



Cambridge Primary Review Trust

...children, their world, their education

PRIMARY COLOURS

Westminster postcards from the
Cambridge Primary Review Trust

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PRIMARY COLOURS

**Westminster postcards
from the Cambridge Primary Review Trust**

June 2015

This is an occasional publication from the Cambridge Primary Review Trust (CPRT), a not-for-profit company established in April 2013 with the aim of building on the evidence, findings and principles of the Cambridge Primary Review in pursuit of the highest possible quality of primary education for all children.

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Introduction

The Cambridge Primary Review was, and remains, the UK's biggest and thematically most comprehensive enquiry into primary education for half a century. Launched in 2006 and supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it gathered a large array of local, national and international evidence before publishing 31 interim reports and, in 2009, a final report and research compendium.

After an intensive period of dissemination, the Review's work was taken up by Cambridge Primary Review Trust (CPRT), a not-for-profit company established in 2013 with generous support from Pearson. Since then, CPRT has pursued an ambitious programme of policy engagement, research, school leadership and professional development. It has set up 13 regional networks whose work is spearheaded by appointed co-ordinators, and an expanding alliance of leading primary schools which in their own distinct and lively ways enact the CPR vision. It has maintained the Review's insistence on the centrality of evidence to educational policy and practice by launching research projects, commissioning research reviews and publishing reports and briefings. It has entered into a partnership with Pearson to produce well-grounded professional development materials and services for schools. And it has built up a mailing list of individuals and organisations with whom it shares and exchanges information and ideas. All this activity is driven by the Review's twelve aims for primary education and the Trust's eight priorities for achieving a better educational future for our children.

At the heart of the operation is the CPRT website, re-launched in July 2014. Alongside news, events, information, publications and other resources, the website's weekly blog has aimed to provoke discussion about issues of the moment. Contributors have so far included the Trust's five directors, heads and teachers in primary schools, students, journalists and guests. Though all contributors support the Trust's work and vision, the views they express are their own. Some write with enthusiasm, some with gravity, some with anger and some with wit; but all are committed to the cause of a primary education which secures children's mastery of basic skills while extending beyond these to enlarge their understanding and enrich their imaginations and lives.

It is inevitable that government policy has been a prominent and recurrent topic for our bloggers. This is not just because the launch of the CPRT blog coincided with the countdown to the 2015 UK general election. More fundamentally, bloggers' preoccupation with policy reflected unease about its sheer pervasiveness and intrusiveness, notwithstanding ministers' repeated promises to give teaching back to teachers. It reflected, too, a growing disenchantment with many of the policies that primary schools have been required to implement during the past twenty years; the shaky or even non-existent evidence on which too many of these policies have been based; the sheer poverty of the educational vision for young children that all but exceptional ministers espouse (and, sadly, few such ministers find their way to DfE); the cynically tokenistic character of the attendant official consultations; and the way that having invited comment some ministers resort to personal abuse in order to marginalise comments and evidence that don't fit their view of the world.

These concerns, we must immediately emphasise, were not unique to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010-15 which provided the context for the first two years of CPRT's work. In fact, they closely mirrored findings about the Labour administration of 1997-2010 recorded in the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review and amply captured in press reports of ministers' all-too-revealing responses to the Review's findings. By 2010, in the judgement of the Review's most pessimistic analysts, education policy had become the problem rather than the solution.

This perception reflected, and continues to reflect, a wider belief that parliamentary democracy in the UK is in crisis, especially in England. The fact that in May 2015 a newly elected Conservative

government could claim a ringing mandate from ‘the British people’ for its highly controversial public service reforms, on the basis of support from a mere 24 percent of those Britons entitled to vote, confirmed the extent of the democratic deficit. And the fact that one of the first policies announced by the new government was to force struggling schools to become academies shows just how conclusively ideology had triumphed over evidence. For, as one of our contributors shows, the claim that simply by virtue of their status and governance academies outperform other schools can no more be sustained by the evidence than can the inference that the best way to improve poor schools is to turn them into academies. And that’s just one example among many.

But it would be wrong to infer that these concerns, serious though they are, have diminished the vital and rewarding experience of teaching young children. On the contrary: many of these pages celebrate that experience, and they demonstrate as well as commend the more generous educational vision for which the Trust and its preceding Review have consistently stood.

So with a new government in place we thought it would be salutary, and perhaps even entertaining, to bring some of these blogs together as a commentary on policy and policy making and a reminder of what really matters for children, their world and their education. The blogs were not written for the incoming government’s ministers and advisers, even that’s how this volume’s subtitle has presented them. They are, of course, of at least equal interest to everyone else involved in primary education. Many speak directly to the condition of teachers and children, and empowerment of both groups is a recurrent theme both in these pages and in the work of the Trust.

Of this publication, then, we might say, using the words with which the Cambridge Primary Review final report was launched: ‘this ... is not just for the transient architects and agents of policy. It is for all who invest daily, deeply and for life in this vital phase of education, especially children, parents and teachers.’

A final practical note. Instead of academic referencing the original blogs made extensive use of hyperlinks and in this online version these have been retained. A separate version, formatted for printing out, retains the references as footnoted URLs and is available on the [Trust's website](#).

Robin Alexander
Chair of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust
and former Director of the Cambridge Primary Review
June 2015

ELECTION 2015 AND BEYOND

PRIMARY EDUCATION: WHAT DO WE WANT?

Robin Alexander

It's party conference time again. Season of grandiose claims, hollow promises, choreographed ovations, and now – a conference first – chunks of speech that are too important to be delivered.

When Ed Miliband confessed to forgetting those vital paragraphs on migration and the financial deficit at the Labour Party Conference, I found myself hoping the other party leaders would follow suit by forgetting to talk about education. Forlorn hope. In the countdown to the 2015 UK general election we can reliably predict that the Govine legacy will be lauded as the most radical and successful programme of educational reform ever, at a stroke hauling a failing education system back from the brink and making our schools truly 'world class.' World class: among crowning political fatuities only 'the best ever' comes close. Best ever since when? 2010? 1066? The big bang? And who was around to collect the evidence?

Leaving such rhetorical games to those who choose to play them, but reminding ourselves that the evidence assessed in the Cambridge Primary Review final report provided a more measured account of ministerial achievements, the final party conferences before the 2015 election trigger something closer to home: our quest to identify what we believe should be the next government's policy priorities for primary education.

In 2010, drawing on the Cambridge Primary Review final report and reactions to that report voiced at the ensuing dissemination conferences, [we nominated 11 policy priorities](#). These recommended specific action on children's voice and rights, the early years, aims, curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, professional development, school staffing and educational partnership. These nine were topped and tailed by two imperatives which remain as urgent now as they were then: 'Accelerate the drive to reduce England's gross and overlapping gaps in wealth, wellbeing and attainment', and 'Rebalance the relationship between government, national agencies, local authorities and schools.' By many accounts the wealth and attainment gaps have widened while the removal of the remaining checks and balances between Westminster and England's schools have made our education system more centralised than ever.

Although, a year on from CPR's final report, I was able in the [Brian Simon Memorial Lecture](#) to record modest progress in relation to some of our 2010 priorities, and although it's clear that CPR and CPRT have played their part in securing this, most of them required and require continuing vigilance and effort. That's why the [eight priorities](#) with which CPRT was launched in 2013 echo some of those from 2010; and it's why CPRT's new research projects and [professional development programmes](#) focus on voice, learning, teaching, curriculum, assessment and tackling disadvantage.

Here's the invitation then. Please tell us what the next government should do – or not do – in order to help schools provide the best possible primary education for all the nation's children.

You may wish to voice your views by adding comments to this blog. Or you may prefer to email us. If you are involved with one of CPRT's regional networks you may want to encourage discussion locally or within your own school. In any event, please tell us what you propose. We'd also encourage you to look again at the CPR and CPRT priorities referred to above. Are these still as pressing as they were? Do some override others?

Of course, you may feel this exercise has little point on the grounds that governments are influenced more by ministerial prejudice and tabloid headlines than by evidence or reason. Despair at Westminster's impervious arrogance has been prominent lately in Scotland, but south of the border it's pretty widespread too. You may also have registered the CPR/CPRT leitmotif that policymakers have less influence than they believe and teachers have more, while what counts for children is not the latest DfE initiative but what happens in classrooms. That's true, too. Yet policy undoubtedly frames and constrains our professional actions, especially in a regime as centralised and ideologically-driven as England's, and to that extent we should do our utmost to influence it.

So please accept this invitation. Let us know what you want the makers of education policy to do for our children's primary education after the 2015 general election.

26 September 2014

PRIMARY EDUCATION: WHAT'S THE STORY?

Gregory Frame

Parliament will be dissolved on Monday 30 March, and the starting gun for the election campaign will be fired. Thus far, education has not dominated the story of the 2015 general election, one of the most unpredictable in recent memory.

There has been a flurry of announcements in recent weeks from the Conservatives and Labour about what they will do should they secure the keys to Downing Street on May 7th (a possibility that appears unlikely without the support of Nigel Farage, Nicola Sturgeon or Nick Clegg), but nothing approaching the blizzard that has been afforded the economy, the issue that is likely to determine the outcome.

