

# English

## A conversation with Lekha Sharma

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At the end of Year 6 I expect my pupils to have a love of reading and writing and in turn for them to be avid readers and writers. I want them to know that reading and writing are both different sides of the same coin. Then they need to know the technical stuff that underpins reading and writing. This could be at a text level, at a sentence level and the fundamentals at word level. That journey starts in the Foundation years and continues into Year 6. By Year 6 I expect my pupils to have a toolkit of writing techniques, strategies, and skills to be able to have established their own writing style and writing voice.

There are different elements of the English curriculum: reading, writing, and speaking and listening. It's important to develop these as distinct skills because they are reliant and dependent on each other. I think we underestimate what our pupils have the capacity to achieve in English and I believe we need to show them texts beyond their comfort zone so they can see examples of beautiful, rich texts.

This means that pupils can see what's possible and aim for that in their own work.

I think individual schools could create a literature spine that is bespoke to their setting. For one context that might be Year 6 studying *The Hobbit*. However, that text might not be suitable for another context. In our school, we discussed as a staff to consider the texts in our literature spine. We wanted to see how representative, diverse, and challenging they are. An example is *Goodnight Mister Tom* which we taught in Year 6. This was in a school in East Croydon, and it meant there was an opportunity to consider the impact of World War II on the local area. This provided an opportunity to explore local history and for pupils to share stories of their grandparents' experiences of the war. We found that this work was reflected in the quality of pupils' writing.

A literature spine in the primary curriculum consists of the core texts that are taught each half-term. The core texts connect the different areas of the curriculum. For example, in Autumn 1 in Year 2 we teach *George's Marvellous Medicine* by Roald Dahl. That is also the half-term where we're exploring acts of kindness and how people within history have stood up for their beliefs. Another example is *I am Rosa Parks* by Brad Meltzer, which supports learning about the civil rights movement in history lessons. The purpose of a literature spine is to be the glue that holds elements of the curriculum together. Pupils study the book in their reading lessons, and they use it as a stimulus in their writing lessons. These texts also help to develop cultural capital and provide background knowledge around other subjects.

We organised CPD to support colleagues and agree on the books to be taught. The first session was held in a bookshop, where we went to look at the texts, to talk about how challenging they were, and whether they supported different parts of the curriculum. Over the course of a term, we distilled them down to include them in the literature spine. This work was done in collaboration with the leads for reading, writing and subject co-ordinators.

This is an ongoing process because, for example, in Autumn 2 we might get feedback from teachers saying that it might not be the right book for this stage of the year. It involves discussions with colleagues across the year and an annual curriculum review when we come together and ask teachers to annotate the plans. This means

that we can reverse engineer and really unpick what made great units of study.

In terms of pupils' progress in grammar, it's helpful to refer to Jerome Bruner's *The Spiral Curriculum*, because we need to continually revisit the word level, sentence level and the text level elements for each year group. It is important to embed grammar teaching through really precise modelling and to front-load grammar and syntax at the start of the year. I believe that if my pupils are secure in the technical fundamentals of writing, that's when we can build great composition in their own work. I want my pupils in Year 6, by the end of the Autumn term, to be fluent with the terminology of grammar, so they can talk about different sentence structures, subordinating conjunctions, apostrophes for possession, for example. This means that in the spring term we can use that terminology to have in-depth discussions about why we're using a multi-clause sentence.

I think the most powerful time to unpick the grammar is when we model the writing of the text at sentence level. Pupils need to hear us think out loud, to verbalise the complex processes that are going on in one's head when we're writing. For example, 'I'm going to write a sentence which means I need to start with a capital letter.' Even in Year 6, this is important. In science, for example, when pupils are learning about space, we introduce the knowledge before starting the writing. We plan backwards with the pupils from the end point and consider what is needed at a word and sentence level, to write a strong piece. We provide pupils with scaffolds to support their writing. Then we draft and redraft the different components of the text. We teach explicitly the skill of editing to improve writing. We try and mirror the process used by a writer working towards a final published piece. Pupils produce a double-page spread in their books. This enables them and their teacher to see the whole writing process. Then we sometimes create a physical book or find a way to present their work to their parents.

