

National Literacy Trust: Curriculum and Assessment Review Recommendations

Executive Summary

At the National Literacy Trust, our mission is to break down barriers to opportunity by raising literacy skills across the UK – focussing on the most disadvantaged areas. This is why we believe the following four pillars should be central to curriculum and assessment reform:

1. Reading for Pleasure

Despite the benefits of reading for pleasure including improved wellbeing, tolerance, social cohesion, confidence and academic attainment, our research shows 2 in 3 children and young people do not enjoy reading, with reading enjoyment at an all-time low. A lack of access to books is central to this. 1 in 8 children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not own a single book at home and 1 in 7 state primary schools lack libraries, rising to 1 in 4 in the most deprived areas. Our Libraries for Primaries campaign with Penguin Random House aims to ensure every UK state primary school has a library or reading space.

A lack of diversity in texts is also a barrier to engagement as our 2022 research found that 2 in 5 young people struggle to find relatable book characters, rising to 1 in 2 for ages 8-11.

Creating a culture of reading for pleasure enables children to build the skills they need to thrive in school and beyond – and stimulates growth, too. Our research with British Land shows that the power of reading for pleasure to improve grades, and the associated higher future salaries, could boost UK GDP by £4.6 billion per year over a generation.

We recommend: **1)** greater independent reading, **2)** the diversification of the curriculum, **3)** the facilitation of engaging literacy activities, **4)** data collection on school library provision and **5)** partnership working through Libraries for Primaries to boost access to books and libraries.

2. Disciplinary Literacy

Disciplinary literacy acknowledges that literacy should not be confined to English lessons. Students need to learn the relevant literacy skills for each subject.

This opens doors to future opportunities in the world of work. Economic productivity depends on a literate workforce, capable of driving innovation and growth. Yet, our research shows 9 in 10 businesses are concerned about young people's level of literacy skills in the workplace.

We recommend: qualifications that prioritise practical skills such as **a)** writing professional emails, **b)** problem-solving, **c)** teamwork, **d)** financial literacy (budgeting, understanding financial fraud, navigating self-employment) and **e)** health literacy (managing wellbeing, reducing NHS strain), with teacher training in these areas to ensure confidence.

3. Inclusive approach to learning

The current curriculum is too rigid, lacks clear progression stages, fails to account for the diverse ways students connect with texts and lacks materials by authors from diverse racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This creates a class ceiling to ambition, which is reinforced by a lack of access to books and libraries in disadvantaged areas.

Accountability systems and pressure to meet test score targets, force schools with limited resources to prioritise exam preparation over enrichment, further fuelling inequality.

Similarly, standardised tests where everyone is expected to meet the same age-based standards, often disadvantage students with special educational needs (SEND), English as an Additional Language (EAL) and/or learners from different cultural backgrounds.

Teachers must have the freedom to select texts that reflect students' interests, backgrounds and wider contemporary issues and have clear, open channels of communication with pupils.

We recommend: **1)** the diversification of the curriculum, **2)** partnership working, through Libraries for Primaries to boost access to books and libraries, **3)** cross-sector early interventions to address literacy gaps (i.e., health and social care with education), **4)** inclusive assessments measuring holistic progress milestones (e.g. portfolios, oral exams), **5)** targeted support for SEND learners and EAL students (speech and language therapy, additional time in assessments) and **6)** a collaborative approach to learning and career planning through open dialogue between students, educators, advisors and employers.

4. Critical Literacy

Teaching students to evaluate and navigate information gives them critical literacy skills and reduces susceptibility to misinformation. This should be delivered in tandem with media and digital literacy skills, especially with AI on the rise. Learners need to be able to analyse information, make informed decisions, and engage in democracy and society.

Reflecting real-world applications of literacy in education settings creates a more empowering learning environment and fosters a sense of belonging. As research shows that 90% of young offenders struggle with basic literacy, early interventions—such as our *Represent* and *Empower* initiatives for teenage girls who are excluded, or at risk of exclusion, from education—are key.

We recommend: **1)** tailored, small-group interventions for at-risk youth on information reliability and **2)** broadening the curriculum to foster confidence, wellbeing, empathy and civic responsibility through **a)** critical literacy, **b)** social justice themes, **c)** speech and language skills and **d)** programmes building emotional resilience

Conclusion

These four pillars would not only boost education quality and experience but also improve economic growth, social cohesion, wellbeing and the life chances of the next generation.

We recommend: the government implements our suggested measures with a commitment to continued partnership working to **a)** deliver accessible literacy programmes, resources and library spaces, through our Libraries for Primaries model, and **b)** ensure curriculum content is updated as necessary to align with societal needs, so reforms remain effective and inclusive.

Only then can we ensure all students, regardless of background, reach their full potential, which is key to the success of mission-led government.

