

**ENTITLEMENT, FREEDOM, MINIMALISM AND ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE:
CAN THE CURRICULUM CIRCLE BE SQUARED?**

Robin Alexander
University of Cambridge

Last year, when I was asked to provide a title for this session, there was much talk of professional freedom, curriculum minimalism, and the need to ditch the accumulated curriculum baggage of 25 years and concentrate on 'essential knowledge in key subjects'. This, we were told, is what they do in 'high performing jurisdictions', that is to say those countries, states and provinces whose students come top in the PISA reading, mathematics and science tests at age 15.¹

I was struck by the fact that advocates of this course of action did not mention the principle underpinning England's national curriculum since 1988, the entitlement of all children educated in state-maintained schools to a curriculum that is broad, balanced and relevant, and which promotes - I quote from the 1988 Education Reform Act - their 'spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development and prepares [them] for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.'² Cumbersomely worded this may be, but if each of the identified aspects of children's development is given due thought and weight they add up to a not ungenerous account of what a national curriculum can offer. My anxiety that this hard-won vision of educational entitlement might be sacrificed to the professional appeal of freedom and minimalism prompted a brace of newspaper articles and this session's title.³

Entitlement, we should remember, was partly a response to 1970s inspection evidence that in many of England's primary schools children's access to subjects outside the 3Rs depended on what their teachers happened to be interested in or know something about. As a result, HMI reported, young children's encounters with, say, science, history or music were a matter of chance.⁴ The 1988 Act ended this curriculum lottery, and primary science was one of its success stories. 21 years on, the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) found that entitlement had been progressively eroded by a succession of government initiatives and that it urgently needed re-affirming: partly as a basic educational right, partly because children deserve a proper foundation for later choice, but also because research and inspection had demonstrated that in our best primary schools high standards in literacy and numeracy are associated with a curriculum that is broad, balanced and well managed.⁵ This is no coincidence, for we know that learning in one area can enhance learning in others.

Alongside their silence on entitlement, policymakers had become so fixated on those 'high performing jurisdictions', chiefly Singapore, Hong Kong and Finland, that they failed to ask

¹ Oates, T. (2010) *Could Do Better: using international comparisons to refine the national curriculum in England*, Cambridge Assessment.

² Education Reform Act 1988, 1.

³ Alexander, R.J. (2011) 'Primary schools need a broad curriculum', *The Guardian*, 15 March; Alexander, R.J. (2011) 'Evidence from the US tells us arts belong at the heart of the curriculum - but it's our last chance to make this happen', *TES*, 5 September.

⁴ HMI (1978), *Primary Education in England: a survey by HM Inspectors of Schools*, HMSO.

⁵ Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010), *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge, especially chapter 14 (hereafter referenced as 'CPR final report'). The HMI/Ofsted sources usually cited in relation to the association between breadth and standards are: HMI (1978) (Note 2 above); Ofsted (1997) *National Curriculum Assessment Results and the Wider Curriculum at Key Stage 2*; Ofsted (2002) *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools*; Ofsted (2008) *Improving Primary Teachers' Subject Knowledge Across the Curriculum: a summary of evidence from subject surveys (excluding English and mathematics)*; Ofsted (2009) *Twenty Outstanding Primary Schools*, Ofsted (2010) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2009-10*.

the necessary questions about society, childhood and education here in Britain. The word 'jurisdiction' tacitly sanctions this neglect, for it strips a country of the complexities of culture, values, social structure, politics and demography and reduces it to tidy legalities. But these are the very features with which we must engage if we are to understand education elsewhere, explain why one country outperforms others, and devise our own national curriculum.⁶

I wonder, too, whether 'jurisdiction' is chosen because it permits comparison at sub-national level to be smuggled into discussions of *national* curricula. This is taken to extremes in the third McKinsey report, whose high performers ('systems', admittedly, rather than 'jurisdictions') include Japan (a country with a population of 127 million), Alberta (a Canadian province with 3.7 million) and Aspire (a charter school system in the state of California with just 40 schools).⁷ On this basis, can we anticipate the one-school 'jurisdiction', scaled up to provide a template for England's 24,604 other schools?⁸

So am I as worried now that we have the Expert Panel (EP) report as I was last year? Well, although ministers initially appeared to favour what I call 'minimalism 1' - detailed prescription for English, maths and science, with the rest of the curriculum left to chance - entitlement to breadth may be back in favour. Indeed, the DfE's own international trawl produced two excellent reports and effectively turned the tables on 'minimalism 1' by showing that countries that do well in PISA and TIMSS require their pupils to study a broad range of subjects, and to pursue breadth within those subjects, up to age 16.⁹

So far so good - possibly. However, over half of England's secondary schools and an increasing number of primary schools have become academies, and although they must teach English, maths and science in some form and secure 'breadth and balance' (which as usual are not defined), they do not need to follow the national curriculum. Thus curriculum entitlement as a principle for the state sector as a whole, at least as it has been understood since 1988, appears to have been abandoned. Indeed, with so many schools able to opt out, we must ask in what sense the new national curriculum will be a national curriculum at all.