To finish, I find Andy Tharby's *Making Every English Lesson Count*<sup>1</sup> very helpful in summarising this approach. 'The text that a pupil reads

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1 Tharby, A. (2017) *Making every English lesson count*. Wales: Crown House Publishing. [https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1785831798/ref=cm\\_sw\\_r\\_tw\\_dp\\_W6A2BWVKHKA3C2PWZYPN](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1785831798/ref=cm_sw_r_tw_dp_W6A2BWVKHKA3C2PWZYPN)

should be culturally, linguistically and conceptionally rich. They should be immersed in imaginative and academic language and should be encouraged to write with ambition and accuracy. However, it is unlikely that they will become an excellent reader or writer by magic. The pupil needs their teacher to explain and model these highly complex processes with clarity and precision.'

### **English: background**

To help us get our bearings, it is worth quoting the purpose of the English programme of study from the national curriculum:

'English has a pre-eminent place in education and in society. A high-quality education in English will teach pupils to speak and write fluently so that they can communicate their ideas and emotions to others, and through their reading and listening, others can communicate with them. Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development. Reading also enables pupils both to acquire knowledge and to build on what they already know. All the skills of language are essential to participating fully as a member of society; pupils who do not learn to speak, read and write fluently and confidently are effectively disenfranchised.'<sup>2</sup>

Once the importance statements have been revisited, it is helpful for subject leaders and co-ordinators to discuss and agree with colleagues the reason why their subject, in this case English, is important for the pupils in their school. One way of doing this is to draw on a quote, in this case from James Earl Jones: 'When I read great literature, great drama, speeches, or sermons, I feel that the human mind has not achieved anything greater than the ability to share feelings and thoughts through language.' This kind of prompt allows us to formulate our way of stating

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2 Department for Education. (2014) *National curriculum in England: English programmes of study*. Available at: [www.bit.ly/3AvnG4U](http://www.bit.ly/3AvnG4U) (Accessed: 18 February 2022).

the importance of the subject. We might agree or disagree with such a statement and in doing so come to a form of words which expresses our view of the importance of this subject, in this school. This moves us away from the territory of 'we teach this subject because of the SATs or GCSEs'. While the external tests and exams are important, they are not the totality of the subject.

'The overarching aim for English in the national curriculum is to promote high standards of language and literacy by equipping pupils with a strong command of the spoken and written language, and to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment. The national curriculum for English aims to ensure that all pupils:

read easily, fluently and with good understanding; develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information; acquire a wide vocabulary, an understanding of grammar and knowledge of linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language; appreciate our rich and varied literary heritage; write clearly, accurately and coherently, adapting their language and style in and for a range of contexts, purposes and audiences; use discussion in order to learn; they should be able to elaborate and explain clearly their understanding and ideas; are competent in the arts of speaking and listening, making formal presentations, demonstrating to others and participating in debate.<sup>3</sup>

### **Professional communities**

Subject associations are important because at the heart of their work is curriculum thinking, development and resources. The subject association for English is the National Association for the Teaching of English<sup>4</sup> (NATE), and any member of staff with responsibility for a subject should be a member of the relevant subject association, and this should be paid for by the school.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> [www.nate.org.uk](http://www.nate.org.uk)

Twitter subject communities are important for the development of subject knowledge because there are lively debates about what to teach, how to teach and the kinds of resources that are helpful. For English, it is worth subscribing to Litdrive<sup>5</sup> and following NATE.<sup>6</sup>

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5 [www.litdrive.org.uk](http://www.litdrive.org.uk)  
6 [www.twitter.com/NATEfeed](https://www.twitter.com/NATEfeed)