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Teachers call for return to the liberal 1980s

- NUT seeks more play and opposes Labour targets
- Union reading guidance to move away from phonics

Polly Curtis, education editor
The Guardian, Sunday 23 March 2008

Schools should return to an early 1980s style of liberal education with more time for play and less rigid methods of teaching children to read, according to the largest teachers' union.

Citing mounting evidence of a crisis in children's happiness and mental health, the National Union of Teachers will today debate calls to scrap the most restrictive elements of the national curriculum and reverse a government order that literacy be taught through phonics.

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"Teachers want a return to a system which is liberal and flexible and not top-down [and] imposed by government. We want a return to a time when there was a potential for magic moments in the classroom," said Steve Sinnott, the general secretary of the NUT.

At the union's annual conference in Manchester, teachers will today debate a series of motions to mount a new campaign to oppose the government's testing and targets regime in schools, to challenge a policy that all children be taught to read using phonics, and to free up the curriculum to allow children more time for play.

Crucially, some members are calling for a rethink of the pre-school curriculum, to be introduced this September. A number of childcare experts also oppose the curriculum.

"The imposition of an overly formal ... curriculum can distort young children's learning experience. These occur most naturally and effectively through a subtle combination of free play, movement, rhythm, repetition and imitation," according to one motion to be debated.

Sinnott warned that the early years curriculum could lead to a "tick-box" mentality towards very small children's learning. "Play is a metaphor for greater liberalism in the classroom. You can change how we teach and learn, but giving the space for proper playing in the classroom symbolises a freer approach to education."

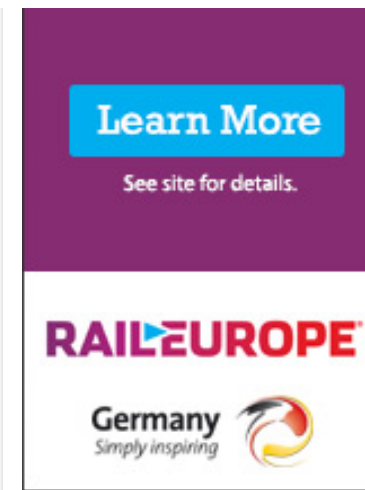
A separate motion, drawn up by the union's executive, sets out plans to launch a rival to the government's order that children be taught reading through phonics. If backed, as the leadership expects, the union will provide rival guidance to schools on how to teach reading, offering a range of methods other than phonics. These will include models that encourage children to recognise whole words when prompted by pictures in a book.

Phonics is often described as the "back to basics" literacy scheme. It teaches children how to decode whole words by learning letters and sounds first. It was abandoned in the 1970s and 1980s in many Labour-run local authorities after criticism that it is too mechanistic and does not

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run local authorities after criticism that it is too mechanistic and does not teach a love of language and stories.

In recent years it has been revived by the Conservatives and was subsequently reintroduced in schools in 2006 after a government review of reading and writing.

Sinnott said: "Phonics is vital for decoding words but there are some 50 basic words which kids must learn on sight rather than breaking down. The prescription that schools teach using phonics doesn't allow for that.

"There were developments in local authorities in the early 1980s in London and in Birmingham which were way in advance of any notion of education now.

"We don't want a return to the drift of the 1970s, but the government has forgotten fantastic work in the 1980s which saw children flourishing."

The conference will also debate calls for a moratorium on new faith schools and a removal of their right to control their admissions. Delegates will be asked to agree a "long-term aim... [of] the establishment of a single, secular comprehensive state education system".

The union is urging the government to act on the interim findings of the Cambridge University primary review, which says children are under "intense and perhaps excessive" pressures from the policy-driven demands of their schools and a "narrow and rigid" curriculum.

A spokeswoman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "To turn the clock back to the 80s would be ridiculous since we have the best-trained teachers we've ever had and record exam results." She said the secondary curriculum was being made more flexible and an independent review of the primary curriculum had been commissioned.

"Phonics is here to stay, it is the best way of teaching children to read. The early years foundation stage is flexible enough to support a wide range of philosophies and needs of parents and settings."



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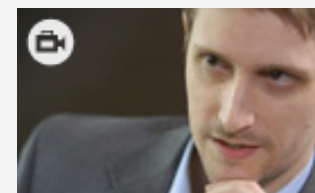
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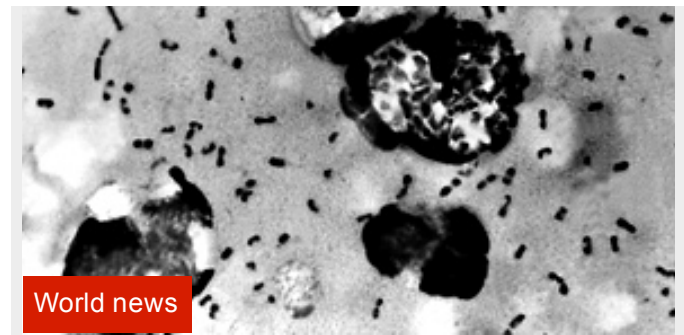
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