The narrative framework that has dominated the long election campaign is this rather simple distinction: keep the Tories behind the wheel and let them steer us to economic security and a balanced budget, or give the keys to Labour and allow them to stop along the way to share the proceeds of recovery with all of those who have been left at the side of the road by zero hours contracts, welfare reform and the 'bedroom tax'. Education has, it must be said, been something of a subplot to this story.

In advance of the publication of the party manifestos and CPRT's own priorities for the next government, I will outline what each of the major parties in England have to say on education, and how this sits in relation to the broader narratives they have sought to spin.

Conservative Party

The Conservatives are looking to continue their existing policies by establishing many more free schools and academies outside the control of local authorities.

On March 9th, [David Cameron pledged to open at least a further 500 free schools in England](#) should the Conservative Party secure a majority. This is being pursued even though there is little evidence to support it: not only have there have been two high-profile failures of free schools ([Al-Madinah in Derbyshire](#) and [Discovery in Sussex](#)), there is also [no evidence](#) to support Cameron's claim that 'free schools don't just raise the performance of their own pupils – they raise standards in surrounding schools in the area too.'

Similarly, as [Warwick Mansell](#) suggested in his recent blog on the subject, there is plenty of evidence to contradict the Government claim that sponsored academies are improving faster than the national average. Nevertheless, Cameron also announced on March 9th that all primary and secondary schools rated as 'requiring improvement' or 'inadequate' by Ofsted would be forced to become academies.

This, coupled with the usual tough talking about 'the basics' of reading, writing, and maths, and a utilitarian approach to education driven by the party's subservience to neoliberal dogma (hence [Cameron's declaration](#) that all children 'should be taught how to turn a profit'), and the Tory approach to education after 2015 represents a perpetuation of what has come before: pursuing an ideologically-driven agenda despite the mounting evidence against these policies. More important than evidence, it seems, is the maintenance of a carefully-cultivated image of being simultaneously

opposed to state intervention in most areas of public life, while retaining an authoritarian streak when it comes to ensuring 'higher standards'.

Labour Party

Many in education are disenchanted with the Labour Party's unwillingness to commit to changing course substantially from what the Coalition has pursued. It is this caution that has dogged Labour's approach to opposition since 2010, but it is entirely in keeping with its broader attempt to cultivate an image of being a slightly more agreeable version of its Tory opponent in all matters (and education is one of them).

With this in mind, Labour has pledged to restore local oversight of schools to ensure 'high standards', with a particular emphasis on improving teachers' access to high quality professional development in order to appear supportive and 'on the side' of teachers as they face increased pressure to deliver better results and higher standards, [working longer hours for comparatively less pay than other professions](#).

To sweeten the pill further, [Ed Miliband recently committed a future Labour government to strengthening creative education in schools](#), 'guaranteeing every young person access to the arts and culture'. Of course this is a move welcomed by CPRT which is committed to a broad, balanced curriculum and has specifically campaigned for the arts, but we would echo the concern expressed by the NUT that creative education cannot be a 'simple add-on to a system which is otherwise left unchanged.'

This particular policy could be viewed, if one were so cynically minded, as merely a further attempt by Labour to widen the miniscule shaft of light that exists between the two larger parties. While it has been noted that [Labour and the Tories are more ideologically distinct now than they have been for at least two decades](#), Labour is keen to ensure that the image they project, particularly on the economy but also on education, is one of broad similarity with the Conservatives ('tough on standards'). In so doing, they hope to retain electoral credibility, although whether such a strategy can be successful remains to be seen.

Liberal Democrats

The image the Liberal Democrats have sought to cultivate is of a calming, moderating influence on the extremes represented by the two major parties: more fiscally prudent than Labour, less heartless than the Conservatives. The Lib Dems have been particularly keen to emphasise their distinction from the Tories in this regard, trumpeting their achievements in Government in the areas of Early Years (free school meals for all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, and 15 hours free early education to all three-to-four year-olds and 40 per cent of two-year-olds), and establishing a £2.5 billion Pupil Premium aimed at assisting those pupils who most need it.

What would they do if they secured a majority? [David Laws reiterated recently](#) that their number one priority will be to protect the education budget, something the Conservatives have not guaranteed. Their two flagship achievements while in Government will likely be extended, with more money pledged for disadvantaged children and free childcare for all two year olds.

This is welcomed by CPRT which remains committed to tackling social and educational disadvantage and helping schools to find practical ways to address these problems, and has [two research projects](#) in this area currently in progress. However, it remains obvious that such initiatives will only meet with limited success when broader economic policy is destined (if not explicitly designed) to further exacerbate inequality. This argument, strongly presented in CPR's final report, is even more

urgent following five years of economic austerity that [shows little sign of abating whatever the makeup of the next government.](#)

UKIP

As increasing poll numbers have forced Ukip to develop policies in areas other than immigration, so the party's inclination towards an uncomplicated restoration of a supposedly more simple, stable and glorious past has made itself even more apparent. In keeping with this, its pledges in education involve allowing existing schools to become grammar schools (with one established in every town) and a 'back to basics' approach that focuses on the 3 Rs. Given its policies in higher education, where students pursuing STEM subjects will be offered tuition fee waivers, it is clear that UKIP is not committed to a broad and balanced curriculum but rather a relentless and dogmatic focus on 'standards' with a curriculum skewed heavily towards the sciences. Most disturbing, however, is the recent announcement from Nigel Farage that [children of new immigrants should be prevented from attending state schools for up to five years.](#)

Green Party

The Green Party, the membership of which has soared in recent months as left-leaning voters grow increasingly disgruntled with Labour, has committed to a series of measures that will likely prove popular with the profession: scrapping Ofsted and replacing it with a 'collaborative system of monitoring school performance', allowing teachers, schools and local authorities to work together to maintain high standards. They also advocate replacing the national curriculum with a set of 'learning entitlements' in order to liberate teachers to adapt classes to the needs of their pupils and deliver a more 'enriching and rewarding' experience. They aim to bring free schools and academies back under local authority control, abolish Sats and league tables, and make school optional until age 7. Most encouraging, however, is the [determination that schools should nurture students' potential](#) and not merely become clearing houses for the 'next generation of workers'.

Where does that leave us?

The disenchantment with the Labour Party's unwillingness to challenge the Conservative 'consensus' in all matters, not just education, is symptomatic of a wider crisis of vision in politics. As economist [Will Hutton](#) and satirist [Armando Iannucci](#) have lamented in recent weeks, our politicians have become little more than glorified bean-counters obsessed with the budget deficit, while steadily handing over power and responsibility to the market under the guise of allowing citizens more freedom from central control.

These developments are disturbing not just in the immediate context of the upcoming election, but also in the longer term. This hardly needs further reiteration, but we are undergoing rapid and potentially seismic changes that are likely to have a huge impact on this (and the next) generation of children: the size and constitution of Britain's population, the pervasiveness and power of digital technologies and the escalating consequences of climate change, all of which are indicative of the continued and increasing impact of globalisation.

If these conversations are being had, they are not loud enough, or they are viewed solely through the prisms of other factors: [the economic 'global race' consistently emphasised by the Conservatives](#) which posits a disturbingly utilitarian view of education (again exposed by CPR), or the apparent dangers of uncontrolled immigration from Ukip, and the pressure this will put on the education system.

What this summary of policies indicates is that not only is the debate about education occurring on a small and diminishing patch of turf but that it is not tied anywhere near substantially enough to the wider concerns our society faces in the coming years beyond the desire for a secure and growing economy. Those wider concerns are one of the three pillars of the Cambridge Primary Review and CPRT, hence 'Children, their world, their education'.

So what's the story of primary education in 2015? It seems much like those we have heard before, and it fails to address many of these challenges.

There are other avenues that demand exploration: during the past year CPRT has, in accordance with its [eight priorities](#), offered critiques of the Government's policies on [curriculum](#), [assessment](#), [academies](#) and its use of both [national](#) and [international](#) evidence. It has pressed the case for [children's voices](#) as an essential component of educational practice, [endorsed the UN's vision](#) of 'a sustainable future with dignity for all', called for a curriculum that [takes seriously the concept of global citizenship](#), [shed light on the plight](#) of children who by necessity take on responsibilities for loved ones with little acknowledgement or support, and [publicised the enormous challenges](#) faced by primary schools in areas of rapid demographic change. And it has backed these critiques and campaigns with research projects, reports and practical action through its regional networks and schools alliance. All this work is summarised on the [Priorities in Action](#) page of CPRT's website and much of it can be downloaded for circulation and discussion.

CPRT's priorities address some of the genuine and most urgent challenges we face, but instead of substantive debate about them and compelling visions of the future, most of our politicians are obsessed with their images and [preoccupied with each other's kitchens](#). Cutting through this sound and fury is our first task.

27 March 2015

NONE OF THE ABOVE

Stephanie Northen

There's an election looming. Hopefully, teachers will take the opportunity to revenge themselves just a little on the government that gave us Gove and hollow promises of workload reform. Hopefully, they will manage to make it to the polling station and put a lovely big black cross next to any party that appears vaguely aware of the very real pain they are enduring.