But this is not Expert Panel territory. They at least have endorsed breadth. They have made other positive proposals: on the centrality of knowledge; on relating such knowledge to children's development; on the importance of aims; on making space for local curriculum variation; on subdividing the four years of Key Stage 2 so that primary schools can more realistically secure progression and give each key stage a distinctive character; on the critical importance of oracy to children's learning across the curriculum and to the raising of educational standards.¹⁰ But I do have reservations. In the time I've been allowed I can touch on only some of them.

Let's start, as all curriculum planning should start, with aims. The EP confirm that aims are essential - they could hardly do otherwise - and they propose five broad 'aims and purposes of the curriculum'.¹¹ In some of these we even catch faint echoes of the principles and aims proposed by the CPR¹², which indeed the EP acknowledge. Like the CPR, the EP argue that such aims will apply with different force and in different ways as children move through their schooling, and that they should inform all aspects of school life, not just the curriculum.

⁶ On the importance and proper assessment of the place of culture in international educational comparison, see Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Blackwell-Wiley.

⁷ Barber, M., Whelan, F., Clark, M. (2011) *Capturing the Leadership Premium: how the world's top school systems are building leadership capacity for the future*, Dubai: McKinsey and Company. 24,605 is the figure on the DfE website in April 2012.

⁹ DfE (2011) *Review of the National Curriculum in England: report on subject breadth in international jurisdictions*, DfE; DfE (2011) *Review of the National Curriculum in England: what can we learn from the English, mathematics and science curricula of high-performing jurisdictions?* DfE.

¹⁰ DfE (2011) *The Framework for the National Curriculum: a report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review*, DfE (hereafter referenced as 'EP report').

¹¹ EP report, chapter 2.

¹² CPR final report, chapter 12.

There are two problems with the EP aims, however. First, if they are to be valid and useful, aims for a national curriculum - as I've said - need to arise from a searching analysis of the condition of British culture and society: the problems to be addressed, the individual and collective needs to be met, the values and principles to be advanced.¹³ The EP provide no such analysis or rationale, and in contrast to the CPR - which having posed its questions about aims then sought answers from national and international research surveys, written submissions and focus groups from Cornwall to Northumberland¹⁴ - DfE's call for evidence did not invite consideration of these matters. Instead, it launched straight into questions about the content of subjects whose candidacy for inclusion and pecking order had already been agreed. On the other hand, and my second concern, DfE did collect evidence on aims in high performing jurisdictions which the EP report duly summarises and takes as its point of reference.¹⁵ Such statements are definitely worthy of study, in relation not only to PISA but also to the fact of globalisation and the imperative of human interdependence - the CPR itself has a strong global dimension in the aims and the curriculum domains it proposes and the evidence on a wide range of issues on which it draws - but they should contribute to the national analysis for which I have argued, not replace it.

Regrettably, therefore, the EP report and the DfE's call for evidence combine to convey the clear message that the structure and content of the curriculum have been determined independently of the formulation of aims, and that the latter are cosmetic.

What of the much-vaunted 'essential knowledge'? Like the EP, the CPR has argued that knowledge is fundamental to all education.¹⁶ In doing so, it has challenged those who claim that knowledge is redundant, subjects are old hat, and a modern curriculum should deal instead with skills and creativity. Now skills and creativity are supremely important. But what kind of curriculum denies children access to some of humankind's principal collective ways of making sense? Or what skills can be exercised without knowledge? Or is it really possible to be creative yet ignorant? Or if subjects are old hat, how are they able to provide the frameworks within which the world's leading minds push forward the frontiers of scientific, medical and technical knowledge, and raise creative, artistic and literary endeavour to new heights? So let's dispense with such pointless polarities: children need knowledge *and* skill *and* creative capacities (and much more), not one to the exclusion of the others. And if subjects are old hat it's the way they are taught that makes them so.

Yet despite agreement with the Expert Panel over the importance of knowledge as such, I detect fudge over which knowledge matters most and what 'knowledge' actually means. In the EP report, 'essential knowledge' is treated as synonymous with 'socially valued knowledge' and 'subject knowledge'.¹⁷ But these are not the same. Subject knowledge may be socially valued but there's much socially valued and indeed essential knowledge that is not subject bound. Elsewhere the EP tries 'powerful knowledge'. But some of the world's most

¹³ From the CPR final report (p174): 'Prominent among the questions which the Cambridge Primary Review posed for itself and its witnesses in 2006 were these: What is primary education for? To what needs and purposes should it be chiefly directed over the coming decades? What core values and principles should it uphold and advance? Taking account of the country and the world in which our children are growing up, to what individual, social, cultural, economic and other circumstances and needs should it principally attend? Hinting that the task of defining the aims of primary education was not entirely straightforward, we also asked: How far can a national system reflect and respect the values and aspirations of the many different communities - cultural, ethnic, religious, political, economic, regional, local - for which it purportedly caters? In envisaging the future purposes and shape of this phase of education how far ahead is it possible or sensible to look?'

