

BOB COX

with Leah Crawford, Angela Jenkins and Julie Sargent

# OPENING DOORS to AMBITIOUS PRIMARY ENGLISH

Pitching high and including all



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# Foreword by Mary Myatt

We are a challenge-seeking species! We like doing things that are difficult, as long as the conditions are characterised by high challenge and low threat.

This is reflected in my conversations with pupils in schools: they enjoy doing work that stretches them. Their observations about the level of challenge they are given can be summarised as ‘We’d like more demanding work please!’

I believe there is a tendency in the sector to make things too easy for too many of our pupils, whatever their prior attainment, in the mistaken belief that they can’t cope. They can!

In ‘“Just Reading”: The Impact of a Faster Pace of Reading Narratives on the Comprehension of Poorer Adolescent Readers in English Classrooms’, Westbrook et al. (2019) from the University of Sussex found that simply reading challenging, complex novels aloud and at a fast pace in each lesson repositioned ‘poorer readers’ as ‘good’ readers, giving them a more engaged uninterrupted reading experience over a sustained period.

Feedback from some of the teachers expressed surprise at the impressive results of the poorer readers as they had thought that these pupils would not be able to cope with demanding texts: ‘I didn’t for a minute expect that they would keep up.’

This research chimes with what the ‘Opening Doors’ series does, which is to walk us through the steps to create lesson structures in which we can honestly say that every single pupil is immersed in rich and diverse literature and language.

When we’re shifting a gear to offer greater challenge to our classes, it’s not just the materials we offer but also the rationale for doing so that matters. Change in professional practice will not be embedded until we as teachers understand the ‘why’ as much as the ‘what’. And this is exactly what this marvellous book does.

It’s also important that we as professionals up our game in terms of our professional and personal reading. It is through the systems and

structures of professional learning within schools that this work needs to be embedded. All the examples of schools working with the Opening Doors materials show not just impressive results and pupils joyful in their reading, but also an excitement amongst staff for this work, which has been supported and encouraged by senior leaders.

Such work rarely takes off on its own. It needs a collective response and sense of urgency to crack on with it. And when it is offered to teachers in the right way, what we find is that there is a renewed excitement about the teaching of texts in particular, and curriculum design in general. There are very few books that set out the rationale and include examples for professionals to get to work straightaway. *Opening Doors to Ambitious Primary English* is one of them.

We simply can't ignore examples of impact like this:

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As teachers became more proficient in applying the Opening Doors approach, we found that their choices became more ambitious. At Ravenfield Primary Academy, children in Year 6 compared and analysed the language choices within a range of historical speeches from Shakespeare and Elizabeth I to Winston Churchill. Archaic language and motivational aspects were carefully unpicked to enable the children to understand the context and meaning. Taster drafts allowed them to manipulate language from across the speeches, sparking their imagination to create motivational battle speeches of their own.

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The proof of any substantive theory – in this case, the offer of demanding texts, including non-fiction and poetry for all pupils – is in what pupils 'produce'. In working in this way, pupils get better not just at reading, but also speaking, listening and writing. Most importantly, they fall in love with beautiful texts too. When you have a resource like *Opening Doors to Ambitious Primary English*, which provides you with the theory, text examples, link texts, concept development, ways of working in the classroom, case studies from schools, all the way through to examples of pupils' work, it makes such logical sense, that you will finish reading it and want to get cracking immediately!

As Bob Cox says, 'I have seen lots of lessons where teachers try to elicit responses from pupils on easily accessible texts. The answers given tend to be monosyllabic right or wrong replies and are less

about dialogic responses. No one has done anything wrong, but there was simply not enough scope for learning in the chosen text.’ With a resource like this, I am convinced we can do better.

**Mary Myatt, education writer, speaker  
and curator of Myatt & Co**

# Foreword by Sonia Thompson

When Bob Cox came to St Matthew’s Research School, it was like meeting the owner of the most wondrous literary emporium. His love of both classic and contemporary poetry and prose, and the possibilities they offer – not just beautiful writing outcomes but for enabling our children to appreciate beautiful writing – engulfed the hall. The session left us feeling that we needed to be even more courageous with our English curriculum, and we quickly began our journey to empowering our children to widen and deepen their knowledge of a more diverse range of authors and poets.