Of course, funding is a crucial issue. There's talk of strikes and the [NAHT warns](#) of 'harsh, austere' times ahead – particularly troubling for those in sixth-form or FE colleges. But the seemingly inevitable funding cuts would be better borne if accompanied by a change in the political zeitgeist. The hectoring 'must-do-better' tone that trickles down to the classroom from the two main parties is an outrage. Currently [40 per cent of NQTs bail out after their first year](#), but it's not just the naïve newbies who are finding it hard. [It's also the experienced ones](#) who finally just can't take it any more – [68 per cent considered chucking it in last year](#). This is not surprising given that the job routinely demands a 70-hour working week from people it equally routinely smears as inadequate.

Sadly, though, both Labour and Conservatives are persisting with the [tough talk](#) though there may be a glimmer of hope in [Tristram Hunt's recent speech to the NASUWT](#). That aside, both parties still tediously insist on the importance of raising standards. Labour's [Changing Britain Together](#) – a product of Agenda 2015 – takes the banal rhetoric further, demanding that standards are 'driven up'. When I go into my classroom in the morning and look at the children sitting there, I wonder how precisely should I achieve this driving up? Hell, yes, it sounds tough, but these are small children not US Navy Seals.

There is little discussion about how standards are to rise as funding falls. Nor is there much sign of sensible political debate as to what these raised standards look like. Teaching children to recognise a fronted adverbial or to do subtraction by decomposition at ever younger ages does not appear to me – [nor to the CPR Trust with its support for a broad, balanced and rich curriculum](#) – to be valid aims. As we are poised once again to embark on the enervating 'run up' to Sats, the ideal of a system that – in the words of the [CPR final report](#) – 'assesses and reports on children's achievements in all areas of their learning, with the minimum of disruption,' seems more remote than ever.

True, [Ed Miliband has promised](#) to strengthen 'creative education,' but this welcome move away from the Gradgrindian Gove isn't actually in Changing Britain Together. Instead there is the pledge 'to bring a *relentless focus* on the quality of teaching'. Now that sounds jolly. I shall look forward to the spotlight shining in the eyes. And we have the promise 'to *require* all teachers to continue building their skills and subject knowledge on the job'. It's that tone again. The choice of verb tells us much about the party's attitude to the profession. Doesn't it understand that most teachers are gagging for training, desperate for any help they can get in the face of a largely hostile Ofsted, beleaguered local authorities and bullying politicians – never mind a new curriculum and the constant reinvention of the assessment wheel?

Also in Labour's Changing Britain Together is the charge that, under the Tories, 'underperformance in schools has been allowed to go unchallenged'. Er, sorry, but what planet is Dr Hunt on? How can the shadow education secretary have sanctioned that statement? Teachers and heads are worn out responding to a multiplicity of challenges. [Days and nights](#) have been sacrificed to organising mock Ofsteds, to reviewing marking policies, to feeding the Raise Online machine and to crunching statistics until they reveal that every pupil's performance is improving, steadily and evenly. There is

no place for footnotes to explain that this child was ill, or this child's father ran off with another woman, or this child's mother lost her job or this child's dog died or this child, dare I say it, is just not very good at literacy...

What a shame Labour has been so slow to challenge the madness of the current assessment culture. It distracts from the true work of teachers who need, [as the CPRT puts it](#), assessment that 'enhances and supports learning' rather than distorting it.

But no, we don't have assessment that enhances and supports. We just get the tough talk. It's a little like being bullied. Everyone thinks it's ok to join in. Take, for example, the person who arrived at our school recently. He was a critical friend – with the emphasis on the critical – who spent a lot of time 'interrogating' the online performance statistics. Along the way, he announced that pupil background was *no excuse* for poor performance.

There it is again; that patronising 'you-must-do-better' tone. Actually, we do not spend our time making excuses. We spend it patiently teaching and nurturing children, some of whom have extremely challenging home lives and consequently struggle to progress as fast as others. This is a fact and not an excuse. These children fall behind as a result of family disadvantage and poverty. They are the losers in our unequal society. CPR, in its final report, urged the government to give the highest priority to eliminating child poverty. CPRT reinforced the importance of this goal by [making its own priority](#) 'tackling the continuing challenge of social and educational disadvantage and finding practical ways to help schools close the overlapping gaps in social equity and educational achievement'.

Schools deal with the consequences of disadvantage every day. When they succeed in closing the gap just a little, they are picking up the pieces of political failure and should be thanked not rebuked. Every time a minister agrees to a policy that will exacerbate rather than reduce inequality, he or she needs to visit a classroom and see the consequences for children who have, for many reasons, no one to help them practise their times tables, learn their spellings or to read them a bedtime story.

Labour, like the Lib Dems, the Green Party, Plaid Cymru and the SNP, appears committed to investment in the vital early years as a means of redressing the balance slightly. Its manifesto highlights the fact that poverty and inequality are increasing. Teachers, with support, can do much to help create a more equal society. Overworked and rebuked, they can't. They will just leave. It's time for Labour to wake up and smell the cheap staffroom coffee.

10 April 2015

JEKYLL AND HYDE

Warwick Mansell

Education policy-making is two-faced, and perhaps never more so – surprise, surprise – than during the run-up to a general election.

It has a kindly aspect, which talks soothingly about helping teachers to make this the best country in the world in which to educate children. And – as [Stephanie Northen](#) illustrated in last week's CPRT blog – it has a tougher side, or what could be called a Robocop '20 seconds to comply' mode for fans of late 1980s sci-fi, in which politicians boast of having 'zero tolerance of failure.'

This contrast was illustrated for me perhaps more vividly than ever in this week's launch of the Conservative Party manifesto. But it also sits underneath what seems a different vision being put forward by the other party that may be in position to lead a government from May: Labour.

So, to the [Tory manifesto](#) first. And I must avoid getting sidetracked here by its highly questionable claims about recent governments' education records, such as on the performance of UK pupils in international tests; on the record of sponsored academies; and on the management of free schools. But what struck me first about this document was the juxtaposition, in the bullet points with which the education section starts, of the manifesto's plan to 'help teachers' with its insistence that there would be 'zero tolerance of failure' in primary schools. Meanwhile, there would be takeovers of 'failing and coasting' secondaries, which would automatically be turned into academies.

This latter move, by the way, is what is needed as the evidence shows overwhelmingly that academy status is the only way of improving schools. (Not really. See [here](#) and [here](#)).

The question is whether it is possible to talk meaningfully about supporting teachers to do their jobs well while at the same time espousing 'zero tolerance of failure' when the schools in which they work underperform.

I think this is a very difficult circle to square, in the reality of how schools operate: the hunch must be that if you use 'zero tolerance', so making schools extremely fearful as to their next bad set of results, you probably will make them unattractive workplaces for many teachers or would-be teachers.

In fact, the Conservatives' tough talk seems to crowd out more narrowly-framed statements which might be seen as more supportive, from a teacher's viewpoint, in this document.

Its promise about 'helping teachers' is followed by the words 'to make Britain the best country in the world for developing maths, engineering, science and computing skills'. This strangely implies that these named subjects are to be privileged: is world class status for the others not something at which to aim?

And while the manifesto pledges to cut the time teachers spend on paperwork and to reduce the burden of Ofsted, no further details are provided.

Instead, under 'zero tolerance of failure', there is talk of "ensuring our best headteachers take control of failing primary schools", and a factually dubious statement that 'nearly 800 of the worst-

performing primary schools have been taken over by experienced academy sponsors with a proven track record of success’.

Any school judged to require improvement by Ofsted would be ‘taken over by the best headteachers’, with ‘coasting schools’ ‘forced’ to accept new leadership. This last promise, by the way, comes despite the current Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, telling the House of Commons Education Select Committee in October that she was ‘not really a forcing type of person’.

That other f-word – ‘failure’ – stalks this document, with promises that pupils unable to meet ‘required standards’ in primary school will re-sit tests at the start of secondary, ‘to make sure [a heroic assumption, on which books could be written] that no pupil is left behind’.

The document adds: ‘We will expect every 11-year-old to know their times tables off by heart and be able to perform long division and complex multiplication,’ without admitting that one of those implied stipulations – the teaching of long division in primary – was opposed by virtually every maths educator I know as counterproductive.

Readers can make their own judgement on whether what seems to me to be the stress-infusing atmosphere which this continuation of our present policy regime implies in schools will help create the right kind of learning environment for our children. As suggested above, I am sceptical, to say the least. I think this document is certainly out of line with the more thoughtful, much less top-down vision of the Cambridge Primary Review, which talks – particularly in chapter 23 of its final report - about bullying policy centralisation.

This document reminds me again that the tough, posturing, unilaterally-decided and shallow incentives of ultra-politicised policy-making in England are in collision with what might be seen as some of education’s more nurturing, positive and consensual ideals. Yet, tragically perhaps, politicised policy-making usually wins.

A contrast with Labour’s recent policy pronouncements is revealing. [Labour’s manifesto](#) itself is striking in its brevity – only two pages on the detail of schools policy – though its statements that ‘children develop and learn best when they are secure and happy’ and that ‘education is vital to achieving personal fulfilment [as well as] economic prosperity’ are worth noting.

I found the speech of [Tristram Hunt](#), shadow education secretary, to the annual conference of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers last month more interesting. Mr Hunt pledged that the negativity of recent policy-making, which he attributed in particular to Michael Gove through the latter’s attacks on educationists as ‘enemies of promise’, would end. Mr Hunt said: ‘I promise you today: this deplorable, hostile, almost militaristic rhetoric towards the profession dies alongside this Tory government’.