¹⁴ Alexander, R.J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L., Kershner, r. (ed) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge, chapters 10-13, 241-340; Alexander, R.J. and Hargreaves, L. (2007) *Community Soundings: the Cambridge Primary Review regional witness sessions*, http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/Downloads/Int_Reps/1.Com_Sdg/Primary_Review_Community_Soundings_report.pdf ; CPR final report, chapter 12. For briefings on the CPR's aims research surveys and community soundings: <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/publications/overview.php>

¹⁵ EP report, Annexes 1 and 2.

¹⁶ EP report, chapter 1; CPR final report, chapter 14, especially pp245-51.

¹⁷ EP report, chapter 1.

powerful knowledge arises from defiance of what is socially valued, so how does the conventionally 'essential' sit with the subversive possibilities of 'powerful'?

Anyway, who defines what knowledge is 'socially valued', 'powerful' or 'essential'? A so-called 'expert panel' whose expertise may or may not be superior to that of the thousands of others who have a view on such matters? The Secretary of State? E.D.Hirsch?¹⁸ Not the 5,763 respondents to the DfE's call for evidence, that's for sure, because – to take just one example among many – 78 percent of those who responded to the question on Design and Technology wanted it to be in the National Curriculum¹⁹ yet the four members of the EP relegated it to the 'basic curriculum'.

Moreover, the EP draw the boundaries of 'essential knowledge' somewhat tightly. 'The National Curriculum', they say, 'should set out only the essential knowledge (facts, concepts, principles and fundamental operations) that all children should acquire ...'²⁰ 'Facts, concepts, principles and fundamental operations' works reasonably well for mathematics, up to a point for science, but not at all well for English or many other subjects, unless one presumes that (a) knowledge in the national curriculum is to be reduced to propositions and (b) such propositions are to be transmitted but not investigated or tested in the way that true understanding demands. The verb 'acquire' after the EP's definition of essential knowledge seems to confirm this.

What of curriculum scope and structure? In a key diagram, printed twice for good measure, the EP present the curriculum as a five-division league table.²¹ Subjects in division one, the premier league, have 'detailed programmes of study and attainment targets'; those in division two have 'refined and condensed programmes of study and minimal or no attainment targets'; for those in division three there are no national requirements and subject content is determined by schools. Division four, oddly, includes two subjects that are specified yet 'not required'. In division five, at the bottom of the heap, are four subjects or areas of learning beyond the EP's remit, including that nettle that no national curriculum review has been prepared to grasp – though the Cambridge Primary Review did – religious education.²²

Into these five divisions are placed 17 subjects or areas of learning. But far from providing an argued reassessment of essential knowledge for the 21st century, the EP have in two senses merely confirmed the status quo. First, only those subjects that are in the current national curriculum are included in the new one, so earlier errors of both commission and omission are perpetuated. Second, we have yet again a high-status and protected core pursued at the expense of a low status and unprotected residue, except that in place of two divisions - what former HMCI and Permanent Secretary David Bell called the 'two tier curriculum'²³ - we now have five. There are minor adjustments in the lower divisions but overall the hierarchy remains exactly as it has been since the nineteenth century.²⁴

¹⁸ Hirsch's work has been warmly commended by both the Secretary of State and Tim Oates, chair of the EP. See, for example, Hirsch, E.D. (2007) *The Knowledge Deficit: closing the shocking educational gap for American children*, Houghton Mifflin.

¹⁹ DfE (2011) *Review of the National Curriculum: summary report of the call for evidence*, DfE, 31.

²⁰ EP report, 6.

²¹ EP report, 29 and 71.

²² The CPR argued (final report, 268) that 'faith and belief are so fundamental to this country's history, culture and language, as well as to the daily lives of any of its inhabitants, that they should remain within the curriculum even though some Review witnesses argued that they should be removed on the grounds that England is a predominantly secular society or that religious belief is for the family rather than the school.' The study of faith and belief (carefully differentiated from the conventional concept of RE) was proposed as one of the eight domains of the CPR's framework for the (primary) national curriculum (CPR final report, 261-278).

²³ 'We cannot afford, and our children do not deserve, a two-tier curriculum', Ofsted (2004), *Standards and Quality 2002-3: the annual report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools*, Ofsted. For further discussion of the divided curriculum and its educational consequences, see CPR final report, chapter 14.

²⁴ See the striking juxtaposition of subject requirements and hierarchies, from the 1904 Board of Education Regulations, the 1967 Plowden Report and the current National Curriculum, in the CPR final report, 211.