The crux of the ‘Opening Doors’ books is that they are like no other educational textbook. Their identity and purpose is truly enshrined within their name. They take the teacher by the hand and lead them on a journey of exploration. *Opening Doors to Ambitious Primary English* builds on this concept by offering the explanations, plans and case studies that enable these ambitious explorations to happen. It answers questions, offers challenge and enables diverse and ambitious literacy to become the norm within your setting. As you turn every page, teachers and English leads may rest assured that every word has been carefully and passionately curated by Bob and his amazing team. That is the beauty of the Opening Doors books.

Exposing our children to high-quality texts is like giving them a gift. Once unwrapped, the opening up of their imagination, through the power of words and illustrations, is a sight to behold. For me, this literary gifting should never be the preserve of the favoured few. I am wholly convinced that it must be available to every child, regardless of circumstance. *Opening Doors to Ambitious Primary English* will not disappoint. There is more richness, more depth and even more literary gold.

**Sonia Thompson, head teacher/director, St Matthew’s Church of England Primary Research and Support School**

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Straight ahead of oneself, one cannot go very far ...

**Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince***

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# Introduction

The ideas, resources and case studies in this book will help you to make primary English vibrant, creative and challenging in your school. It also provides frameworks and principles for any school wishing to be more ambitious in developing pupils' speaking, listening, reading, writing and thinking. There is an emphasis throughout on application, adaptation to context and links between theory and practice.

*Opening Doors to Ambitious Primary English* explains and models top quality ways of thinking, planning and teaching which can become a norm in any classroom. It is the opposite of occasionally including an extra challenging unit or offering tricky literary texts to just one group. All pupils have an entitlement to challenging texts, fascinating poetry, or non-fiction in various styles. All pupils can continue to learn about spelling patterns, word derivatives and grammar within the context and beauty of a text. No one should feel excluded and everyone can be aspirational.

How can this be done? We want every teacher reading this book to appreciate that there are numerous creative and fascinating ways in which an English curriculum can be designed to ensure that every single pupil is immersed in rich and diverse literature and language. We want to show how varied learning dialogues and new knowledge planned progressively can be the entitlement of every primary pupil.

Our case studies demonstrate how key principles and a toolkit of techniques can open doors to opportunity via high pitch approaches, with a huge range of access strategies built in. Schools adapt our ideas and feed back to us, creating a genuine knowledge-growing community, one which is focused on rationales and concepts for teaching English. As Eaglestone (2021) observes, 'knowing a discipline is not simply knowing its content, but involves understanding the wider concepts that frame the discipline itself'.

As you turn the pages of this book, you too will become involved in this community as you question, adapt, debate and consider new perspectives. The wonders of a high-quality literary text enable all of us to contribute our own imagination and puzzlement as we work

out how best to utilise it to teach our pupils about English language and literature.

Chapter by chapter, we seek to show how ideas and texts – pitched high but accessed by all – can become part of the everyday diet of the classroom. Ambition is rightly admired as a tangible ethos in schools and is often visible via displays, assemblies, websites and aspirational messages, but where ambition is actually fulfilled is in the quality of the teaching in the lessons themselves. We have seen astonishing writing and improved comprehension when teachers have fully exploited the opportunities that challenging texts offer all pupils.

You can dip into any section in your own way. You will notice many cross-references to other chapters, because understanding language development is more of a cognitive field rather than a linear progression. However, we would advise reading Chapter 1 first as it provides the background for the rest of the book. After that, you can follow a narrative from big principles to strategies and specific applications via the chapter headings. This book is all about providing explanations and case studies which explore how top-class primary English can be designed and delivered to every pupil. There is a continuous emphasis on inclusion – for example, strategies like taster drafts offer the potential to deliver spelling, punctuation and grammar in context.