He added: ‘The idea that our children’s potential can be fulfilled if we just raise the targets, stamp our feet and demand one more heave is now, surely, approaching its end stages.’ The days of education by diktat were over, he vowed, with Labour moving schools away from the ‘narrow, “exam factory” vision of recent years’.

Mr Hunt concluded that he wanted to ‘remove this centrally-controlling, profession-bating, target-obsessed government from inflicting five more years of evidence-free market mania on our children’s future’.

Cynics – and readers of Cambridge Primary Review reports from 2007-9 and ministers’ responses to them – might wonder if the last quotation could apply almost equally to the last Labour government.

But the real question for Labour, should it lead the next administration, is whether its warmer words about standing back and supporting teachers will withstand alternative policy-making pressures.

Specifically, will central government be able to back off even slightly from tough-sounding interventions in schools, predicated as they always are on being intolerant of failure? Even in Mr Hunt's speech there was a glimpse of that tension, as he talked of a reformed Ofsted but which needed to be 'an interventionist inspectorate tasked with rooting out underperformance wherever it lies'.

So, is it possible to preside over a national government pledging to raise standards without resorting to macho – and shallow – 'zero tolerance' in its rhetoric and in the detail of its policy-making? I think so, and that an alternative vision is possible for our schools, which moves away from policy-making's notorious 'discourse of derision' towards something more supportive. But it will need some courage from the politicians.

17 April 2015

HERE WE STAND

Robin Alexander

And so we come full circle. In 2010 the Cambridge Primary Review presented party leaders with [eleven post-election policy priorities](#) for primary education. Distilled from the Review's evidence and from public discussion of its final report, these urged a more principled approach to election perennials such as curriculum, assessment, standards and accountability while asking political leaders to frame such vital matters by something a bit more visionary than 'zero tolerance', 'tough', 'relentless' and those other pugilistic epithets of political choice that betray such a limited view of the education of young children. Judging by the 2015 manifestos, even that was too much to ask.

Yet during the early days of the coalition government we sensed encouraging movement on several of CPR's priorities. The Pupil Premium aimed to tackle the twin challenges of social disadvantage and educational underperformance, challenges that headed our 2010 list; government enquiries were initiated on curriculum, assessment, professional standards and primary school staffing – the last of these specifically at CPR's request and with CPR involvement; and the new government's ministers promised to re-empower teachers after 13 years of Labour prescription and micro-management.

But the honeymoon was short, the enquiries' outcomes were pre-empted by narrow terms of reference and disdain for evidence and genuine debate, and the old language and mindsets soon reasserted themselves. With a vengeance, indeed, for the national curriculum became narrower, testing became more obsessive, accountability more punitive, and ministerial interventions more abusive. As for the vision of 21st century primary education that CPR had offered but policymakers had evaded, this advanced no further than the PISA league tables: a reasonable aspiration in terms of standards in the basics, certainly, but hardly a rounded education.

Consequently, when the Cambridge Primary Review Trust was launched in 2013, we felt obliged to retain some of [CPR's 2010 priorities](#) alongside others that the new organisation wished to pursue. So in the current list of CPRT priorities, to which I return below, curriculum and assessment remain in need of genuine reform rather than the ideological gerrymandering to which we have been treated, and closing the wealth/wellbeing/attainment gap is still at the top of our list because what government has given with one hand via the Pupil Premium it has taken away with another through economic and social policies that have made Britain [the most unequal OECD country in Europe in terms of income distribution](#), with [3.5 million of its children living in poverty](#) (with numbers predicted to rise further) and [one million people dependent on food banks](#).

That is not all. At the end of CPR's final report we noted the intense pressures to which by 2009 primary schools were subject but applauded their vital communal role in a changing, fractured and unequal society and their maintenance, against the odds, of a stable core of humane and enlightened values. This being so – and it was an outstanding achievement – we felt able to conclude that on balance the condition of England's primary education system, though severely stressed and in need of rebalancing, was sound.

Others, though agreeing with CPR's judgement about individual schools, were less sanguine about the system as a whole. If in 2010 this was open to debate, in 2015 it no longer is. For the word 'system' implies unity, coherence, consistency and hence equity, and in England these conditions no longer apply.

Thus the checks and balances vital to education in a democracy have been swept away, and without local mediation schools have little protection from ministers' caprice, megalomania or what NAHT's [Russell Hobby](#) calls their 'crazy schemes' – those back-of-the-envelope bids for media headlines that teachers and school leaders are forced by legislation or Ofsted's compliance checks to implement, regardless of their cost to children's education or teachers' self-esteem.

The schooling structure itself is deeply fractured by gross discrepancies in the level and quality of local support on which schools can draw, and the ideological drive for academies and free schools. This sector, expanded by dint of grand promises, ominous threats and [questionable evidence](#), is privileged by greater freedoms, grandiose management titles, inflated top salaries and, some suggest, [gongs in return for compliance](#). Meanwhile, rank and file staff are under unprecedented pressure and the [number of teachers prematurely leaving the profession is at a ten-year high](#). Not only mid-career burnout either: though the exact number is disputed, it is clear that [many teachers leave within a year of qualifying](#).

Hardly a 'system' worthy of the name, then, let alone one which it is at ease with itself.

Yet the paradox identified in the Cambridge Primary Review final report – of individual schools doing wondrous things for and with their pupils, not least in circumstances of exceptional social challenge and against a background of system fragmentation and policy folly – continues to apply. These blogs have so far included reports from two such schools with which CPRT is working closely, and the blog that will follow this one provides inspiring evidence from a third, Sarah Ruddy's school in Leeds. What is doubly impressive is that Sarah, together with [Jo Evans](#) and [Iain Erskine](#), who provided the earlier blogs from schools, so manage the taxing circumstances of education in 2015 that they are able both to lead outstanding schools and to give time, energy and experience to supporting the work of CPRT.

But those wider social challenges are not receding and one of them, population growth and the widening gap between the number of school places required – 900,000 over the next decade – and the number available – is likely to become very pressing indeed during the next parliamentary term. Indeed it already is. In some local authorities, [only a minority of parents secure their first choice of primary school for their children](#), and this transfers pressure from schools to families, with children facing longer journeys to and from school, siblings attending different schools, increased traffic congestion, and diminishing opportunities for friendships made within school to be maintained outside it. Primary schools, meanwhile, get bigger and bigger. They cope, as our schools always do, with this as with other externally-induced challenges. Yet at what cost to children and teachers?

Which brings us to the election manifestos. In this last matter there is widespread concern that the coming crisis over primary school places has neither registered with the political parties nor been included in their costings. Maintaining school spending at current levels won't be enough. Is this policy lacuna emblematic of a more general loss of touch with reality?

The manifestos themselves were helpfully prefigured in [Greg Frame's recent blog](#) and detailed in the [BBC's excellent policy guide](#), while the blogs of both [Warwick Mansell](#) and [Stephanie Northen](#) drew attention to the conflicting languages, within both the Conservative and Labour manifestos, of support and retribution.

It is of course easy to dismiss manifestos as cynical posturing; worse, as in the case of the LibDems' 2010 commitment to scrapping university tuition fees, as promises waiting to be broken. It is certainly the case that what matters is what political parties do, not what they say they will do. The promise most regularly and predictably broken by both Conservative and Labour is to reduce government prescription and give teaching back to teachers. Fine sentiments in opposition, but observe what happens when your friendly ministerial wannabe succumbs to the power of the big

desk, ministerial car, obsequious officials, callow advisers and hungry press: 'For I also am set under authority ... and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.' Small wonder that most ministers lose touch with reality within a few minutes of arriving in Sanctuary Buildings.

At this election, then, those voters for whom education matters would do well to pay greater attention to each party's record than to their manifesto promises. It's an exercise from which none of the three main parties emerges unscathed. And after this election we must hope that what may be a novel chemistry of votes, personalities and minority parties will create political space for what really matters. Such as, of course, [the priorities that CPRT has been pursuing since 2013](#). Here they are again:

- **Equity.** Tackle the continuing challenge of social and educational disadvantage, and find practical ways to help schools to close the associated gaps in educational attainment.
- **Voice.** Advance children's voice and rights in school and classroom in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- **Community.** Promote community engagement and cohesion through school-community links and a community curriculum that supplements and enriches the national curriculum, and by developing communal values in school and classroom.
- **Sustainability.** Embed sustainability and global citizenship in educational policy and practice, linking to the UN agenda for global education after 2015.
- **Aims.** Develop and apply a coherent vision for 21st century primary education; enact CPR's aims through curriculum, pedagogy and the wider life of the school.
- **Curriculum.** Develop a broad, balanced and rich entitlement curriculum which responds to both national and local need, eliminates the damaging division of status and quality between core and non-core, and teaches every subject, domain or aspect to the highest possible standard.
- **Pedagogy.** Develop a pedagogy of repertoire, rigour, evidence and principle, rather than mere compliance, with a particular emphasis on fostering the high quality classroom talk which children's development, learning and attainment require.
- **Assessment.** Encourage approaches to assessment that enhance learning as well as test it, that support rather than distort the curriculum and that pursue standards and quality in all areas of learning, not just the core subjects.