It's as well to remind ourselves of the consequences of a hierarchy which is so strenuously reinforced, as in England it is, by tests, initial teacher training, CPD, school inspection and resources (what later in its report the EP approvingly calls 'control factors'²⁵). It's a recipe for ensuring that those subjects that are least regarded are least well taught, thus confirming their lowly status, especially with pupils. Teachers who buck this trend do so – to their immense and lasting credit, especially among the children they inspire – against considerable odds. This structural double whammy is a far cry from the CPR's insistence that 'children have a right to a curriculum which is consistently well taught regardless of the perceived significance of its various elements or the amount of time devoted to them'.²⁶ Entitlement is meaningful only when it is about quality in the classroom as well as breadth on paper, and quality requires proper resourcing and close attention in teacher training, school staffing and CPD.

The EP may argue that they are offering the non-core subjects not relegation but freedom. But history and the CPR's evidence show that while our best schools maintain both breadth and quality, elsewhere the curriculum diminishes to what is tested and inspected, if not in nominal breadth then certainly in actual quality.²⁷ After evaluating its evidence on KS2 tests and Ofsted inspections the CPR recommended wholesale reform but stressed, lest its criticism of current arrangements be interpreted as rejection of testing and accountability in any form: 'The issue is not whether children should be assessed or schools should be accountable - they should - but *how* and in relation to *what*.'²⁸

It is against this background that we should view the EP's decisive break with the 1988 Education Reform Act's version of entitlement. The 1988 Act envisaged a national curriculum in which not only the constituent subjects were specified but also, in relation to each of them, the 'knowledge, skills and understanding [and] the matters, skills and processes' required by the end of each key stage.²⁹ Breadth, in other words, amounted to considerably more than the checklist of subject labels to which, in the lower divisions of the EP's league table, it has now been reduced. Since the EP have said that 'the National Curriculum should set out only the essential knowledge ... that all children should acquire',³⁰ it is hard to resist the conclusion that their naming of lower division subjects amounts to little more than tokenism, since nothing that these subjects entail is deemed sufficiently 'essential' to be specified.

It is in this somewhat unpromising light, too, that we should view prospects for the EP's proposed 'local curriculum' (division four in their framework), an idea the EP credits in part to the CPR³¹ but which, as they have presented it, I don't recognise. The CPR proposed a 'community curriculum' which, with 30 percent of the overall time, would encourage schools to forge local partnerships, address local needs and opportunities and give each curriculum domain local as well as national relevance.³² But in the EP report the local curriculum becomes a repository for those subjects that haven't made the grade. One of them, up to age 11, is citizenship, which in relation to David Cameron's promise to fix 'broken Britain'³³ seems pretty shortsighted.

The EP justifies re-arranging the current subjects rather than reassessing both them and other claimants to a place in England's national curriculum on the grounds that the government wishes to work within the current legislative framework.³⁴ Perhaps, mindful of 2010 and the Conservatives' last-minute scuppering of the Labour government's attempt to bring the Rose curriculum framework into law, ministers preferred not to take the risk.

²⁵ EP report, 55-6.

²⁶ CPR final report, 505.

²⁷ CPR final report, chapters 13, 14, 16 and 17.

²⁸ CPR final report, 500.

²⁹ Education Reform Act 1988, 2.

³⁰ EP report, 6.

³¹ EP report, 21.

³² CPR final report, 262-3 and 273-5.

³³ Prime Minister Cameron in speeches in April 2010. The fixative was to be 'the big society.'

³⁴ EP report, 20.

At the CPPS seminar on 23 April, Tim Oates said that my league table reading of the EP's subject framework was incorrect and the EP intended parity of commitment if not classroom time. In the interests of fairness to the EP I record his objection. But if he is right then the EP has managed to mislead not only myself but many other commentators too, as well as those subject associations with a particular interest in the subjects or areas that have apparently been relegated.³⁵ The issue, of course, is not so much the EP's intention, for its overt commitment to breadth is clear enough, but the classroom consequences of the model through which the intention is enacted.

My reading is further confirmed by the EP's approach to curriculum coherence. The EP lists 'control factors' such as testing, inspection and professional standards which they say will ensure that a revised national curriculum is taught as specified.³⁶ Elaborating this recently to the House of Commons Education Committee, Tim Oates said: 'A system is regarded as "coherent" when the national curriculum content, textbooks, teaching content, pedagogy, assessment, drivers and incentives all are aligned and reinforce one another.'³⁷

Apart from its excessive faith in the now heavily tarnished nostrums of systems theory, and its striking detachment from the messier realities and relationships of educational policy and practice, the Oates maxim raises three more immediate points about the curriculum. First, by 'curriculum coherence' the EP signals not coherence across the curriculum as a whole (as the phrase implies) but consistency of message and approach within a subject. Second, coherence in this narrower sense applies only to the first division subjects - English, maths and science. This tends to confirm the league table because there's an unavoidable implication that quality and standards in the other subjects don't matter, and to these subjects few if any control factors are applied. (In conversation, senior Ofsted staff have told me that school inspection checks for 'breadth and balance' may amount to no more than asking heads whether given subjects are listed in the school's paper curriculum, and what happens in the classroom is neither here nor there). In other words, the EP's 'curriculum coherence' portends consistency in three subjects at the expense of the quality of other subjects and coherence of the curriculum as a whole.

