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Jim'll fix it

Sir Jim Rose, former director of inspection at Ofsted, is heading up the government's review of the primary curriculum. Just how much of a stir is he likely to create?

Peter Wilby
The Guardian, Tuesday August 5 2008

Mention the name of Sir Jim Rose, who is currently reviewing the primary curriculum, and the words "safe pair of hands" are never far behind. What does the phrase mean? "I used to play a lot of rugby," he suggests, with a slightly embarrassed giggle. The record speaks for itself, however.

In 1991, a Conservative government, close to a general election it would struggle to win, appointed Rose as one of "three wise men" to review the delivery of primary education. They concluded, to put it in shorthand, that child-centred or "progressive" teaching had gone too far, allowing the Tories to reinforce public prejudices about what leftist teachers and councils had done to primary schools. In 1999, Rose led an inquiry to consider whether Sats were being dumbed down to help New Labour achieve its targets for raising standards. Happily, it found, as David Blunkett, then the education secretary, put it in his diaries, "precisely what we had expected ... there was no question of any kind of 'fiddling'". In 2005, ministers asked Rose to consider how reading was taught. Pressure was growing from MPs and newspapers - but not from most academic experts on reading and early childhood education - for a wholesale return to phonics. Rose duly concluded that "synthetic phonics offers the vast majority ... the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers".

This is probably an unfair summary, since all the reports contain nuances and qualifications, and most of what they say may be right. Moreover, by all accounts, the "wise men" of 1991 were split and Rose sat on the sidelines while the two protagonists, Chris Woodhead, later head of Ofsted, and the educational researcher Professor Robin Alexander slugged it out. But, each time, Rose caught the prevailing political wind.

"Jim has excellent political antennae," said a former colleague from HMI, which Rose joined in 1975. "He's good at giving ministers what they want, but not necessarily what they need." If that sounds like damning with faint praise, Conor Ryan, a former New Labour education aide, puts it more kindly: "He has both considerable integrity and a pragmatic sense of what's going to work. He can take on board a range of entrenched opinions and yet reach a consensus." John O'Leary, a former Times education editor and a member of the Sats inquiry, adds: "He's worldly wise. He knows what he can get away with."

At 69, Rose is still a lean and wiry man, who was good enough to be invited to join Leicester Tigers training squad in the days when rugby union was wholly amateur. He perhaps owes his ability to steer through clashing educational ideologies to playing as a scrum half, this position being a link between forwards and backs who are (or used to be) quite different animals, temperamentally and physically.

The brief for his latest job is to "strengthen their [schools'] focus on raising standards in reading, writing and numeracy", introduce foreign languages, increase "curriculum opportunities for child initiated and play-based activity", and reduce prescription. All this must be achieved without changing the extent and nature of the testing regime, which is specifically excluded from Rose's remit. It sounds as though ministers want to allay parents' complaints about their children being over-pressured without upsetting the Daily Mail. No doubt, as they now say in educational circles, Jim'll fix it.

The timing of the curriculum review is itself controversial. True, it follows a secondary curriculum review and the introduction of an early years "foundation stage" and you shouldn't, as Rose puts it, "just extend one backwards, the other forwards, tie a knot in the middle and say that's primary education". But the biggest primary review for 40 years, organised by a Cambridge University team independently of the government, under the former "wise man" Alexander, had been at work for a more than a year before Rose's review was announced in January. The Cambridge team's wide-ranging research got wide media coverage, sometimes on front pages. The headlines included "Poor performance linked to substandard classrooms", "Government policy has created 'impersonalised education'", "Study reveals stressed out 7- to 11-year-olds" and others apparently hostile to new Labour's policies and achievements. Now Rose's review appears with a suspiciously similar email address, a claim that it too is independent, and an identical deadline for its final report of spring 2009 (an interim report is due in October this year).

Spoiling operation?

Is this an attempt to spike Alexander's guns? "There are very clear distinctions," replies Rose. "His is a no-holds-barred look at primary education. Mine is simply the curriculum: the what rather than the how, or the measurement thereof. I've met Robin on several occasions and we've shared thoughts."

Rose, just appointed ("out of the blue," he says) as president of the National Foundation for Educational Research, is an affable man, but tends to talk as though framing an official report, tiptoeing through political minefields, striving to put the emphasis in exactly the right place. He is most categorical about the importance in his life of his two grandchildren - he and his wife sold a planned retirement home in Norfolk to be near them in the south-east - but even that he puts rather oddly, saying "their formative stages of development were within our ambit".

He was born in Leicester a few months before the outbreak of the second world war, and the local accent is still distinct. His father, a quantity surveyor who also played in a brass band, joined the Rifle Brigade as a bandsman and was captured by the Germans in northern France. He was not released until 1945 and, for a time, was classified missing, presumed dead. The infant Jim was therefore reared by his mother, grandparents and a "very book-focused" aunt who read him stories in the air-raid shelter. He went to state primary schools and then grammar school. His first ambition, derived from his grandfather's enthusiasm for allotments, was to follow a career in horticulture. But he drifted towards teaching, vaguely hoping he might combine the two, since gardening was then a school subject.

As it turned out, he became a pioneer of Nuffield science in primary schools, which until then had confined their science teaching largely to what was called nature study. Nuffield put great emphasis on open-ended inquiry. So was Rose a trendy? He answers with a firm negative.