To which, in light of the experience of the past five years, I propose two more. One is from [CPR's 2010 list of policy priorities](#) which seems as remote a possibility now as it was then, yet for that very reason needs to be repeated. The other arises from the discussion above.

- **Policy.** Reverse the centralising thrust of recent policy. End government micro-management of teaching. Re-invigorate parental and community engagement. Replace myth, spin and the selective use of evidence by genuine debate. Restore the checks and balances which are vital to the formulation of sound policy.
- **The education system.** Call a halt to those policies that have so severely fragmented England's education system, setting school against school, increasing inequalities in provision, encouraging bullying and scapegoating in the name of accountability, and destroying professional morale. Aim instead for coherence, consistency, the equitable distribution of resources, accountability for policy as well as teaching, and a culture of mutual support and respect. Replace political posturing and ministerial machismo by a sustainable vision for children, their world and their education.

Yet, and to return to that judgement about the state of England's education system in the Cambridge Primary Review final report, if the policy process requires reform far more radical than anything ministers have imposed on schools, it's the schools themselves that continue to provide the best

grounds for optimism. So it's fitting that this rather depressing assessment of the national scene will be followed, in [CPRT's next blog](#), by news of an utterly inspiring kind from a primary school in Leeds whose head has joined the CPRT community and is leading one of its networks.

5 May 2015

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY?

TWO WORLDS OF EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM AMERICA

Robin Alexander

[‘Education in two worlds’](#) is the blog of Gene Glass, a leading commentator on American education in the era of marketisation, charter schools, common core standards, high stakes testing and teacher employment practices redolent of 1860s England and ‘payment by results’.

Far from being remote from the situation here in the UK, what Glass, Berliner, Ravitch and others portray as a politically and commercially orchestrated assault on American public schooling in the name of parental choice and improved standards uses strategies that the UK government has consciously imported, adapted or endorsed. This policy cloning is most conspicuous in the treatment of international evidence, the national curriculum, academies, teacher education and testing. For in campaigns educational as well as military, where America goes Britain tends to follow, in the process transferring the language of the battlefield to the classroom.

In their brilliant book *50 Myths and Lies That Threaten America’s Public Schools*, Berliner and Glass muster research evidence that deconstructs the ‘myths, hoaxes and outright lies’ through which, in their view, US policymakers and their multinational and fundamentalist backers have sought to discredit mainstream schooling and turn public service into private profit. With many of these – especially the ‘grand myth’ of a state schooling system which in comparison with its PISA competitors is in terminal decline – England is only too familiar.

The trouble is, each incoming UK government uses the same terminal decline claim to dismiss the sweeping and often disruptive ‘reforms’ of its predecessor and impose its own, which is tantamount to an admission either that the reforms don’t work or that the system isn’t broken after all and the exercise has more to do with vanity and machismo than progress. Remember Michael Gove, hard on the heels of Labour’s ‘highest standards ever’ national strategies: ‘literacy, down; numeracy, down; science, down; fail, fail, fail!’

1992, 1997, 2010 ... We’ve been there so many times that as we approach the 2015 general election party leaders may well find themselves rubbishing their own policies. Let’s hope so.

Hence ‘two worlds’: the world of carefully assembled evidence and educated deliberation, of schooling as it is and could be, and the shallow, hectic and self-regarding world of political rhetoric, spin, myth and scapegoating; a world in which evidence is treated not even-handedly but opportunistically and selectively, and on that basis serves not to shape, test and improve policy but *post hoc* to validate it; a world in which myths and policies are endlessly recycled and in which, consequently, there’s much change but little real progress. It matters not that in opposition our leaders promise, as they invariably do, a more principled approach. Once in power, just as invariably, they revert.

One strand of the Cambridge Primary Review’s final report that gained less attention than it deserved was its exposure of these tendencies in English primary education. In the course of a wider analysis of the educational policy process the report contrasted the necessary discourse of evidence and deliberation with the actual discourses of dichotomy, derision and myth, and its penultimate chapter demolished no fewer than 14 claims about educational standards that were central to government policy between 1997 and 2010.

So if you fancy a break from the usual holiday reading, try the books below and the blogs of [Glass](#) or [Ravitch](#) – or indeed *Children, their World, their Education*, chapters 2, 3 and 23.

Plus a further four for the bookshelf of seekers after educational truth:

- Berliner, D.C., Glass, G.V. and associates (2014) *50 Myths and Lies That Threaten America's Schools: the real crisis in education*, Teachers College Press.
- Ravitch, D. (2013) *Reign of Error: the hoax of the privatisation movement and the danger to America's public schools*, Knopf.
- Sahlberg, P. (2010) *Finnish Lessons: what can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press.

and, of course –

- Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge.

5 August 2014

TEACHING TO THE TEXT: ENGLAND AND SINGAPORE

Robin Alexander

Hearken, if you will, unto DfE Minister [Nick Gibb](#):

I would like to see all schools, both primary and secondary, using high quality textbooks in all subjects, bringing us closer to the norm in high performing countries ... In this country, textbooks simply do not match up to the best in the world, resulting in poorly designed resources, damaging and undermining good teaching ... Ministers need to make the case for more textbooks in schools, *particularly primary schools*.

At the conference of the Publishers Association (PA) and the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA) at which Minister Gibb thus nailed his colours to a rather colourless mast, he did rather more than 'make the case' and modestly depart. (Minister [Liz Truss](#) had delivered the same message to the same audience a year earlier, to little effect). In the discussion that followed his speech Gibb said that publishers should produce the textbooks that teachers need, not what they want, and that if they don't do so then DfE may have to introduce state approval or kitemarking of textbooks, as in some other countries.

There's a lot to unpack and unpick here: the assumption that among PISA top performers it's textbooks that make the difference (the familiar confusion of association with causality); that what appears to hold for secondary students tested by PISA must therefore hold for their primary school peers; that what works for maths works for all other subjects; that what teachers want for their pupils is not what those pupils need (teachers may wish to count to ten before responding); that PISA is all that matters; and that government has both the right and the competence to act as arbiters of textbook quality and impose its judgements on every teacher and child in the land.

There are also the familiar contradictions. In the same speech, the Minister characterised his government's 'new approach to educational policy' since 2010 as 'designed to foster the autonomy of the teaching profession and sweep away the prescriptive and ideological national strategies'. The national strategies were indeed prescriptive, but replacing one kind of prescription by another seems a decidedly odd way to foster professional autonomy. In any case, weren't textbooks, albeit in ring binder form, central to Labour's national strategies?

Ah, but the difference is that Labour's policies were 'ideological' while the current government's are dispassionate and objective. But to this helpful separation of the good guys from the bad (for without ministerial guidance how would we possibly tell the difference?) the Minister adds a further semantic tease. For while Labour's textbooks/ring binders were ideological, the *neglect* of textbooks in English schools relative to their heavy use in Singapore (the system the Minister wants us to copy) was ideological too. Thus Gibb complains of 'ideological hostility to the use of textbooks, particularly in primary schools.'

Ideological textbook prescription, ideological opposition to textbooks ... Can he have it both ways? Yes indeed, for as used by ministers, 'ideological' means merely (of a phenomenon) what the minister doesn't like, and (of a person) someone who has the audacity to disagree with him. Remember Minister Gibb's erstwhile DfE colleague Michael Gove? In accordance with established legislative procedure he invited comment on drafts of the new national curriculum, only to [lambast those whose comments were less than fulsomely supportive](#) as 'enemies of promise ... Marxists hell-bent on destroying our schools.' Clearly, such folk misread the DfE invitation. They should have

known that ‘comment’ meant, as no doubt it does in North Korea, ‘applaud’. Who then is the Marxist – the respondent to DfE consultations, Kim Jong-un or Comrade Gove?

Rum cove, politics. And with the 2015 general election only a few weeks away there’ll be a lot more of this kind of thing before we’re done. So let’s momentarily escape and consider the substantive issue. Gibb’s PA/BESA speech made its case for textbooks by drawing on a paper by [Tim Oates](#) that looked at over 200 textbooks in five PISA high-performing jurisdictions, including Singapore, and compared them with England. Textbook use in England, at least in the crucial sense of textbook *dependency and compliance*, is indeed much lower: in the 2011 TIMSS survey, 70 per cent of Singapore teachers said they used textbooks as the basis for maths teaching compared with only 10 per cent in England; though here textbooks weren’t, as Gibb claimed, viewed with ‘ideological hostility’ but were used by 64 per cent of teachers ‘as a supplement’, which suggests that resources here are used flexibly rather than unquestioningly. Which also sounds reassuringly like teachers exercising the very professional autonomy that Gibb claims his government has fostered.

Oates shows how the best textbooks are well grounded in learning theory as well as subject content, and how they offer range, coherence and clarity in structuring that content for teaching. In other words, they can be, without question, a valuable resource. Further, he reminds us that high stakes tests have narrowed the curriculum (a post-1997 trend chronicled in the [Cambridge Primary Review final report](#) and again, for the period since 2010, in Wynne Harlen’s recent [CPRT research review](#)). Interestingly, he suggests that well-structured and ‘expansive’ textbooks ‘could be an antidote to such narrowing’. He adds that ‘in key jurisdictions, high performing teachers are well-disposed and enthusiastic about textbooks.’

