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The English primary curriculum and its assessment: a critique of three recent reports

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Abstract

This brief article provides a critique of three major reports on English primary education – arguing that two are essentially conservative (though one appears more liberal at first sight than the other) while the third may go a considerable way to providing the fundamental reappraisal that English primary education requires.

Keywords - curriculum; assessment; review; appraisal; testing

The provenance of the reports

2009 saw the publication of three major reports/reviews, each with important implications for policy and practice in curriculum and assessment in English primary education. The first was a so-called 'independent' review of the primary curriculum set up by the government and conducted on its behalf by Sir Jim Rose (hereafter described as the *Rose Review* [Rose 2009]). The second was the report of a so-called 'expert' group (DCSF 2009), again including Rose whose remit was to recommend improvements to the national testing regime as applied to both primary and secondary schools (hereafter described as the *Report*). The third was the Cambridge Review of English primary education as a whole (Alexander 2009). This article (written by one of its contributory authors) discusses its proposals for curriculum and assessment.

The 'independent' *Rose Review* was never going to be independent since it was set up by a beleaguered government; it was headed up by the government's primary 'fixer'; it was staffed by government-paid officers; it was published by a government department in an absurdly glossy (and expensive) format; it was being straitjacketed by a government-inspired brief to which it adhered tenaciously; and it contained no direct or indirect challenge to, or questioning of, any current or past government policies. It has had all the hallmarks of an 'independent' report from a group of members of parliament justifying their own expenses.

The *Report of the Expert Group on Assessment* (DCSF 2009) was similarly misnamed and for similar reasons. Whatever the five members' expertise, it was not an expertise in assessment. Discounting the two (token?) headteachers, who are not well-known nationally, none of the other members have published anything substantial on assessment, sat on any previous committees on assessment, undertaken any research on assessment, or conducted any national assessments of children themselves. This might conceivably bring a degree of detachment to their deliberations but certainly not *expertise*. The group's primary function was to legitimise the government's view that the

purpose of assessment is to hold individual schools accountable for their performance – the very issue at the heart of the current controversy.

While not containing the words 'independent' or 'expert' in its title, the *Cambridge Review* can make a good claim to both epithets. It was commissioned and funded by an independent foundation, it was directed by an academic with no public or professional political allegiances and none of its authors works for the government or one of its quangos. Its brief was very wide and unconstrained by government policies, past or present. It provides a reappraisal of primary education as a whole, not just curriculum and assessment. Its findings are underpinned by wide-ranging academic research, though this varies considerably in quality and relevance – a fact not fully acknowledged in the otherwise well-written research surveys the *Cambridge Review* commissioned. Perhaps some commentators might be tempted to question its objectivity given the fact that its principal author has publicly disagreed with, and made allegations about, the Department for Children, Schools and Families' (DCSF's) handling of its own review and the *Cambridge Primary Review*.

The Rose Review: an appraisal

Despite its appearance, its liberal sound-bites and the hype attached to it, the *Rose Review* is fundamentally conservative – a conservatism reinforced by the assessment *Report*. In essentials, it leaves everything as it is:

- the notion of a 'core' to the curriculum, a problematic notion unexamined since its inception in the mid-1970s and now resurrected for twenty-first century consumption;
- the place of literacy and numeracy trumpeted as core of the core, as if primary schools have ever considered them other than fundamental;
- the cosmetic use of aims imported from a previous review of the English secondary curriculum – aims which have not informed the drawing up of the new curriculum but which simply serve to adorn or legitimise it after the event;
- the development of supposedly slimmed down programmes of study which on closer examination are little different in terms of their overall 'weight' than their criticised predecessors;
- the introduction of six areas of understanding – but neatly divided into subject content for two out of the three proposed primary sub-stages, and with a none too subtle advocacy of subject-based teaching wherever possible;
- the proclamation of increased curricular flexibility based on these six areas when that flexibility has been there in theory since 1988 (where in the Education Reform Act [House of Commons 1988] the government was proscribed from prescribing curriculum organisation or teaching methods) but absent in practice because of so-called official 'guidance' and assessment; not that different from that offered in tone from the *Rose Review* and the *Report*;
- the use of clichés such as the importance of inculcating a love of learning and of fostering challenging innovative teaching but in a climate where both are inhibited by a testing regime, whose implications are ingenuously ignored by the *Rose Review*;

- the grudging support for a mixed-economy of subject teaching with a little cross-curricular work – a policy that many schools had already adopted prior to the *Rose Review*;
- the failure to address the disproportionate amount of curriculum time taken up by numeracy and literacy (which it reinforces rather than challenges);
- the failure to challenge that 'elephant' in the curriculum – national testing (which it obediently but disingenuously avoids as required by its political masters).

The much-trumpeted changes in the *Rose Review* are similarly cosmetic:

- the relegation of science – but for some time considered a poor relation to English and mathematics right from the start and definitely 'non-core' ever since it failed to secure its own national strategy;
- the promotion of ICT as 'an essential for learning and life', an idea put forward over 15 years ago and scarcely an innovative concept worthy of headlines;
- the introduction of a modern foreign language, an initiative of good educational value but of dubious logistic viability and one which is already under way in some form or other in most schools;
- the official recognition given to personal development, long established as a strength of English primary education.

The *Rose Review* does have some valuable recommendations. In particular, it at last recognises the need for the periodic wholesale review of the curriculum at regular intervals, rather than the current illogical arrangement whereby the foundation and Key Stage 3 curricula have been reviewed prior to consideration of that obtaining in Key Stages 1 and 2. But basically, it is conservative and fails to provide the kind of fundamental review needed for the long-term development of primary education.