Third, far from being novel, hasn't this been tried before, and recently? In Labour's drive to raise standards through national literacy and numeracy strategies, the control factors - content, pedagogy, testing, inspection, teacher training, CPD, resources, support - were aligned exactly as Tim Oates proposes, producing what one of the CPR's witnesses called a 'state theory of learning'.³⁸ Yet was Labour successful in its bid to use multiple control factors to secure curricular and pedagogical compliance and hence raise standards? As the CPR has shown, the evidence on this was decidedly mixed and certainly not of a kind to warrant the pre-election claims about 'the highest standards ever'; but the collateral damage was undeniable.³⁹ And doesn't all this talk of 'control factors' sit rather uneasily with the

³⁵ See, for example, Richards, C.M. (2012) 'Framed or fudged? A primary perspective on "The Framework for the National Curriculum: a report by the 'expert' panel for the National Curriculum Review" ', *ASPE Newsletter*, March.

³⁶ EP report, 55-6.

³⁷ Oates, T. (2012) 'The role of high quality textbooks in raising educational standards – how we need to link textbooks to curriculum and assessment – the evidence from transnational analysis', submission to the House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into the Administration of Examinations for 15-19 Year Olds, 3.

³⁸ 'A state theory of learning ... based on the idea that a combination of repeated high stakes testing, a national curriculum and mandated pedagogy in literacy and numeracy will raise standards,' Maria Balarin and Hugh Lauder, in their research survey for the CPR 'The governance and administration of English primary education', quoted and discussed in CPR final report, 291-9.

³⁹ The evidence on Labour's 1997-2009 standards drive is assessed in the CPR final report, 469-74, and in greater detail in six of its commissioned research surveys, by (i) Tymms and Merrell, (ii) Whetton, Ruddock and Twist, (iii) Harlen, (iv) Balarin and Lauder, (v) Cunningham and Raymont, (vi) Wyse, McCreery and Torrance. These appear in Alexander, R.J. *et al* (2010) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge, chapters 17, 18, 19, 26, 28 and 29. See also Alexander, R.J. (2011) 'Evidence, rhetoric and collateral damage: the problematic pursuit of 'world class' standards', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(3), 265-86.

coalition's assurances about respecting teachers' expertise and judgement? Only connect, Expert Panel, only connect.

This brings me back to those 'high performing jurisdictions'. The lemming-like rush of governments worldwide to jettison what is distinctive about their national education systems in favour of what can be imported from PISA high performers - what I call 'PISA panic' - raises urgent concerns about the uses and abuses of international educational comparison.⁴⁰ Here, to close, are a few of them.

First, we must ask whether in relation to England's performance the panic is really justified. When the results of PISA 2009 were published, the government and the media immediately claimed that far from achieving 'the highest standards ever' under Labour, the performance of England's 15-year olds in literacy, mathematics and science had 'plummeted' while educational expenditure had rocketed.⁴¹ This interpretation of PISA 2009 informed both the 2010 White Paper and the 2010-12 national curriculum review. Tim Oates's high-performing jurisdictions/essential knowledge/control factors thesis⁴² was enthusiastically endorsed as the basis for this - possibly (we can only speculate) because it played both to traditionalist educational sentiment and the teaching profession's desire for greater freedom while keeping government firmly in control. However, expert commentators such as John Jerrim of IoE have comprehensively re-analysed England's performance in PISA 2009 and have concluded that neither PISA nor TIMSS justifies such alarmist claims or provides a safe basis for major policy changes.⁴³ Studies commissioned by the CPR from researchers at Durham University and the National Foundation for Educational Research came to a comparable conclusion about Labour's very optimistic spin on the international and national test data.⁴⁴ It works both ways: it would seem that in the matter of educational standards in England over time, neither New Labour hyperbole nor Coalition alarmism is justified. It would be unfortunate, to say the least, if the EP were to find themselves implicated in the orchestration of PISA panic.

Second, those who use international data to argue or imply a simple cause-effect relationship between a prescribed curriculum focusing on 'essential knowledge in key subjects' and the capacity to outperform other countries in TIMSS and PISA risk false correlation, or the philosophers' 'fallacy of division'. X may well be a common feature of high-performing education systems a, b, c, d and e, but that doesn't demonstrate a cause-effect relationship between feature and performance. And if x is also a common feature of *low*-performing systems g, h, i, j and k, then the claimed relationship is clearly inadmissible. In fact, a curriculum constructed in terms of 'essential knowledge in the key subjects' is the basis of most of the world's national curriculum specifications, PISA successes and failures alike,⁴⁵ though of course they may differ in their view of which subjects are 'key' and what knowledge is 'essential'. But - and here's what matters - countries certainly differ, often dramatically, in the conditions and practices through which the prescribed curriculum is enacted.