All of this underlines Oates’s concern that opposition to textbooks in England confuses the question of textbook quality with unease about central prescription. But that unease, in view of Gibb’s remarks and the still-vivid memory of Labour’s national strategies and their policing by Ofsted, is hardly surprising; for the Minister is clearly saying that government, not the teaching profession, is the arbiter of textbook quality. Which is exactly the line that Labour took when it imposed its national strategies, extending that presumption of omniscience beyond lesson content to teaching methods, pupil grouping and the allocation of time. There’s a corrosive legacy of blatantly politicized intervention in teaching to which both Labour and Conservative need to own up if they wish their proposals to be viewed with other than the deepest suspicion.

Back to Oates. Although he notes that textbook use needs to be embedded in a coherent pedagogy and is just one of a number of ‘control factors’ whereby governments may try to ensure that the curriculum as taught ‘delivers’ the curriculum as prescribed, he does not address the ethical and political questions raised by this notion and its somewhat chilling vocabulary; for teaching is a moral matter, not merely a technical one. Nor, apparently, has he persuaded ministers to recognise that pedagogy is a system of interdependent elements rather than an aggregation of discrete factors that can be cherry-picked to fuel a media headline or score a political point in the way that ministers are currently doing with textbooks and their predecessors did with whole class teaching.

This alternative perspective is fundamental to my own work on pedagogy going back more than 30 years. It is no less fundamental to what is by far the largest, most detailed and most authoritative research study to date of educational practice in Singapore, a system which both Gibb and Oates wish England to emulate. The [Core 2 Research Programme](#) was led by David Hogan, who until recently was Principal Research Scientist at Singapore’s National Institute of Education and for nine years has intensively researched Singaporean schooling. He is currently working with his colleagues Dennis Kwek and Peter Renshaw on [CPRT’s new research review on effective teaching](#). The Core 2 research is conspicuously absent from both Oates’s paper and ministers’ consciousness.

Core 2 entailed systematic observation, video-recording, interviews and outcome measures in a large and nationally representative stratified sample of Primary 5 (pupils aged 10-11) and Secondary 3 classrooms (14-15) where the unambiguous focus is examination preparation and success. Through multi-level statistical modelling the research team assessed the relationship between various classroom practices, including the use of textbooks, and student achievement in mathematics and English.

The Core 2 findings on the impact of textbooks, though in certain respects positive, are not as straightforward as our Minister would like. Hogan and his colleagues confirm that in Singapore teacher reliance on textbooks is indeed high in mathematics, though not in English. The effects of textbooks are statistically significant in models of the relationship between traditional instruction, direct instruction and student achievement. Overall, however, textbooks do not have a statistically significant impact in either maths or English; and while they do have a statistically significant *indirect* impact in maths, this is not the case in English.

This subject variation supports scepticism about the Minister's blanket commitment to a textbook for every subject. But more important is Hogan's insistence that it's essential to look well beyond bivariate relationships of the kind that ministers prefer in order to grasp how textbook use and impact are part of the much larger and more complex business of pedagogy, which in turn is embedded in and shaped by culture, history, values and beliefs relating to teaching, learning, knowledge and the goals of education (issues that I investigated in some detail in my own five-nation *Culture and Pedagogy*).

Thus, in a recent email exchange, David Hogan told me that

In Singapore textbooks are an integral part of an assessment-driven instructional system that effectively integrates elements of traditional and direct instruction ... It [does not focus] on learning for deep understanding through carefully designed and calibrated tasks intended to develop a broad range of skills, understandings and dispositions. Rather, it is a highly efficient and effective pedagogical system driven by a limited and highly instrumental and functionalist set of institutional rules.

Crucially, he added:

In my view it would be a mistake to permit textbooks to drive classroom pedagogy in English primary schools: given the current English assessment regime ... it would further enhance the transformation of primary school classrooms into pedagogical facsimiles of secondary school classrooms. This might well improve the performance of English students in TIMSS and PISA, but it will compromise the quality of education they get.

And again, in a recent piece entitled 'Why is Singapore's school system so successful, and is it a model for the West?' [David Hogan](#) warned:

Singapore's experience and its current efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning do have important, if ironic, implications for systems that hope to emulate its success. This is especially true of those jurisdictions – I have in mind England and Australia especially – where conservative governments have embarked on ideologically driven crusades to demand more direct instruction of (Western) canonical knowledge, demanding more testing and high stakes assessments of students, and imposing more intensive top-down performance regimes on teachers.

In my view, this is profoundly and deeply mistaken. It is also more than a little ironic given the reform direction Singapore has mapped out for itself over the past decade. The essential challenge facing Western jurisdictions is not so much to mimic East Asian instructional regimes, but to develop a more balanced pedagogy that focuses not just on knowledge transmission and exam performance, but on teaching that requires students to engage in subject-specific knowledge building. Knowledge building pedagogies recognise the value of established knowledge, but also insist that students need to be able to *do* knowledge work as well as learn *about* established knowledge. Above all, this means students should acquire the ability to recognise, generate, represent, communicate, deliberate, interrogate, validate and apply knowledge claims in light of established norms in key subject domains.

In the long run, this will do far more for individual and national well-being, including supporting development of a vibrant and successful knowledge economy, than a regressive quest for top billing in international assessments.

The distinction arising from the Core 2 research between the pedagogies of *performativity* (curriculum coverage, knowledge transmission, test preparation and success) and *knowledge building* (defined in the quote above) is both crucial to our understanding of what goes on in Singaporean schools and highly relevant to the debate about England's national curriculum and the role of textbooks in its implementation. Hogan judges that Singapore's undoubted prowess at performativity has been at the expense of the knowledge-building which is no less essential to social and economic progress and which he believes is one of the strengths of English education. As it happens, he has used these two versions of pedagogy to compare schools in [Singapore and London](#), and on knowledge-building the London schools do well.

There's clearly a discussion to be had about the narrower question of textbooks and other published resources in primary schools, and I hope this blog will encourage that. As a matter of fact, it's a discussion in which many of us have been involved, via the [Expert Subjects Advisory Group](#) (ESAG) and [CPRT's own collaboration with the subject associations and Pearson](#), since long before Tim Oates presented his thoughts and Nick Gibb dropped his bombshell. Indeed, it was DfE itself that set up ESAG to help teachers locate and evaluate resources for implementing the new national curriculum in line with the new, post-Labour professional freedoms. Perhaps our Minister has forgotten that.

But the more fundamental debate, which is marginalised by ministers' obsession with international test performance, is about the proper nature and purposes of 21st century education. To adapt the Minister's comment at the PA/BESA conference: a test-driven curriculum and a textbook-driven pedagogy may be what Nick Gibb wants, but are they what our children need?

Postscript

Since this blog coincides with the death of Lee Kuan Yew, the man who presided over Singapore's remarkable economic and social transformation into the international powerhouse that it is today, it's perhaps worth reminding ourselves of two salient differences mentioned by neither Oates nor Gibb: scale and politics. Singapore is a city state with 5.14 million inhabitants and just 182 primary schools (the corresponding figures for England are 53 million and 16,818). When manageable scale is combined with an authoritarian political regime, government has at its fingertips potent levers for rapid and wholesale systemic reform. As a comparativist I believe that it is essential to learn from others, and this blog reminds us that there is certainly much we can learn from Singapore. But, as David Hogan and the Core 2 research show, wrenching one factor in another system's success from its cultural, political, historical, demographic and pedagogical roots is neither valid nor viable.

[The Guardian obituary](#) for Lee credits him with creating 'a strong, pervasive role for the state and little patience for dissent.' Given the current government's track record on appointing advisers and handling evidence perhaps that's the lesson from elsewhere that ministers would really prefer us to accept.

20 March 2015

HOW WELL ARE PRIMARY ACADEMIES DOING?

Warwick Mansell

Has DfE, including its supposedly public-minded official statisticians, been misusing data in its drive to force on primary schools its favoured policy of academy status?

The question arises since I performed an analysis that seems to raise serious difficulties about a key statistic used by a minister to defend the academies scheme.

On February 2nd, education minister Nick Gibb was confronted on BBC Radio 4's Today programme with the findings of a report by the cross-party House of Commons Education Select Committee. The committee, following an inquiry on academies and free schools, had concluded the previous week: 'We have sought but not found convincing evidence of the impact of academy status on attainment in primary schools.'

The minister [responded](#) that sponsored academies – generally previously struggling schools which are taken over by a 'sponsor' entering into a contract with the Secretary of State to run the school – were improving faster than the national average.

He said: 'We do know sponsored academies do improve standards of education in our schools. If you look at the primary sponsored academies, they've seen their reading, writing and maths results improve at double the rate seen across all schools.' He added: 'Primary [sponsored academies]...have seen their reading, writing and maths results improve at double the rate of local authority schools.'

This seemed to mark a change of position for the DfE, which less than a year ago concluded, in its publication *Academies: research priorities and questions* that 'The research evidence [is] primarily based on secondary schools and with more and more primary schools becoming academies, further evidence is needed on what drives those schools to become academies and what makes them viable and sustainable.'

So was Mr Gibb's statement accurate? Investigating, it became clear that the source was DfE's *Statistical First Release* which accompanied the publication of primary league tables on December 12th, 2014. The [document](#) is headed with the reassuring logo 'National Statistics'. It says: 'Attainment in sponsored academies increased by 7 percentage points between 2013 and 2014, compared to 3 percentage points in converter academies and LA maintained schools.'