The teaching and learning of English is much more coherent when scaffolded around quality literature. In this way, pupils can be taught, for instance, how to build suspense, what a metaphor is or how connotations spin wildly in our brains, rather than simply ‘doing’ a book, ‘covering’ a poem or ticking an assessment box. Above all, we and our schools model how the reading of quality texts can be linked explicitly into the curriculum instead of being marginalised. It is a matter of social justice and equal opportunity that children access a wide range of books from past to present, from across the globe and from picture books to classic literature.

It is you, the teacher, who makes the difference, who intervenes with that much-needed support and scaffolding, who inspires, who cares and who laughs with your pupils. High-quality English texts offer so many more openings for this to happen.

The ideas and examples in this book have been inspired by education research, case studies from the Opening Doors network, the applica-

tion of Opening Doors strategies and principles, and the combined knowledge of the four educationists who have written the book. There are already 80 units from the five previous books in the ‘Opening Doors’ series which may interest you too.

From the start, our aim has been to show that pupils enjoy fresh literary challenges more than the standard texts, and this can make the Key Stage 3 programme of study simply the next stepping stone in their reading journey rather than an intimidating step up. We hope you will come away more confident that there are clear route-ways to ambitious English for you and your pupils, and that you can adapt our principles and strategies into a highway to excellence that suits your school.

It is our belief that pupils respond well to high expectations. The key – as we have seen over our long careers – is the difference that a great teacher makes. When excellent ideas are disseminated across a school, local authority or trust as guiding principles, *not* dogma, teachers have the autonomy and freedom to apply strategies as they see fit – and that is confidence-building for a career!

Enjoy opening the doors to opportunity for your pupils, and be inspired by schools like Icknield Primary in Luton, where Lisa Kennedy and Laura McGeachie have recently set up their own training hub:

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At Icknield Primary School, we continue to be excited and motivated by the opportunities our Opening Doors journey affords to both our children and staff. Through visits to other schools to share practice and regular INSETs to refresh and develop key ideas and approaches, our curriculum continues to be enriched. The successes we have experienced thus far have inspired us to share our journey with others: we are in the process of becoming an Opening Doors hub, which will hopefully enable us to spread the word and facilitate mutual support between schools who are genuinely searching for excellence.

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Our vision of continuing professional development (CPD) is one that involves us, as writers and educationists, as sign-posters, so that schools like Icknield spread their inspiration further afield. Across the UK, workshop leaders and teaching and learning leaders for trusts

and local authorities are exploring the key principles, pedagogies and tools which are making primary-phase English exciting and accessible.

All of the key texts referenced and illustrations featured support your work in the classroom and can be downloaded at: [www.crownhouse.co.uk/opening-doors-ambitious-primary-english](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk/opening-doors-ambitious-primary-english).



Part 1

# Key Opening Doors Principles



## Chapter 1

# Pitching High and Including All

Bob Cox

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The research strongly suggests that it is good to find learning difficult – within reason. We may, in fact, be more likely to remember difficult concepts that we have had to grapple with, puzzle through, or work hard to understand initially than easier ones.

**Megan Mansworth, *Teach to the Top: Aiming High for Every Learner* (2021)**

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In an ambitious English curriculum, high pitch and high expectation approaches should be visible in every resource and in the sequencing of units. They are integral to all of the ways in which doors can open for your pupils. Dr Megan Mansworth's quote above condenses much of what we encourage and what we see in schools that are committed to challenge for all – that difficulty, once embraced, leads to strengthened memory and understanding. There is nothing more fulfilling than grappling with new concepts under the guidance of a great teacher.

You will learn more about the concept of using concepts as you read this book. There is no definitive list of such concepts in English, but imagine you are teaching an aspect of English rather than 'doing' a text. You might want to teach how to build tension, how structure has supported meaning or how effective personification has enhanced the beauty of a poem. All of these concepts can enhance your attempts to pitch high – for example, you can teach tension-building by using a simpler part of the text with one pupil and a challenging part with another, but *every* child is learning about tension.