The assessment *Report*: an appraisal

That conservatism is reinforced by the assessment *Report*. Here again, the fundamentals of assessment in primary schools, including testing, remain unchallenged and unchanged:

- the continuation of national tests in English and mathematics for the foreseeable future;
- the lack of trust in teacher assessments not yet considered reliable more than 15 years after a government report by Sir Ron Dearing (1993) recommended that they be given equal prominence to test results;
- the lack of any firm commitment to the introduction of teacher assessments at a later date;
- the belief that test results in just two subjects provide a reliable means of holding primary schools publicly accountable for their performance;
- the commitment to test preparation not just confirmed but strengthened by the risible proposal to move national testing from May to June to give yet more time to English and mathematics (and by implication their test preparation);
- the continuation of the piloting of alternative kinds of tests despite problems over their validity;

- the inevitable backwash effect on narrowing the curriculum and straightjacketing teachers if single level tests were ever to be introduced in the current climate of accountability.

The Cambridge Review: an appraisal

In line with its appearance, its liberal sound-bites and the hype attached to it, the *Cambridge Review* can claim with some justice to be a major reappraisal. In relation to the issues raised earlier in relation to the government-inspired *Rose Review*, it offers a very different view:

- the notion of a 'core' to the curriculum is dispensed with since the concept does less than justice to the other 'non-core' components of a worthwhile primary curriculum;
- the centrality of language, oracy and literacy is stressed but not at the expense of a properly conceived broad curriculum where mathematics and science are seen as important but not overly so;
- the development of 12 aims for primary education grounded in an analysis of what the authors (especially the principal author) identify as the needs, capabilities and circumstances of children now and in the future, and of what they see as the condition of society and the world more generally. It also proposes that such aims should inform the drawing up of detailed curricula, though it could be more open about the very real difficulties that this is likely to involve;
- the argument for a relatively brief broad-brush nationally determined description and rationale for the curriculum as a whole coupled with fuller (but how much fuller?) national, non-statutory programmes of study (notionally taking up 70% of curriculum time) and local, non-statutory programmes of study (taking up a notional 30%), though the very real problems of local curriculum development, especially the issue of how to equate time allocations with programme content, are left unresolved;
- the introduction of eight domains of knowledge, understanding, skill and disposition, only one of which (inevitably mathematics) is a recognised subject but with a firm insistence that such domains are *professional* curriculum categories with schools making their own decisions about 'how, . . . , the domains are reconstructed as a viable school curriculum and are named, timetabled and taught . . .' (Alexander 2009, 495);
- the firm commitment to curricular flexibility based on non-statutory programmes of study for the eight domains at national and, where appropriate, local levels;
- the abandonment of well-worn clichés such as the importance of inculcating a love of learning and of fostering challenging, innovative teaching but with the danger of introducing replacement buzz words and catch phrases such as 'domains', 'engagement', 'empowerment' and 'enacting dialogue';
- the firm advocacy of professional judgement in deciding on the balance (if any) between separate subject teaching and cross-curricular work of various kinds – a commitment in line with the non-prescriptive clauses of the 1988 Education Act (referred to above);
- the acknowledgement of the disproportionate amount of curriculum time previously taken up by numeracy and literacy – which it challenges without,

understandably, offering its own precise time prescription for the domains of language, oracy and literacy, and of mathematics;

- its head-on engagement with that elephant in the curriculum – national testing.

For the most part the *Cambridge Review's* claims to be innovative can be defended in terms of:

- its delineation of possible aims for primary education;
- its development of eight 'domains' of knowledge, understanding, skill and disposition;
- the centrality of language (broadly conceived) with particular emphasis on oracy;
- the incorporation of a significant local component to the curriculum;
- the characterisation of both national and local programmes of study as non-statutory;
- the commitment to flexible, creative interpretation of curriculum requirements by each school;
- the commitment to achieving high quality teaching and learning across the entire curriculum regardless of the amount of time allocated to each domain.

In relation to the assessment issues raised earlier in relation to the government-inspired *Rose Review*, the *Cambridge Review* offers a view very different from government-inspired orthodoxies:

- the abandonment of national testing at ages 7 and 11 in its current form;
- the monitoring of national performance over time through sample testing using a bank of items covering not just mathematics and English but the wider curriculum;
- the assessment of individual pupils to be based largely on teachers' judgements and to cover all types of achievement across the curriculum;
- the limited use of standardised tests and tasks to help moderate teachers' judgements in those aspects of learning amenable to such testing;
- further investment in professional development related to assessment for learning;
- scepticism about the possibility of devising reliable and valid 'single-level' tests;
- firm opposition to the inevitable backwash effects of current national testing and possible 'single-level' testing resulting in narrowing the curriculum and straight-jacketing teaching – at whatever age such testing takes place.

The immediate future

Soon after its coming to power in May 2010, the British Conservative/Liberal Democrat Government decided not to proceed with the proposed revision of the English primary curriculum based on the *Rose Review*. The Schools Minister asserted that 'It is vital that we return our curriculum to its intended purpose – a minimum national entitlement organised around subject disciplines' (June 2010). At the time of writing the implied discipline-based curriculum review has not yet taken place. The new Government, however, did not dissociate itself from the main recommendations of the assessment *Report* and went on to reassert the importance of national testing at age 11, though it did promise a review of the tests themselves.

At face value and without further details neither of these pronouncements on the primary curriculum and testing makes the major contribution to the reappraisal of English primary education that the next decade of the twenty-first century requires . . . which leaves the *Cambridge Review*, of which the writer of this paper is a contributing author and therefore less than objective.

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