

Poems to be compulsory in English primary schools

Children will start learning and reciting poetry at the age of just five, under curriculum reforms proposed by Education Secretary Michael Gove. But is learning verse a waste of time?

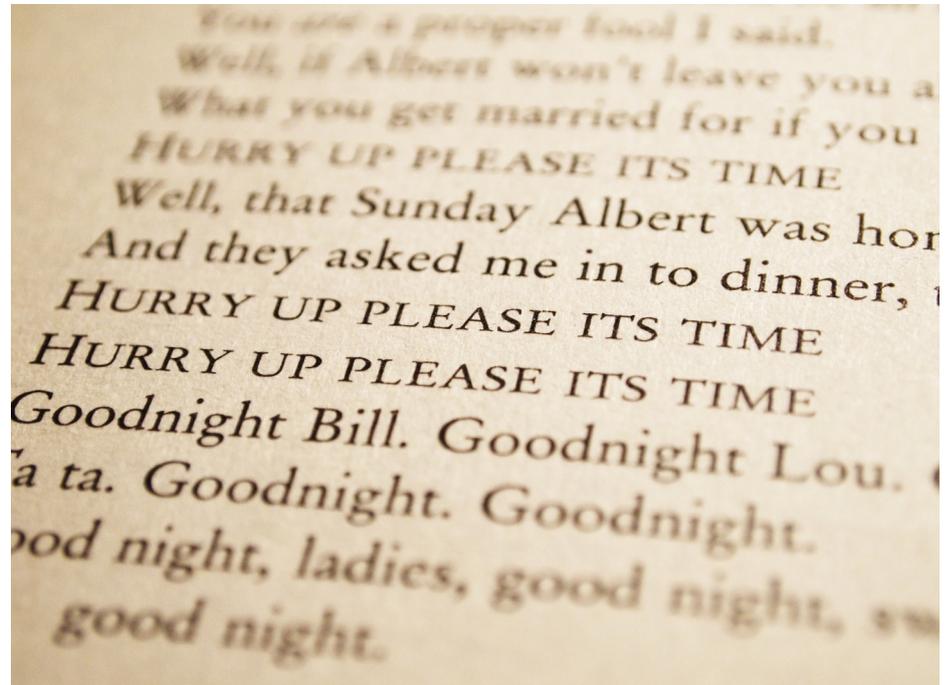


ENGLISH & MEDIA

Learning poetry by heart used to be a fundamental part of every British child's education. Now, under reforms to be proposed this week by Education Secretary Michael Gove, memorising poems will once again take a central place in the national curriculum.

If Gove's plan goes into action, children will be read poems by their teachers from the age of five. At the same time, they will start building up a repertoire of simple poems which they can recite from memory.

This new emphasis on poetry is not the only change. Primary school children will also be encouraged to read more for pleasure, especially from traditional stories and fairytales. At the same time, there will be a much stricter focus on proper spelling and grammar. The overall aim: to make English teaching in primary schools more demanding than it has been for years.



A passage from *The Waste Land*, by T.S. Eliot, voted the UK's favourite poet. Worth learning in schools?

And pupils could soon be learning poems in more languages than just English. Another proposal, soon to be announced, would see all children taking at least one foreign language (including ancient languages like Latin or Greek) from the age of seven. They would be asked to learn songs and poetry in that language as part of the course.

These proposals – which must still face a public consultation before being formally put forward – are likely to be controversial. But teachers, in Britain and around the world, are used to this sort of interference from politicians.

Why? Because a country's curriculum system is an indication of the skills and qualities that country thinks are valuable – and the list of valued skills keeps changing all the time.

In the last ten years, for example, schools in Britain have been encouraged to devote more and more time to

computer science – as computers become a more important part of daily life. At the same time, traditional languages like French are being displaced by more widely spoken languages like Spanish and Mandarin.

WORTH LEARNING?

So if schools teach skills for the modern world, why focus on poetry? There are many who think learning verse is a waste of time. The world needs more engineers, more scientists, more mathematicians. There are quite enough poets around already.

Defenders of poetry teaching have two arguments in reply. Some say learning poetry is a useful method of training the memory, and of acquiring valuable communication skills.

Others point to less obvious benefits. Knowing poems is important, they say, not because it will get you a job, or boost the economy, but because it opens the way to a rich and interesting inner life.

Q & A

Q This change would just apply to primary schools right?

A Yes – but the poetry proposals are part of a wider trend. Michael Gove is pushing for wide-ranging reforms of the education system, which will change things for everyone.

Q For example?

A He wants to make exams harder, for one thing. He is also making efforts to encourage computer skills in schools. And recently, he revealed plans to send every school in Britain a copy of the King James Bible. But there's much more.

Q And how much does it all matter?

A The last word should go to the great

Victorian prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli. He once said: 'Upon the education of the people of this country, the fate of this country depends.'

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Arts subjects are a waste of time.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Poems to be compulsory in English primary schools

WORD WATCH

National curriculum – Introduced in 1988, the national curriculum is a set of rules that dictate the topics that every state school in England, Wales and Northern Ireland must teach. Academies and independent schools have much more freedom. The word *curriculum*, in Latin,

means ‘career’, or ‘running course’, but can also – oddly enough – be used to mean ‘little chariot’.

French – During the 18th and 19th Centuries, French was the dominant language in international diplomacy and European high society. It is for this reason that UK passports still have text in both English and French. French has now been replaced by

English as the main international language, or ‘lingua franca’.

Mandarin – People in China speak many different languages, of which the main groups are Wu, Min, Cantonese and Mandarin. Because it is the traditional language of government, spoken in the capital Beijing, Mandarin is the language most commonly learnt by foreigners.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is there any point learning poems?
2. Which subjects do you think are most important in a modern curriculum? Why?

ACTIVITIES

1. Choose a poem you like, and learn it by heart.
2. Write a short philosophical definition of the word ‘education’.

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 **NOTES**