He began his teaching career in the city of Leicester and got his first headship there - at the junior school he attended as a pupil - before he was 30. In those days, Leicestershire and Leicester were separate authorities, with the former at the cutting edge of "progressive" ideas and the latter resolutely old-fashioned. "Leicestershire," says Rose, "had this thing about open-plan buildings and children's choices driving the curriculum, and some of that was very difficult to swallow. It was a denial of what children are capable of."

His suspicion of extreme "progressive" approaches was strengthened by his second headship, also in Leicester. It involved opening a new city-centre junior school to cope with an influx of east-African Asians in the early 1970s. He began with 400 children, only 17 of them from indigenous backgrounds: "We had these youngsters coming in who had to learn English as an additional language. There was no way in which you could give them a diet which was just 'real books'."

His sympathy for phonics was evident during his years in HMI, where he became head of primary inspection in 1986. "He was ahead of most of us in recognising the role of phonics," said a former colleague. "We used to joke that, if a PE lesson was to get a good rating, it should include phonics."

So did he, all those years later in 2005, begin his inquiry into reading with an open mind? There is a long silence before he answers yes. He seems weary at the very mention of phonics and keeps saying "call it phonics if you like". He doesn't, he says, deny the importance of language comprehension, which continues to develop from the cradle to the grave. On the contrary, he strongly supports the promoting of speaking and listening skills and, in Leicester, he used dramatised stories to help Asian children. But, he continues, children need word recognition skills if language is to flourish and these need to be taught systematically.

"I say that synthetic phonics is the best demonstration of systematic practice. I don't really see how children can get a foothold in reading unless they understand how the alphabet works and can do the coding and decoding. Anybody who thinks they will just discover that decoding system is really way off beam. But phonics isn't the be-all and end-all. It's essential but not sufficient."

Phonic triumph

His report reflects this view and, in fact, emphasises that "far more attention needs to be given, right from the start" to speaking and listening before it even mentions phonics. All the same, the pro-phonics lobby greeted it as a triumph - with some justice, since the review concluded "the case for systematic phonic work is overwhelming" - and Ruth Kelly, then the education secretary, announced revision of the national curriculum to make "synthetic phonics ... the first strategy in teaching all children to read". Shouldn't Rose have stressed more strongly that phonics isn't the be-all and end-all? "It's very difficult when people are so shrill not to be identified with the shrillness rather than the content. The reading wars separated out the rival factions very strongly. It was megaphone communication across a wide gap."

You might say that Rose, by 2005, would have been all too familiar with megaphone communication. When Woodhead took over at Ofsted in 1992, Rose became, in effect, his right-hand man. It is hard to imagine two more contrasting characters. "There is not an excess about Jim," said a former colleague. The same would not be said of Woodhead.

Some Ofsted staff wanted a less confrontational inspection regime and looked to Rose for a lead. They didn't get it. "We felt that Woodhead was misusing the inspection evidence," recalled a colleague. "We hoped Jim would speak out, at least in a coded way. But he didn't counter Woodhead at all, even internally." "He played the role of the dutiful civil servant," was another comment.

I asked Rose if he tried to be a moderating influence. "My job was to try and tell it as it is and remember the goal is to better children's education. Whatever else Chris Woodhead did, he gave the nation a wake-up call on certain issues. He may well have gone too far in terms of confrontation. That's the naature of Chris Woodhead."

Did they, I ask, have rows? A long silence follows during which I wonder whether it is possible to have a row with so mild-mannered a man as Rose. "Not rows in that sense. But I tried to get more evidence together before we took positions. You had to test findings very carefully, on the 15,000 teachers [who, Woodhead announced, were incompetent], for example. It was that kind of thing, where you really had to fight your corner to make sure what you were saying had some reliability behind it."

Did he ever think of resigning? There's an even longer silence. "No ... Not resigning, no ... No, I don't think I did ever actually think of resigning ... I probably considered whether there might be other posts..."

Much as the education world may then have yearned for some grand gesture, perhaps it was as well that Rose carried on. Men and women like him - conscientious, hard-working, undogmatic, entirely lacking in airs and graces, flashiness or egotism - keep the system working. As he repeatedly puts it, "I don't make policy". If he sometimes seems too assiduous in following his masters' commands - and legitimising what they intended to do in the first place - at least he does it in a way that calms everybody down.

Explained: the two reviews

The primary review

Leader: Professor Robin Alexander, fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge. Former professor of education, Leeds and Warwick universities.

Set up by: trustees of Esmee Fairbairn Foundation.

Aims: identify the purposes the primary phase should serve; the values it should espouse; the curriculum and learning environment it should provide; and the conditions necessary to ensure the highest quality and address the future needs of children and society.

Email address: enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk

Final report due: spring 2009.

Odds on effecting major change: 5-1 against.

Primary curriculum review

Leader: Sir Jim Rose, educational consultant. Former director of inspection, Ofsted.

Set up by: Ed Balls.

Aims: advise on how the primary curriculum should change to ensure all children gain a good grounding in reading, writing, speaking, literacy and numeracy; offer schools greater flexibility; allow time for a foreign language; place greater emphasis on personal development; support a smoother transition from play-based learning; encourage creativity.

Email address: primary.review@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

Final report due: March 31 2009.

Odds on effecting major change: 1-5 on.