## Highlights from high expectations history

In a long career spanning many years and various contexts, I have found the phrase ‘high expectations’ to be a constant presence in the educational landscape. In the 1980s, when the national curriculum was introduced, the advice around so-called differentiation was to teach to the top and not the middle. It wasn’t always interpreted in this way, and it jump-started a long process in which lesson planning sometimes distilled the high pitch moments into a discrete ‘extension’ box, diluting the depth of learning for those outside the targeted group who never reached the extension. The debate continues today in a different form, with ‘age-related expectations’ interpreted by some as a quality standard around which a teacher can be partly assessed and by others as a guideline above which a lesson should always be pitched.

By 2001, the National Literacy Strategy was well established in primary schools, but some of the same tensions were still apparent between curriculum coverage (which often occurred in a step-by-step way) and the instinct of teachers to include additional provision, at least for those then termed ‘gifted and talented’.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the *Key Stage 3 National Strategy: English Department Training* document implied a continuation of the rigour of the strategy into secondary schools:

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The main point to draw out is that our first assumption should be to maintain high expectations of all pupils, and not to trap those working below expectations in permanent remediation and those who can go beyond expectations working only to expectations of the average. (Department for Education and Employment, 2001: 97)

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1 There was a strong government-led initiative via the National Strategies to create gifted and talented coordinators and to disseminate ideas and resources suitable for more able pupils, both in the classroom and through enrichment activities. At one point, schools were asked to identify 10% of their cohort as ‘gifted’ (which was academic) or ‘talented’ (in sport and the arts). Of course, both the wording and the rationale have been much disputed ever since!

In 2006, the renewed primary framework for literacy and mathematics implied that more emphasis was needed on challenging expectations. Changes included:

- 
- create a clearer set of outcomes to support teachers and practitioners in planning for progression in literacy and mathematics, to help raise the attainment of all children, personalise learning and secure interventions for those children who need it
  - bring an increased sense of drive and momentum to literacy and mathematics through the primary phase, involving some scaling up of expectations and a greater focus upon planning for progression (Department for Education and Skills, 2006: 2)
- 

These ideas had no doubt been influenced by David Miliband's (2004) speech on the future of teaching, in which he said: 'I want to see an education system that combines excellence and equity.'

Changing governments tend to bring changing emphases, but it is noticeable how many theorists and researchers have regularly returned to this theme of high pitch planning. Doug Lemov, Colleen Driggs and Erica Woolway in *Reading Reconsidered* (2016: 5), list 'read harder texts' and 'close read texts rigorously and intentionally' as the first two essential ideas in distilling the 'core of the core' curriculum. Mary Myatt, in *Back on Track* (2020a), consistently emphasises depth, quality texts and high pitch approaches in which every child must be included. The case studies in this book are testament to the many ways in which schools have made the transition from theory to practice, using the scope that complex texts can give.

## Opening doors for every child

The principles and strategies in this book will guide you towards an approach that suits you and your school. There are key points in each chapter which will stimulate your thinking, but there are some vital mindsets and strategies that I have observed across schools:

- ☛ School leaders believe a challenging curriculum is the entitlement of all pupils and take action to make this happen.
- ☛ Governors and teaching and learning leaders from the trust or local authority support school improvement, not just school organisation. An excellence ethos is encouraged.
- ☛ CPD is provided which explores subject-specific details and approaches. Some schools have digested principles around high aspirational thinking very well, but they have not engaged in how different disciplinary knowledge is needed for different subjects – for example, what an excellence for all approach looks like in science as compared with English.
- ☛ Coaching advice complements exciting curriculum developments to assist the knowledge acquisition and learning of teachers. This isn't connected with performance management.
- ☛ Teachers' ongoing reading of literature and mastery of the texts they use is integral to high pitch work. The deeper the knowledge of the teacher, the less planning is needed and the more confidence grows.
- ☛ A clear action plan is devised for approximately one to two years – with periodic evaluation – to highlight the rationale for an ambitious curriculum and stages for achievement.