⁴⁰ For a recent discussion of these issues, see Alexander, R.J. (2012) 'Moral panic, miracle cures and education policy: what can we really learn from international comparison?' (the 2011 SERA Lecture), *Scottish Educational Review*, 44(1), 4-21.

⁴¹ Toby Young in the *Daily Telegraph*, 7 December 2010. In the House of Commons the Secretary of State said 'Literacy, down; numeracy, down; science, down: fail, fail, fail'.

⁴² Oates (2010) *Could do better* (see note 1).

⁴³ Jerrim, J. (2011) *England's 'plummeting' PISA test scores between 2000 and 2009: is the performance of our secondary school pupils really in decline?* DoQSS Working Paper 11-09, Institute of Education, University of London.

⁴⁴ Tymms, P. and Merrell C. (2010) 'Standards and quality in English primary schools over time: the national evidence', in Alexander, R.J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (ed), *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge, 435-460; Whetton, C., Ruddock, G. and Twist, L. (2010) 'Standards in English primary education: the international evidence', in Alexander, R.J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (ed) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge, 461-483.

⁴⁵ Benavot, A. (2008) 'The organisation of school knowledge: official curricula in global perspective', in Resnick, J. (ed) *The Production of Knowledge in the Global Era*, Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense Publishers.

Third, as David Hogan's extensive research in high-performing Singapore reminds us, the prescribed curriculum is a relatively blunt instrument for raising standards. What matters, again, is the curriculum as enacted by teachers, and the gulf between what governments prescribe on paper and what teachers do in their classrooms can be very wide.⁴⁶ The most effective way to raise and maintain standards – this is stating the obvious – is to improve teaching and learning.

Fourth, it's true that control factors like standardised textbooks (or national literacy strategies, or approved phonics schemes) can be used to narrow the gap between the prescribed and enacted curriculum and make teachers toe the line, though that's a pretty rum definition of professional freedom. However, as Hogan's Singapore research also shows, while such devices may raise the floor of teaching quality and educational attainment, they may also lower the ceiling, frustrating the creativity and idiosyncrasy that characterise outstanding teachers, and confining pupil performance to what is required. In so doing, they may also limit the capacity of the system to innovate and improve.⁴⁷

Fifth, although much is made of Finland, politically inconvenient truths about Finland's success are often ignored. Scandinavia's own experts argue that Finland's TIMSS and PISA performance comes from a culture which has an exceptionally high regard for literacy, a highly qualified, well respected, trusted and autonomous teaching profession, an unshakeable commitment to social and educational equity, a successful comprehensive school system, and close alignment not of curriculum prescription, testing, textbooks and inspection but of public policy in education, the economy, employment and social welfare.⁴⁸ This echoes Wilkinson's and Pickett's finding that reducing inequality is the key to raising national standards in education, health and other areas,⁴⁹ while OECD's own commentary on the 2009 PISA results underlines equity as a major factor in the success of PISA high performers.⁵⁰ For Britain and the United States, which are among the most unequal of all the OECD nations and where the gap between rich and poor continues to widen, this is a hard lesson for governments to accept, let alone apply.⁵¹

Sixth, Tim Oates argues that it's important to look back to how Finland reached its current PISA supremacy rather than focus exclusively on what the country does now. That makes sense. But Oates then claims that Finland's success 'can be traced to highly centralised control in previous decades, including control of textbooks'.⁵² In contrast, Pasi Sahlberg, Director General in Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture and one of Finland's leading researchers, argues that Finland got where it is now not by adopting such policies but by

⁴⁶ Hogan, D., Towndrow, P., Rahim, R., Chan, M. et al (2012), *Interim Report on Instructional Practices in Singapore in Secondary 3 Mathematics and English, 2004 and 2010*, Singapore: National Institute of Education.

⁴⁷ Hogan, D., Chan, M., Rahim, R. et al (2012, forthcoming), *Examinations and the Logic of Instructional Practice in Secondary 3 English and Mathematics Classrooms in Singapore*, Singapore: National Institute of Education (confidential pre-publication version, referenced with the authors' permission). However, we might also note Margaret Brown's observation that Labour's National Numeracy Strategy 'had the effect of increasing the range of attainment although it was designed to reduce it': Brown, M. and White, J. (2012), 'An Unstable Framework: critical perspectives on *The Framework for the National Curriculum*', <http://www.newvisionsforeducation.org.uk/2012/04/05/an-unstable-framework/>. Either way, the notion of 'control factors' is problematic.

⁴⁸ Lyytinen, H.K. (2002) 'Why are Finnish students doing so well in PISA?' Paris: OECD; Fredriksson, P. (2006) 'What is so special about education in Finland?' Paper for the EU Presidency Conference, Helsinki; Sahlberg, P. (2011), *Finnish Lessons: what can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press.

