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The primary curriculum review will solve nothing

With its lack of real independence, clear from the brief, Sir Jim Rose's review of the primary curriculum is likely to be nothing more than a short-term 'fix-it', says Colin Richards

[Education Guardian](#), Friday 25 January 2008 18.53 EST

However little (or much) senior civil servants know about the state of education, there is no doubt that they are politically astute. Their drafting of schools secretary Ed Balls' brief to Sir Jim Rose, the former director of inspection at Ofsted, to conduct an "independent" review of the primary curriculum (announced as part of the Children's Plan) is a case in point. As head of the 2006 review of early reading Rose backed synthetic phonics, the politically popular option.

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The draft's rhetoric is superficially very persuasive, linking long-established professional notions of "a broad and balanced entitlement" with school-friendly references to "flexibility to meet pupils' individual needs and strengths"; with parent-friendly references to "more choice and flexibility in start dates"; with populist references to "raising standards"; and with employer-friendly references to "success in the labour market".

However, the hyperbole embodies a number of contradictions: breadth of curriculum yet a reduced entitlement despite the proposed introduction of a modern language in Key Stage 2; personalised learning yet the retention of a strong element of curriculum prescription; "development of the whole child" yet a still greater emphasis on the traditional "basics".

Amid this rhetoric are two key non-negotiables, the first one expressed positively to the person leading the review (and therefore indirectly to the rest of us): "A key objective of your review is to enable schools to strengthen their focus on raising standards in reading, writing and numeracy" (interestingly, not speaking and listening).

This is followed by a negative reminder that "Your review is focussed on the curriculum and is not considering changes to the current assessment and testing regime" - thereby none too subtly undermining the very possibility of fundamental change which the brief is supposedly advocating.

The proposed review is politically astute in other ways. It has pre-empted a fundamental review of the primary curriculum by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), some of whose senior officers have been rash enough recently to raise doubts and encourage fresh thinking about the current curriculum and assessment regime.

The review neatly subordinates them to providing evidence, instead of developing a professional consensus for change and then making recommendations.

In the same way, the review too seeks to pre-empt Cambridge University's wide-ranging Primary Review, which is genuinely independent and has been generally welcomed by teachers, schools and



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those who represent them.

By its reference to possibly cutting the number of subjects taught, "particularly" (but not exclusively?) in Key Stage 1, the review is also attempting to neutralise, or even buy off, a vociferous, well-organised early years lobby concerned about over-prescription. But prescription will certainly remain, and may well intensify, in relation to numeracy and literacy as a result of the review, given Rose's track record over the teaching of synthetic phonics.

The review also attempts to offset some recent policy initiatives from the Conservative party who have at least tried to engage in fresh thinking. The Tories' avowed concern "to set schools free" is echoed by the review's brief to reduce prescription "where possible" (but presumably not in relation to numeracy and literacy).

The Conservatives' concerns about the attainment of summer-born children and the possibility of their repeating their last year in a test-dominated primary school (a daft notion) is countered in the review brief by the much more sensible proposal for greater flexibility in start dates for children entering primary school.

To ministers and senior civil servants the proposed review heads off a number of potential challenges. For those of them with long memories the prospect of getting Jim Rose to head it up must have reminded them of Lord Dearing.

Dearing's intervention at the behest of a Conservative government bought off professional discontent about curriculum overload more than a decade ago. But its "solution" proved short lived.

With its lack of real independence, clear from its brief and from the track record of the reviewer, this initiative is likely to be nothing more than a short-term "fix-it".

• Colin Richards is emeritus professor at the University of Cumbria and a former HM staff inspector for the school curriculum



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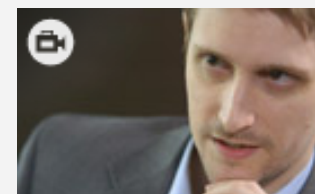
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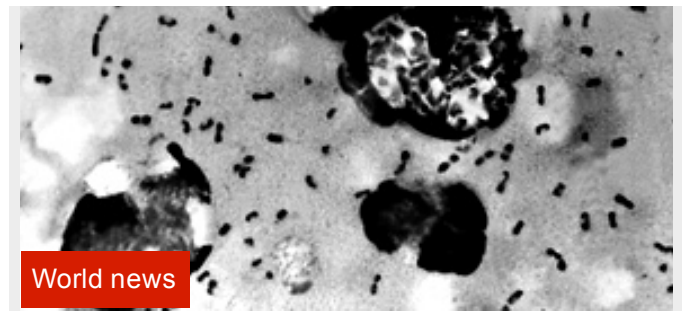
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