This statement seemed factual enough. But doubts began to surface in my mind after digging a tiny bit further into the data.

So, the 420 sponsored academies included in the statistic did indeed improve at faster than the national rate for other schools between 2013 and 2014, rising seven percentage points in the proportion of their pupils achieving level 4 in all of reading, writing and maths, from 61 to 68 per cent. By contrast, the 13,396 non-academy (local authority) schools rose three points, from 77 to 80 per cent, while, among 1,006 converter academies – generally previously successful schools choosing to take on the status – the rise was from 80 to 83 per cent.

The immediate question, though, was whether like was really being compared with like. With both types of school, other than sponsored academies, starting with higher average scores in 2013, sponsored academies would appear to have had more room for improvement.

Another way of looking at that is to say that, clearly, the closer a school gets to 100 per cent of its children achieving level 4s in all three subjects, the less scope it has to improve on this measure; at 100 per cent, it has no scope at all.

This would seem to be a basic statistical point. Yet it was not acknowledged anywhere in this statistical release that the higher rate of progress might be at least in part a product of sponsored academies starting from a lower base. The comparison used in the release, then, might be deemed invalid. Without further information it certainly looked potentially misleading.

The fairer comparison, then, would be to look at schools with the same statistical starting points. In other words, among schools averaging 61 per cent in 2013, did sponsored academies or non-sponsored academies improve faster?

Again, there is no mention of this potential statistical comparison in the release. So I have now performed this data analysis myself, based on the DfE's official underlying school-by-school assessment data.

Staggeringly, this seems to show that, when schools with the same starting points in 2013 are compared, sponsored academies fared *worse* than a comparison group of primaries in 2014. I am not a professional statistician, and the analysis below is rudimentary. But I did it in two ways. First, I decided to look at all schools which, in 2013, had exactly 61 per cent of their pupils achieving at least level four in reading, writing and maths. Remember, this was the average figure for 2013 sponsored academies.

This yielded 113 primaries: six sponsored academies, two converter academies and 105 non-academy state schools. Among the 107 that were not sponsored academies, results improved to 70.7 per cent in 2014, a rise of 10 percentage points.

Second, I widened the comparison group to include a much larger number of primaries: those which had results, in 2013, ranging from 56 to 66 per cent. Again, I made sure that this sample, of 1,650 schools, had an average result of 61 per cent in 2013.

What was the outcome? Well, the schools which were not sponsored academies improved on average to 72 per cent. So that's an 11 point improvement, compared to a seven point gain in sponsored academies. (The 11 point gain included figures for academy converters; removing them from the sample, non-academy maintained schools – 'local authority schools' in Mr Gibb's phrase – went up 10 percentage points, which again is higher than the seven points of sponsored academies). So my research seems to point to an opposite conclusion – sponsored academy results rising less quickly than those of a comparison group – to that of the DfE's official statistical publication.

It would have been easy for the DfE's professional statisticians to have published a similar assessment. But they did not. Nor did they publish any statistical caveats about the sponsored academy-to-national-average improvement comparison they chose to use.

Why does this matter? It seems to me to be very important on the ground, where I hear regularly of communities struggling with campaigns against academy status being forced on them by DfE, in the face of claims by ministers that this should be the only option for school improvement.

Indeed, [DfE guidance says that](#), in schools deemed inadequate, ministers' 'expectation' is always that they should become sponsored academies.

Last month, David Cameron went further, proposing that thousands of schools deemed by Ofsted not to be inadequate but merely to 'require improvement' should become sponsored academies in the event of a new Conservative government.

But if statistical evidence on an area absolutely central to the current political debate about education is being made to say the opposite of what a reasonable person might think the data actually tell us, acknowledging the need to compare like with like, we have serious problems. Is evidence being made to fit policy, rather than vice-versa?

I'd make one final point. In a [recent article](#), Cambridge Primary Review Trust chair Robin Alexander, wrote: 'Deep and lasting improvements in England's education system will be secured only when, in their discourse and their handling of evidence, policymakers practise the best that has been thought and said rather than preach it, exemplify the educated mind rather than demean it.'

It is staggering that the DfE's statistical publication was first released without the basic caveats and checks which would be expected of statistics students completing their assignments, and was then endorsed by a minister of *education*. And a minister of education with an enthusiasm for mathematics, at that. What kind of an example does this set for pupils? We all deserve better.

I invited DfE to comment on the content of this blog but it did not respond.

20 February 2015

DOES EDUCATION PASS THE FAMILY TEST?

Robin Alexander

In 2010, Michael Gove renamed Labour's Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) the Department for Education (DfE), at a stroke ejecting Ed Balls's tiresomely winsome munchkins from the Sanctuary Buildings atrium, ending baffled discussion about whether DCSF stood for comedy and science fiction or curtains and soft furnishings, and heralding a gimmick-free return to core business.

Then last week, with the Gove supremacy a receding memory but with Govine policies firmly in place for the duration, the PM announced that from November 2014 every new government policy 'will be assessed for its impact on the family.' The [PM's admission](#) that too many existing policies have failed his 'family test' must prompt us to ask whether he had in mind the doings of the demoted Gove. After all, who needs munchkins to tell them that children's needs and family circumstances are as inextricably the business of schools and hence DfE as are curriculum, tests and standards?

Labour appeared to understand this relationship, up to a point. So the Cambridge Primary Review found widespread support for Sure Start, EYFS, Every Child Matters, the Children's Act, the Childcare Act, Every Parent Matters, the Children's Plan and Narrowing the Gap, an impressive procession of 'joined-up' initiatives through which the Labour government sought to reduce childhood risk, increase childhood protection, support families and maximise educational opportunities. But CPR also reported growing and often intense opposition to the same government's apparatus of high stakes testing, higher stakes inspection, performance tables, naming, shaming and closely prescribed pedagogy, all of which also impacted on children and families, with outcomes that remain hotly contested.

In any event, this so-called standards agenda was widely thought to exacerbate what, in her [important research survey for CPR](#), Berry Mayall called the 'scholarisation' of childhood: the incursion of schooling and its demands ever more deeply into children's lives at an ever younger age, leaving little room for a childhood unimpeded by pressures which in many other education systems, including some that perform better than the UK in the international PISA tests, start a year or even two years later than in England. When Britain came bottom of a rather different performance table, [UNICEF's comparative rating of childhood well-being in rich countries](#), opponents of these tendencies drew the obvious conclusion.

Hence the reaction: Sue Palmer's best-selling 'Toxic Childhood', the Children's Society Good Childhood Enquiry, and latterly the Save Childhood Movement. And hence, true to the laws of policy physics, the ministerial counter-reaction, from Labour's 'these people are peddling out-of-date research' – a lamely unoriginal and transparently defensive response to unpalatable evidence – to the Coalition's earthier recourse to personal abuse: 'Marxists intent on destroying our schools ... enemies of promise ... bleating bogus pop-psychology'.

Meanwhile, the rich became richer and the poor poorer.

In relation to children and families, then, there is all too often a pretty fundamental policy disconnect. Education policy may give with one hand but take with another; and education policy strives to narrow the gap that economic policy no less assiduously maintains and even widens, not pausing to ask why the gap is there in the first place. For surely Treasury ministers know as well as their DfE colleagues how closely the maps of income, health, wellbeing and educational achievement coincide; that unequal societies have unequal education systems and unequal educational outcomes;

and that equity is a significant factor in other nations' PISA success – though in all this we need to avoid facile cause-effect claims and we know that fine schools can and do break the mould. Yet will the 'family test' be applied as stringently to the policies of Chancellor Osborne, I wonder, as to those of Education ex-Secretary Gove? Or will the social and educational fallout of austerity be written off as unavoidable collateral damage?

But I suspect that linking the policy dots is not what the new family test is about and each policy will be assessed in isolation. In any case, how many new education policies, if any, will the government introduce in the eight months before the 2015 general election? And at a time when the demography of childhood and parenting is more diverse than ever, how exactly is 'family' defined? Isn't the family test both too muddled and too late?

For its part, CPRT, like CPR before it, is operating more holistically, and we have invited leading researchers to help us. Kate Pickett, co-author of *The Spirit Level* – that groundbreaking epidemiological study of the causes, manifestations and consequences of inequality – to help us. In one of five new CPRT research surveys, Kate is revisiting her own and CPR's evidence on equality, equity and disadvantage and examining more recent data in order to re-assess causes, consequences and solutions. Her report will be published in 2015. In parallel, we have commissioned and now published research updates on children's voice, development and learning from Carol Robinson and Usha Goswami; and on assessment and teaching from Wynne Harlen and David Hogan. Squaring the schooling/family circle we have embarked, in collaboration with the University of York, on an Educational Endowment Foundation-supported project to develop and test the power of high quality classroom talk to increase engagement and raise learning standards among those of our children who are growing up in the most challenging circumstances.

You'll find information on the [CPRT website](#) about all these projects and publications. We hope and believe they will pass the family test.

27 August 2014

MINISTERS, EVIDENCE AND INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

Robin Alexander

I suppose the heading of this blog is a trifle tendentious, though not without justification. The Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) was all about evidence. Some of it ministers liked, some of it they didn't. By and large, their reactions reflected not the authority or veracity of the evidence we provided but the degree to which it sustained or challenged their political narrative. As a result, policies were as likely to be based on ideology, prejudice or populism as on evidence, and those who exposed this fundamental frailty, or highlighted the politically inconvenient truth, were pretty smartly shown the door.