⁴⁹ Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone*, Allen Lane.

⁵⁰ OECD (2010) *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: equity in learning opportunities and outcomes (Volume II)*, OECD.

⁵¹ Alexander, R.J. (2010) 'World class schools: noble aspiration or globalised hokum?' (BAICE Presidential Address 2009), *Compare* 40(6), 801-18.

⁵² Oates, T. (2010) *Could do Better*, 16; Oates, T. (2012) 'The role of high quality textbooks in raising educational standards – how we need to link textbooks to curriculum and assessment – the evidence from transnational analysis', submission to the House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into the Administration of Examinations for 15-19 Year Olds, 3.

abandoning them.⁵³ Whose version of Finland's educational history is correct? (For further discussion of this issue, see this paper's Appendix, below).

Finally, while they praise Finland some governments prefer to copy the United States, hence high stakes testing, punitive inspection, supercharged superheads and the marketisation of schooling – strategies which the Finns reject and which, as Diane Ravitch, Sharon Nichols, David Berliner⁵⁴ and other leading American researchers show, don't necessarily deliver on standards. In the matter of learning from other cultures, or even jurisdictions, could it be the case that ideology counts for more than evidence?

Conclusion

One year ago I wrote:

At the start of the latest national curriculum review two versions of 'minimal entitlement' appear to be on offer. Minimalism 1 reduces entitlement to a handful of subjects deemed uniquely essential on the grounds of utility and international competitiveness. The first criterion is too narrowly defined and the second falls foul of the hazards of international comparison. Minimalism 2 ... strives to balance the different ways of knowing, understanding, investigating and making sense that are central to the needs of young children and to our culture - and hence, surely, to an entitlement curriculum - and achieves the required parsimony by stripping back the specified content of each subject to its essential core. This is a very different core curriculum to the winner-takes-all version with which we are more familiar. Rather than a small number of core *subjects*, we have core *learnings across a broad curriculum*, every subject or domain of which, by reference to a well argued set of aims, is deemed essential to a basic education.⁵⁵

It will be evident that if the prescribed curriculum is to be slimmed down as the CPR, like the government, believes is necessary, then I favour minimalism 2. Indeed, the idea of 'core learnings across a broad curriculum' informed the CPR's 2009 proposals for a domain-based curriculum.⁵⁶ I have shown that while the EP report endorses breadth in the prescribed curriculum, its framework retains features of minimalism 1 and as enacted it could compound those problems of the divided curriculum which have diminished the education of generations of children and frustrated the cause of raising standards.

At the same time, the review's stated rationale for its approach to 'essential knowledge' - the need to emulate the curricula of 'high-performing jurisdictions' - collides head-on with the hazards of international comparison. Further, its advocacy of control factors is so preoccupied with education elsewhere that it ignores recent lessons much closer to home, for between 1997 and 2010 such control factors were systematically and vigorously applied in England's schools, but to debatable effect. There is much in the EP report to be welcomed – and much more to the report than what I have been able to discuss - but on these fundamental matters I remain unconvinced. We now await the government's response.

Appendix: Finland and England

Since I first presented this paper, Tim Oates (chair of the DfE's national curriculum review Expert Panel) has complained that his statement 'Finland's success can be traced to highly centralised control in previous decades, including control of textbooks' has been quoted out of context and as a consequence his views have been misrepresented. The one charge doesn't necessarily follow the other, for the quoted statement seems to be capable of only one reading, namely that Finland's success can be traced to highly centralised control in previous decades, including control of textbooks. Yet, because it's important to be accurate as well as fair on

⁵³ Sahlberg (2011) *op cit*.

⁵⁴ Ravitch, D. (2010) *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: how testing and choice are undermining education*, Basic Books; Nichols, S.L. and Berliner, D.C. (2007) *Collateral Damage: how high-stakes testing corrupts America's schools*, Harvard Education Press.

⁵⁵ Alexander, R.J. (2011) 'Primary schools need a broad curriculum', *The Guardian*, 15 March.

⁵⁶ CPR final report, chapter 14 and recommendations 46-53, 494-5.

such matters I felt I should seek further clarification about educational cause and effect in Finland from some of that country's leading experts, including Pasi Sahlberg himself. I now summarise their views.