About the National Literacy Trust

For the past 30 years, the National Literacy Trust's mission has been to break down barriers to opportunity by improving speech, language and communication skills across the UK – focussing on the most disadvantaged areas. Through programmes and resources in schools and communities, and on-the-ground support to families and learners, last year we:

- Reached 1.4 million children and young people
- Mobilised 1,100 Literacy Champions to drive community change
- Partnered with 13,000 schools and other institutions
- Delivered 557,411 books to children

Responding to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

To respond to England's Curriculum and Assessment review, we consulted:

- Over 200 teachers
- The 109 signatories of our business pledge (e.g. the Premier League, KMPG, Amazon, British Land and WHSmith)
- The News Network (10 organisations e.g. the BBC, Guardian, and News Literacy Lab)
- 21 education stakeholders (e.g. Penguin Random House, the English Speaking Board, NHS Speech and Language Therapists, and local government representatives)

During this process we identified four pillars for Curriculum and Assessment Review reforms:

- **Reading for Pleasure:** Cultivating joy and engagement in reading.
- **Disciplinary Literacy:** Embedding reading, writing, speaking and listening skills across all subjects, not just English.
- **An inclusive approach to learning:** Ensuring consistent, sustained literacy development for all students to maximise their potential
- **Critical Literacy:** Teaching students to evaluate and navigate information, including digital, media, and AI, critically.

1. Reading for Pleasure

Children and young people's enjoyment of reading is at crisis point. Our latest research reveals 2 in 3 children and young people don't enjoy reading with reading enjoyment at an all-time low.

When children and young people enjoy reading, they read more often, helping to build vital reading skills and bringing wider benefits for wellbeing, confidence and learning. Our research shows twice as many children who enjoy reading in their free time have above average reading skills compared to their peers who do not enjoy it, and they also said it helps them to:

- relax (57%)
- feel happy (41%)
- learn new things (51%)
- understand views of others (33%)
- learn about other cultures (32%)
- be confident (26%)

Children are not engaged by texts they cannot relate to, so greater diversity of texts is key. Lack of access to materials is also significant. 1 in 8 children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not own a single book at home and 1 in 7 state primary schools lack libraries, rising to 1 in 4 in the most deprived areas. This is why we co-founded Libraries for Primaries with Penguin Random House to ensure every UK state primary school has a library or dedicated reading space. By the end of this academic year, we will have:

- Raised nearly £13 million (including book discounts)
- Established 1,500 libraries or designated library spaces
- Reached half a million children, who now benefit from the programme
- Trained around 3,000 teachers and support staff
- Distributed 628,000 books in primary schools

If we encourage a culture of reading for pleasure and create a daily reading habit, children are more likely to build the skills they need to thrive in school and beyond. This will not only help school outcomes rise over the next decade but is also integral to delivering sustained growth in all areas of the country and improving wellbeing and social cohesion.

Our research with British Land shows that if all UK young people read for pleasure every day, the number of children getting five good GCSE grades would increase by 1.1 million over a generation. This would boost the average lifetime earnings of those individuals by £57,500 and increase the UK's GDP by as much as £4.6 billion per year over a generation.

Our recommendations to boost reading for pleasure:

- Create time for independent reading and engaging reading activities
- Promote diverse texts that represent students' interests and backgrounds
- Facilitate book discussions to deepen students' connection to reading
- Ensure schools have access to libraries, books and literacy programmes through partnership work like Libraries for Primaries
- Collect data on school library provision

2. Disciplinary Literacy

Literacy should not be confined to English lessons alone.

Disciplinary literacy acknowledges that literacy varies, and students need to learn how to read, write, and communicate in ways that reflect the demands of each subject. For example, a history class may emphasise reading primary sources, following timelines, and analysing arguments, while a science class might prioritise using technical terms, interpreting data, and understanding experimental processes.

Disciplinary literacy should be embedded throughout the curriculum to prepare students for different professional environments, opening doors to new opportunities so they can thrive in their chosen field of work.

Economic productivity depends on a literate workforce, capable of driving innovation and growth. Our business survey shows:

- 9 in 10 businesses are concerned about young people's level of literacy skills for the workplace. Poor communication skills hinder recruitment, especially in junior roles
- 94% of businesses felt there had been a decline in literacy skills among young people over the last five years
- 1 in 5 businesses stated that poor literacy skills were a significant problem for their business. Literacy enjoyment has reached a 19-year low among young people, impacting wellbeing, development and future employability.

In the current curriculum, overemphasis on technical grammar detracts from reading for pleasure and the development of essential language and communication skills like reading fluency and comprehension. Improving literacy will not only benefit businesses and foster economic growth but it will also increase mental and physical wellbeing.

Students should also be empowered with the life skills needed to thrive outside of the workplace is also essential. For example, embedding financial literacy (budgeting, understanding financial fraud, and navigating self-employment) and health literacy (so students can manage their wellbeing effectively) into education will lead to a happier and healthier population, reduce NHS strain and improve quality of life.

