belongs – to the teachers' (*Independent on Sunday*, 21 November 1993).

Until quite recently, schools and universities in the UK thought of their educational role as lacking any real political dimension, and certainly as being outside the field of party politics. Administrative responsibility for education lay (in broad terms) with the government, but policy was implemented through the University Grants Committee (for universities) and through local authorities (for schools). The power of such intermediaries has now been seriously curtailed and placed in the hands of 'advisory' committees, hand-picked by the Secretary of State to ensure that only one viewpoint is ultimately heard. It is deeply destructive of morale when legislative changes in education (as in other public institutions like health, law and transport) can be forced through with no real discussion by whoever commands a majority in the House of Commons. The power of government to suppress dissent, if not to command agreement, has been seen in the way that policy is now being shaped.

Such political shaping has been clearly illustrated by successive attempts to replace Cox's original formulation of the English curriculum. Whatever weaknesses that document may have had, it had increasingly gained favour among teachers because it had built upon two decades of good practice in English teaching. It was acknowledged that there were three particular strengths in the Cox curriculum:

- 1 It was based upon the principle that language development combined the modes of speaking, reading and writing in equal measure and that development in any individual mode required the learner to understand through practice the relationship between language choice, purpose and audience. This made it a learner-centred curriculum which encouraged the development of a wide language repertoire for all pupils.
- 2 By preserving many of the fruits of English teachers' professional experience, it made it possible (in principle, at least) for the best practice of recent years to be maintained. It was compatible with those models of teaching – heavily supported by reflective English teachers – described in terms of the personal growth of the learner and cultural analysis of the uses of language.
- 3 Drama, media studies, information technology and knowledge about language were seen as integral to the main concerns of an English curriculum.

It must be added that when the Cox curriculum was translated into the mandatory Order of 1990 it also created many difficulties for teachers and implied some questionable practices (notably associated with the attempt to map language development to criteria for age-related levels of attainment which could not adequately be divided into those separate strands of achievement which the statements of attainment sought to describe). However, it was primarily the weaknesses in the practical implementation and assessment of the curriculum which caused major problems for schools. These were difficulties that had been foreseen by teachers in their responses to the consultative document but were ignored by the authorities in their rush to comply with government policy. Despite the increasingly fraught bureaucratic demands being made on them, teachers worked hard to implement the Cox curriculum, using their professional judgement to adapt, improve and redefine it where this seemed necessary. Research evidence from a study based at Warwick University and reports from English teaching associations suggested that early improvements were being seen (including increased teaching of 'great books' and 'more structured approaches to literacy', according to the *Times Educational Supplement*, 5 November 1993).

The increasing popularity of Cox within the profession ('left-wing extremists' and 'trendy educationists' according to the popular press)

was itself seen in some political circles as a sign that the curriculum must be flawed ('English report fails the test', 'Thatcher furious with trendy experts'). The Centre for Policy Studies, the influential right-wing think-tank, had argued from 1988 onwards that the English curriculum was far too liberal in its conception of the subject. Its members joined with a strange mixture of others (proponents of phonics and graded readers, opponents of coursework assessment, pressure groups for streaming and selection) to claim that standards of literacy were falling, and to press for a revision that would be more in keeping with their views. The National Curriculum Council had a number of government appointees on its English panel who were highly sympathetic to this case and who were instrumental in recommending that a review should be undertaken. After the general election of 1992, the new Secretary of State for Education, John Patten, ignored the evidence in favour of Cox and called on the NCC to submit a formal review.

By a masterpiece of timing, the proposals for 'reforming' and 'improving' the curriculum were published in April 1993, just when the SATs boycott was gathering widespread support. They were greeted by overwhelming hostility within the profession and were swiftly followed by the resignation of a number of those associated with its production. There is little point in cataloguing the weaknesses of the 1993 proposals, but teachers were infuriated by a mechanistic emphasis on separate 'skills', a stress on word identification rather than meaning-making in early reading, the elimination of 'knowledge about language', a prescriptive reading curriculum, a heavy emphasis on Standard English, and the downgrading of drama and media studies. The consultation process recorded widespread alarm at the blatant narrowing of what was meant by 'English'. Antagonism was only defused by the disappearance of the NCC, the establishment of the Dearing Review, the withdrawal of assessment arrangements and the setting up of an English working party with an adequate representation of teachers.

LOOKING AHEAD

What, if anything, have we learned from the past? English teachers have a robust tradition of contesting the nature of their own subject. The existence of several models of the subject as outlined in the opening chapter of the Cox Report only serves to underline this tradition. Indeed, that report gained much of its acceptance from the fact that it acknowledged the strengths of each model and attempted to create a curriculum which was 'broad church'. The work of influential individuals such as David Holbrook in the 1960s, James Britton and John Dixon in the 1970s, Andrew Wilkinson in the early 1980s, or of group projects like the Development of Writing Abilities, or the Oracy Project, or Language in

the National Curriculum, serve to show the constant re-examination of the content and processes of the curriculum which has been carried out by teachers themselves.

English teachers as a body have never been opposed to the concept of a national curriculum. Indeed, much of the work of influential teachers in the 1980s such as David Jackson in his book *Continuity in English Teaching* (Jackson, 1983) argued for some form of coherence, balance and continuity across the full age range which would support the idea of entitlement for all pupils. However, National Curriculum documents, prescriptions and suggestions must be treated like any other professional advice and be judged by teachers who use their daily practice and experience as the chief yardstick of evaluation. The challenge is to reappraise what we already have, continually questioning our principles, policy and practice. As recent history (briefly sketched in this introduction) indicates, if we teachers do not do this, then the politicians will be only too happy to step in and do the redefining for us.

The quest for agreement over the curriculum has been bedevilled by the belief of politicians that there are simple answers to the complex problems of English teaching. Simplistic notions about English are particularly dangerous when they are used to influence the curriculum and assessment of schools. In contrast to the modish denigrating of professional opinion and research, we wish to insist that any policy should be grounded in experience and in evidence. The frank admissions of uncertainty in Cox's English Order were infinitely preferable to what was called in the 1993 version 'a clear definition of basic skills' but one which rested on shaky assumptions and ignored so much that we do know about talking, reading and writing. The quest for greater coherence does not necessarily imply a curriculum model that seeks to define what language features 'all' students at a given stage should know or be able to deploy. Simplistic ideas are still more dangerous when underpinning programmes of testing. The DfE has run an expensive advertising campaign to suggest to parents that National Curriculum testing will give them important information about their children's progress. In fact, though, teachers report that it gives little or no help in defining ability in writing, in assessing pupils or in diagnosing their needs. Testing is a highly political act. What precisely is to be tested, how, in what way, and for what audience and purpose? The people who are in a position to answer these questions – whether politicians, administrators, assessment specialists, theorists or teachers – exercise power over others. The two-year study at Warwick University suggests that it is national testing rather than the National Curriculum that has caused teachers to change their English teaching methods, not necessarily for the better. The report reflects the worries of teachers that, for example, children have been writing less and in shorter sentences because of the pressures of testing at 7. The notion