I have been privileged to see many teachers discover the joy and scope that challenging texts offer for daily learning. It might be a picture book with a fascinating concept, like a wall which apparently offers protection from enemies on the other side, as in John Agee's *The Wall in the Middle of the Book*, or the remarkable variation on fairy tale and myth in Andri Snær Magnason's *The Casket of Time*, where the language, style and sheer invention of the text itself offers opportunities for new learning. Perhaps use Victoria Cox's illustration for

Miroslav Holub's 'Fairy Tale' (at the beginning of this chapter) with your pupils and pitch the learning high.<sup>2</sup>

Texts and how teachers use them are the hub around which English as a subject can be delivered. Comprehension, fluency, vocabulary explorations, reading to writing routes and oracy are all enhanced via the scope and power of a complex text.

## High pitch for social justice

Pitching high but including all is about social justice too. How can anyone justify leaving any child out of introductions to great literature or relegating them at an early age to discrete, easy work and the labelling that goes with it?

This issue is not new, as we can see in this extract from the Bullock Report into the teaching of language:

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The National Child Development Study [Davie et al., 1972] revealed that 48 per cent of the children from social class V were poor readers at 7, compared with 8 per cent in social class I. Several studies have shown that the position worsens as the children grow older, there being a progressive decline in the performance of children of lower socio-economic groups between the ages of 7 and 11. (Bullock, 1975: 22)

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Or, more recently, in 2021, in the observations of Jonathan Doherty from Leeds Trinity University on levelling the playing field and promoting social mobility through education:

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Social class is the strongest predictor of life outcomes in this country.

From a poor start, the next hurdles appear soon after. In Teach First's 2017 report, *Impossible*, we learn that by age 11, 35% of pupils from low-income backgrounds achieve the expected standards in reading, writing and maths, compared with 57% of their better-off peers.

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2 You can find the poem at: <https://gallimaufry.typepad.com/blog/2016/06/fairy-tale-by-miroslav-holub.html>!

Provides both big principles and a toolkit of strategies all carefully selected to support the design of a deeper, more creative and more expansive English curriculum.

The ideas, resources and case studies in this book will help you to make primary English vibrant, creative and challenging in your school. The book also provides frameworks and principles for any school wishing to be more ambitious in developing pupils' speaking, listening, reading, writing and thinking, with an emphasis throughout on application, adaptation to context and links between theory and practice.

*Opening Doors to Ambitious Primary English* explains and models top-quality ways of thinking, planning and teaching. It answers questions, offers challenges and enables diverse and ambitious literacy to become the norm within your setting. All pupils are entitled to be taught challenging texts, fascinating poetry, or non-fiction in various styles and they can continue to learn about spelling patterns, word derivatives and grammar within the context and beauty of such texts. No one should feel excluded and everyone can aspire to produce their best work.

Suitable for teachers and curriculum leads in primary settings.

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In this book, professional awareness of old, gold and retold tales as well as new, bold and diverse texts is a foundational principle. *Opening Doors ...* will reignite your passion for teaching and prompt you to reconsider the depth and breadth of texts and the very nature of reading.

**Professor Teresa Cremin, The Open University**

The passion and the knowledge of the writers sing from the pages in a way that is inspiring and enthusing but also practical and logical with ideas and strategies to take straight into the classroom.

**Nicola Mansfield, Primary Curriculum Manager, PiXL**

For all reflective teachers looking to introduce their pupils to challenging and rewarding texts, this book is essential.

**Janet Gough, Primary English Consultant, former NATE Primary Officer**

No primary school should be without it.

**Gordon Askew, MBE, former DfE Reading Adviser, Founder and Chair, English Hubs Council**

Offers an opportunity to enroot an ardent approach to the teaching of the English curriculum, ensuring challenge for all.

**Kelly Ashley, education consultant, author of *Word Power***

If this glorious book were a store of curiosities, I imagine it being crammed to the rafters with glistening ideas, wheeled ladders and shelves that stretch up as high as the eye can see. Step in and explore for yourselves!

**Claire Martin-O'Donoghue, Senior Education Leader (East), Diocese of Chichester Academy Trust**

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Having taught English for twenty-three years, **Bob Cox** is now an independent education consultant, writer and teacher coach who works nationally and internationally to support outstanding learning. Bob also delivers keynotes for national associations, multi-academy trusts and local authorities, as more schools integrate *Opening Doors* strategies into their curriculum design.