Our recommendations to promote disciplinary literacy:

- Develop qualifications that prioritise real-world skills, such as writing professional emails and interpreting workplace texts
- Introduce a foundational literacy qualification, focusing on practical skills like communication, problem-solving, and teamwork
- Include skills in financial literacy and health literacy with additional teacher training in this area to ensure confidence

3. Inclusive approach to learning

The current curriculum is too rigid and lacks clear progression stages, preventing students from systematically building skills over time and demonstrating this in assessments.

The one-size-fits-all approach fails to account for the diverse ways students connect with texts. This is especially true when they do not see themselves reflected in standard academic content, which focuses on white, middle-class narratives. Our 2022 research found that 2 in 5 young people struggle to find relatable book characters, rising to 1 in 2 for ages 8–11.

This also perpetuates a “class ceiling” on the ambitions of disadvantaged youth due to:

- A lack of access to books and libraries in disadvantaged areas hinders development
- A lack of diversity in texts reduces engagement.
- Accountability systems, with schools in disadvantaged areas facing greater pressure to meet test score targets, prioritising exam preparation over enrichment activities
- Standardised tests which often disadvantage students with English as an Additional Language (EAL), and/or different cultural backgrounds as well as those with special educational needs (SEND).

This inflexibility, where everyone is expected to meet the same age-based standards disadvantages SEND students who require additional support. Flexible assessment methods are key to accommodating the diverse learning profiles of SEND students.

Teachers must have the ability to select materials that reflect students' interests, cultural backgrounds, and contemporary issues to enhance engagement, creativity and progress. Dialogue between pupils and teachers will ensure that students feel heard and supported in their educational choices and journey, leading to increased satisfaction, engagement and lower drop-out rates in the short term and promoting greater social mobility in the longer term.

Our recommendations to create a more inclusive approach to learning:

- Diversify the curriculum, expanding access to texts by authors from diverse racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds
- Ensure schools have access to libraries, books and literacy programmes through partnership work like Libraries for Primaries
- Design assessments to measure holistic progress milestones (e.g. portfolios, orally)
- Ensure tailored approaches for SEND learners, including alternative assessment formats and extended time
- Address foundational literacy gaps in the early years through cross-sector early interventions (i.e., health and social care with education).
- Provide targeted support for disadvantaged students and EAL learners, including speech and language therapy
- Facilitate a collaborative approach to learning and career planning with open dialogue and feedback between students, educators, advisors and employers

4. Critical Literacy

Teaching students to evaluate, analyse and navigate information gives them critical literacy skills and reduces susceptibility to misinformation.

This is key to ensuring people can assess information, make informed decisions, and actively engage in democracy and society.

As generative AI tools become more prevalent, the need for these skills will only intensify, making it crucial for our curriculum to adapt to these challenges to help students navigate this complex digital landscape.

Our Represent and Empower programmes, designed for girls aged 11-14 excluded, or at risk of exclusion, from mainstream education have critical literacy skills at their heart. After taking part in our Empower, 85% of students reported increased confidence in their digital literacy skills, while 80% improved their ability to identify misinformation so we know there are clear ways to prevent the spread of fake news.

By boosting critical digital literacy skills and reflecting real-world applications of literacy in an education setting, we can create a more inclusive, and empowering learning environment.

When children are exposed to engaging and diverse critical reading experiences, it can foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation that can contribute to criminal behaviour. Whereas a lack of these skills can hinder young people's ability to succeed academically and socially, contributing to frustration, alienation, and sometimes, involvement in crime as research shows 90% of young offenders struggle with basic literacy skills.

Literacy difficulties, especially those linked to speech, language, and communication barriers, are linked to higher rates of youth offending.

Promoting critical literacy skills not only supports academic achievement and social cohesion but also prepares students to navigate the complexities of the modern world, giving them the skills needed to thrive in the workplace and an increasingly digital society.

Our recommendations to foster critical literacy:

- Embed critical literacy as a cross-cutting competency through the curriculum
- Prioritise programmes that build resilience, emotional intelligence and social skills
- Integrate speaking and listening skills into the curriculum to build confidence, empathy, and critical thinking
- Provide small-group interventions, tailored to at-risk youth, to enhance understanding of reliable versus unreliable information
- Incorporate themes of social justice and conflict resolution into the National Curriculum to foster civic responsibility

Conclusion

Whilst we welcome the interim report's aims to ensure reforms work for all learners, promote diversity and focus on practical, real-life skills, including critical literacy, we would also like to see more focus on creativity, oracy and a commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. We have a wealth of expertise in this area and our four pillars are key to improving education quality and experience as well as

economic growth, social cohesion, health and wellbeing, and giving the next generation better life chances.

It is important that our recommendations under each pillar, are delivered alongside:

- Accessible and inclusive literacy programmes, resources and library spaces
- Partnership work with educators, businesses, the third sector and community leaders to align curriculum content with societal needs
- A commitment to ongoing evaluation to ensure reforms remain effective and inclusive

Only then can we ensure that all students, regardless of background, are able to reach their full potential, which is key to the success of mission-led government.