

That's the way it is

Editorial

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New Labour's investment in primary schools, and the literacy and numeracy efforts that went with it, were the proudest educational boasts of its first term in government. "I want particularly to single out the primary school literacy and numeracy strategies," announced Tony Blair in a speech to teachers in February 2001. "This is a great achievement in its own right. It is also a beacon for the future."

Eight years on, that achievement looks less substantial, while the beacon burns dimmer than it did then. The literacy and numeracy strategies, admirable though they were in intent and even achievement, have spawned a target-dominated primary school culture which distorts the balance of early-years learning and which locks schools into a politically determined agenda rather than one that is centred, as originally intended and as any such policy should be, on the needs of the child.

To do it some credit, the government knows that there is a problem and knows that it cannot rest indefinitely on its wilting laurels in primary education. That is partly why in 2007 it gave Professor Jim Rose the task of reviewing the primary school curriculum. But the Rose review seems also to have been an attempt to pre-empt the larger Cambridge review of the same subject under Robin Alexander, whose interim report was published this week. Compared with Mr Rose's narrowly drawn terms of reference - which largely presuppose the continuation of existing priorities - the Alexander team have gone back to first principles. They have also delivered a shattering verdict.

At the core of the report is the conclusion that the government's preoccupation with tests and standards has become the cuckoo in the primary school nest. The report is positively in favour of the national curriculum. It is not hostile in principle to the focus on literacy and numeracy. But it is insistent that the prioritisation of measured standards in these fields, which Mr Rose's terms of reference do not allow him to question, creates pressures - particularly intense at the start and finish of the primary phase - which "increasingly but needlessly" compromise children's right to a broad and balanced primary education. The most prominent casualties of this distortion - which is driven by Whitehall's conviction that breadth is incompatible with "the basics" - are the arts, humanities and, in some cases, science.

Mr Alexander and his colleagues want this two-tier system replaced by eight broad but equal "domains" of skill and knowledge. At its heart would be language, oral skills and literacy. The national tests, especially at age 11, would be reformed so that tests and targets can no longer wrench the system away from its larger purpose of providing broad and balanced learning for all children. It is no shock that this readable, humane and rational report (which is far more illuminating than its official summaries) has been widely supported by teachers.

The Cambridge report is one of those rare documents which one reads and then says: yes, that's exactly how it is, that's what is wrong with the way things are being done and, yes, that's the way a better system ought to be run. In the past, reports of this authority and quality were often commissioned by governments which were genuinely concerned to obtain the full facts and best advice for dealing with difficult problems - and respectful of politically inconvenient conclusions too. Nowadays, largely because of political fear of inconvenient findings, such reports have to be privately financed and

written independently, as this one has been. Mr Alexander has written a report that ought to define the collective approach to primary education for a generation. When Rose is published too, there will be a huge opportunity to put the system right. New Labour rarely listens to advice it does not script or control. But this is an issue and a moment that should not be sacrificed to political dogma.

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