- Because of substantial national differences on a number of significant dimensions – population size, culture, demography, language, educational goals and priorities, education system structure and structure, and so on – all educational comparisons between Finland and England should be made with extreme caution.
- At the same time, it is not legitimate to claim, as do some - especially in the United States - who find Sahlberg's 'Finnish lessons' politically unacceptable, that such differences wholly invalidate this particular exercise in learning from comparing.
- Oates's assertion that 'Finland's current success can be traced to highly centralised control in previous decades, including control of textbooks' contains an element of truth in as far as Finland's system was, and in some respects remains, centralised, and textbooks have been a significant part of the mix.
- However, it is emphatically not correct to claim or imply a direct cause-effect relationship between centralisation, textbooks and PISA success in Finland.
- Further, even if there had been an initial impact of centralised measures, including textbooks, during the 1960s and 1970s, it is naive to presume that this could continue to have a significant impact half a century later, by which time the teachers concerned had retired, Finland's education system and policies had evolved far beyond the 1960s vision, and the measures for assessing impact had changed out of all recognition. (On the latter point, the international measures available during the 1970s and 1980s were the few and suspect IEA and IAEP surveys, followed during the late 1990s by TIMSS, and only from 2000 by the more reliable PISA surveys).
- The central point, however, is that Finland's reforms centred on the introduction of the *peruskoulu*, or 9-year municipal comprehensive school, in place of the earlier mix of primary schools, grammar schools and civic schools. The aim of these reforms was not to raise standards in as then unheard-of tests but to secure equality of educational opportunity and equity in educational experience and outcome, and 'to build a more socially just society with higher educational levels for all'.⁵⁷ In other words, it was believed - and was later confirmed not just by Wilkinson and Pickett's epidemiological studies⁵⁸ but also by OECD itself from the PISA data of many more countries than Finland - that narrowing the equity gap is not only a social and educational good in itself but also enhances attainment. This is precisely the line that the Cambridge Primary Review took when, at the top of the list of policy priorities for the new British government in 2010, it placed this:

*Policy priority 1. Accelerate the drive to reduce England's gross and overlapping gaps in wealth, wellbeing and educational attainment, all of them far wider in England than most other developed countries. Understand that teachers can do only so much to close the attainment gap for as long as the lives of so many children are blighted by poverty and disadvantage. Excellence requires equity.*⁵⁹

- Although the coalition government's Pupil Premium acknowledges this relationship, England's educational reforms since 1998 have generally prioritised two rather different objectives, which the Finns see as working against each other. The first is to raise measured educational standards in literacy and numeracy. The second is to increase parental choice of schooling through marketisation and competition. Both elements

⁵⁷ Sahlberg, *op cit*, 1.

⁵⁸ See note 49.

⁵⁹ Cambridge Primary Review (2010) *After the Election: policy priorities for primary education*, CPR Briefing. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

consciously follow the American model of charter schools and high stakes testing that was subsequently disowned as a failure by one of its leading initial advocates, not least because it widened rather than narrowed the equity gap (Ravitch 2010).

- To the Finns, as I have reported, these policies are in direct opposition, and they are therefore not at all surprised that the achievement gap in England (as in the United States) remains as wide as ever. For them, as for OECD itself,⁶⁰ equity is the key.
- The other key is teaching quality, and here there are further contrasts. What Finland has done is to front-load system reform by concentrating on what it sees as the two essential prerequisites for a high-achieving school system: equity and teaching quality. The Finns are categorical in their belief that it is the combination of these, going back to the *peruskoulu* legislation of the 1960s and building on it through reforms to teacher recruitment and training, that has produced the high standards that Finland has achieved not just in PISA but across the curriculum as a whole. For their part, England's governments have rejected equity in favour of 'choice' and competition, and have introduced quality controls or levers which operate much further down the line than in Finland, and arguably are applied too late to make a real and lasting difference. These are headed by high stakes testing and inspection which, it will be noted, focus on outcomes rather than input and process. The government's one 'Finnish lesson' to date, marginally raising the bar for graduate entrants to teacher training, is a very modest adjustment compared with what is required of teachers in Finland. So the front loading is too weak and the controls or levers are applied too late.
- My Finnish informants agree that the contrasting reform essentials of the two education systems might be summarised as follows:

Finland: *peruskoulu* (municipal comprehensive schools) + highly trained teachers = equity + standards.

England: marketisation/competition + high stakes testing/inspection = choice + standards.

- On this, Pasi Sahlberg told me:

My feeling is that in Finland we have so many young Finns interested in teaching because equity and equality of outcomes are so high in the list of key objectives in education here ... I am quite convinced that the strong equity focus in Finland has been the driving force and the magnet for people to choose teaching. Marketization + testing would be a rapid killer here as it has been with our Scandinavian neighbours.⁶¹

- And, of course, the greater the attraction of teaching to high calibre applicants, the higher the teacher training entry and qualifications bar can be raised, yielding direct and positive gains in educational standards: a virtuous circle. Thus it appears to be in Finland.

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Note: this is an expanded, annotated and referenced version of the CPPS seminar presentation. For an account of the Cambridge Primary Review's proposed aims/domains based curriculum, and the extensive evidence on which it is based, see the CPR final report, pp 174-278. For a downloadable 4-page briefing: http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/revise_2011-02/CURRICULUM_BRIEFING_REVISED_2_11.pdf.

⁶⁰ See note 50.

⁶¹ Pasi Sahlberg, personal communication, 28 May 2012.