

Framed or Fudged? A primary perspective on “The Framework for the National Curriculum: a report by the ‘expert’ panel for the National Curriculum Review”

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Make no mistake. This report, if acted upon, would reinforce, rather than, mitigate, some of the deleterious trends to which English primary education has been subject in recent years. It would massively reinforce the place of English and mathematics, and restore the place of science, as *the* core subjects of a four-fold Primary Curriculum – the essential “core” National Curriculum, the second-class foundation subjects of the National Curriculum, the third-class subjects of the basic curriculum, and the nebulous fourth -class area of the local curriculum (if any time can be found for it). The core subjects would have detailed programmes of study for each of two-year key stages and testable attainment targets. That core pre-eminence would be reinforced by national testing at the end of key stage 2 –endorsed, not even questioned by the panel- and itself reinforced by performance tables of progress at two-yearly intervals, probably based on yet more testing which the government, or private agencies, would provide. The tyranny of testing would continue unabated or, more likely, would be even more burdensome .

As foundation subjects art and design, music, a modern foreign language, PE and geography, already marginalised by current testable emphases, would be even more marginalised by having “condensed” programmes of study and minimal or no attainment targets. They would remain “compulsory” but only in a subsidiary, almost token, sense. History could join them as a foundation subject but could just as easily be slid into the core if Gove wants, as he probably will. The real relegated “losers” are design and technology and ICT – supposedly compulsory but with schools determining appropriate specific content which could be mean little more than token recognition in a curriculum dominated by the “core” three and by national tests. Paradoxically these are the very areas of particular relevance to a technological problem-solving age. Weep James Dyson!

Give these emphases and the Coalition government’s commitment to national testing and yet more information in league tables it is disingenuous indeed of the “expert” panel to proclaim that “the National Curriculum should not absorb the overwhelming majority of teaching time in schools.” This assertion will be met with deserved derision by those, influenced by the Cambridge Primary Review, who are attempting to provide a genuinely broad and balanced curriculum where each component is given sufficient staffing, time and resources to be taught properly. The impoverished curriculum foisted on too many schools by a punitive inspection and testing regimes will be reinforced.

Don’t be misled. Unlike the report of the Cambridge Primary Review this is not a truly independent report. It has clearly been “framed” with political imperatives in mind. It does indeed meet the very tight, politically constrained remit it was given at the outset. The fitness for purpose of the current legal framework for the school curriculum is not questioned, even indirectly; there is no hint that politically difficult and inconvenient changes in primary legislation might actually be required to ape the curricula of the “highest-performing jurisdictions”. There is no questioning of the validity or reliability of the international tests beloved of government ministers. Unconditional support, even welcome, for the highly contestable external testing regime at the end of Key Stage 2 is smuggled in in a short, single paragraph. Perhaps most telling many, if not all, of the panel’s proposed list of system-wide aims could have been written, may have been written, by Gove himself as suggested by the prioritisation of “economic needs” and the blatant politically motivated importance accorded the appreciation of “national cultures, traditions and values of England and the other nations within the UK”. Thus are mini-capitalist little Englanders to be fostered.

The report may be the “best” that the panel thought they could come up with in the current political circumstances. They should, however, have resisted the temptation to fudge matters by tempering educational aspiration with contemporary political correctness. The future of the primary curriculum is too important to be subject to short-term political priorities- here endorsed by a compromised scarcely independent “expert” panel. Children in primary schools deserve better.

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