Because CPR hoped to make a difference in policy circles as well as in the classroom, it investigated not only its various chosen aspects of primary education – childhood, learning, teaching, curriculum, assessment, leadership, school organisation, teacher education and so on – but also the evidence on which policies relating to each of these were based.

The relationship between policy and evidence that CPR uncovered was on occasions somewhat murky. The most problematic instance was the matter of educational standards over time and what causes them to rise and fall. CPR had commissioned no fewer than six independent research reviews in this area from teams of leading academics at five universities and NFER. Against the findings of the resulting six reports and other data CPR set official claims about trends in standards and the impact on those trends of government policies and initiatives.

Without going into detail that can be read in its final report (*Children, their World, their Education*, pages 471-4), CPR reported both good and less good news on standards – which in a large educational system serving a highly diverse society at a time of rapid change is what one would expect – but also a succession of grand political claims about standards, tests, accountability and school improvement that under scrutiny all too often dissolved into unsubstantiated assertion or downright falsehood.

This week there are two developments that enable us to bring the story up to date and consider the record of the current government. Has it maintained Labour's uneasy relationship with evidence or has it displayed a more even-handed stance in the interest of making its policies as well founded as possible? In so doing, has it been prepared to accommodate the inconvenient truth?

The first pertinent development is the decision of the House of Commons Education Committee to launch an on-line enquiry into the way DfE uses evidence. The Committee has selected nine areas for scrutiny: phonics, teaching assistants, professional measurement metrics, the National College, summer-born children, universal infant free school meals, raising the participation age, music education, and the school starting age. In each case, DfE has been asked first to state the policy and second to cite the evidence on which it is based, and we the public are then asked to comment. In addition, lest it be thought that this list is too exclusive – there is no mention, for example, of the national curriculum, national assessment, standards, international comparisons, inspection, teacher education, academies, free schools or many other prominent and hotly debated areas of policy – respondents are invited to comment on DfE's use of evidence in more general terms.

Cambridge Primary Review Trust will certainly respond, and we hope those reading this blog will do likewise. The deadline is Friday 12 December.

The other development is closer to home. In 2007, Cambridge Primary Review commissioned a research-based report on the pros and cons of different approaches to assessment from Professor Wynne Harlen, one of the best-respected experts in this field. This was revised for publication in 2010 in [The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys](#).

Earlier this year we invited Professor Harlen to revisit and update her 2010 report to contribute to the CPRT's pursuit of its eight priorities, one of which is assessment reform, taking account of recent developments (including [the performance descriptors announced last week](#)). This she has now done. Wynne's 40-page report is accompanied by a three-page briefing or executive summary and both can be viewed and/or downloaded from the CPRT website.

Wynne Harlen's CPRT report ends with separately-itemised implications for teachers, school leaders, teacher educators and policy makers. Wynne stresses the need for teaching strategies in which assessment for learning is fully embedded, especially in teachers' questioning and feedback, and she urges government to raise the profile of properly moderated teacher assessment and to provide assessment guidance in all subjects rather than confine its efforts to literacy and numeracy. In this matter she reinforces one of CPR's core messages, that literacy and numeracy tests are not valid proxies for quality and standards across the curriculum as a whole, and children have a right to a curriculum in which every element is taught to the highest possible standard regardless of how much or how little time is allocated to it, so we need valid and reliable information on how, in all such curriculum areas, they are progressing.

Assessment is one of the areas with which the House of Commons enquiry on evidence does not directly deal. However, DfE's reaction to this new report, which is an aspect of education that is at once extremely important and highly contested, will provide a timely test of its claim that its policies are evidence-based.

More to the point, if the House of Commons enquiry comes up with conclusions that DfE finds unpalatable and therefore dismisses or rejects, we shall know exactly where on the matter of evidence the government truly stands.

21 November 2014

FROM PHONICS CHECK TO EVIDENCE CHECK

Robin Alexander

In ministerial speeches ‘evidence-based policy’ is now as almost as routine as ‘I care passionately about ...’ and is as likely to be greeted with hollow laughter. So it’s to the credit of the House of Commons Education Select Committee that it has [undertaken an enquiry into the use of evidence by the Department for Education](#), asking DfE to list the evidential basis of a number of policies before inviting the public to comment via a web forum. Nine areas of policy were nominated for these ‘evidence checks’: phonics, teaching assistants, professional measurement metrics, summer-born children, the National College of Teaching and Leadership, universal infant free school meals, the impact of raising the school participation age, music, the school starting age. [There was a further section on DfE’s use of evidence generally](#) and this prompted the largest number of responses, including the following which we reprint as our final blog of 2014.

DfE’s use of evidence

Several contributors to this enquiry commend DfE for its commitment to evidence, but surely this is a minimum condition of good governance, not a cause for genuflection. More to the point are the concerns of Dame Julia Higgins that DfE’s use of evidence is inconsistent (or, as Janet Downs puts it, ‘slippery’) and those many other contributors across the Committee’s nine themes who find DfE overly selective in the evidence on which it draws and the methodologies it prefers.

The principal filters appear to be ideological (‘is this researcher one of us?’) and electoral (‘will the findings boost our poll ratings / damage those of the opposition?’) and such scientifically inadmissible criteria are compounded by DfE’s marked preference for research dealing in big numbers, little words and simple solutions.

In the latter context, we should be wary of endorsing without qualification the view of several contributors that the randomised control trial (RCT) is the evidential ‘gold standard’, trumping all other attempts to get at the truth. Education is complex and contested, and its central questions are as much ethical as technical – a challenge which the fashionable but amoral mantra ‘what works’ conveniently ignores. The RCT language of ‘treatment’ and ‘dosage’ is fine for drug trials but is hardly appropriate to an activity which is more craft and art than science, and in untutored hands the effort to make teaching fit this paradigm may reduce to the point of risibility or destruction the very phenomena it claims to test. I should add that I make these observations not as a disappointed research grant applicant but as recipient of [substantial funding from the rightly esteemed Educational Endowment Foundation](#) for a ‘what works’ project involving RCT.

Of the nine ‘evidence check’ memoranda submitted to the Committee by DfE, those on phonics, the school starting age and the National College most conspicuously display some of the tendencies I’ve so far identified. Thus the defence and citations in [DfE’s phonics statement](#) neatly sidestep the methodological controversies and evidential disputes surrounding what is now the government’s mandated approach to teaching reading, so the contributor who applauds DfE’s grossly biased bibliography as ‘accurate’ is plain wrong.

[DfE’s school starting age citations](#) carelessly – or perhaps carefully – attribute a publication of the [Cambridge Primary Review \(Riggall and Sharp\)](#) to NFER, but again avoid any evidence running counter to the official view that children should be packed off to school as soon as possible; or the more nuanced finding of the Cambridge Primary Review that the real issue is not the starting age for

formal schooling but the availability and quality of early years provision, wherever it takes place; or indeed the inconvenient truth that some of this country's more successful PISA competitors start formal schooling one or even two years later than England.

As for the National College of Teaching and Leadership (NCTL), no independent evidence is offered in support of DfE's insistence that this agency, and the models of teacher training and school improvement it espouses, justify its consumption of public funds. [Only two publications are cited in DfE's 'evidence check'](#). One is NCTL's statement of accounts; the other a DfE press release which is neither evidence nor independent. Proper evaluation of NCTL became all the more essential when DfE abolished the relatively 'arms length' bodies that NCTL subsumed and charged it with 'delivering' approved policies. Of course NCTL can be shown to be effective in relation to the delivery of policies x and y. But what if those policies are wrong?

The Committee has received many unhappy comments from parents about schools' draconian responses to term-time absences. These highlight a further problem: there are important areas of educational policy, at both school and national level, where evidence is rarely or never on view and parents and the electorate are expected to comply with what may be little more than unsubstantiated claims. In the case of those blanket bans on term-time absence about which so many parents complain to the Committee, as with the tendency to fill more and more of children's (and parents') waking hours with homework (i.e. schoolwork done at home) of variable and in some cases little educational value, there appears to be a deep-seated assumption that schools have a monopoly of useful learning. The Cambridge Primary Review scotched this mistaken and indeed arrogant belief in the comprehensive research review on children's lives outside school that it commissioned from [Professor Berry Mayall](#). Except that the then government preferred summarily to reject the evidence and abuse the Review team rather than engage with the possibility that schools might do even better if more of them understood and built on what their pupils learn outside school.

So although the Education Committee has applied its 'evidence check' to nine areas of policy, it might also consider extending its enquiry in two further directions: first, by examining the evidential basis of policies and initiatives, such as those exemplified above, about which teachers, parents and indeed children themselves express concern; second by adding some of those frontline policies which DfE has justified by reference to evidence but which are conspicuously absent from the Committee's list.

Examples in the latter category might include: (i) the government's 2011-13 review of England's National Curriculum; (ii) the development of new requirements for assessment and accountability in primary schools; (iii) the rapid and comprehensive shift to school-led and school-based initial teacher education; (iv) the replacement of the old TDA teacher professional standards by the current set; (v) the strenuous advocacy and preferential treatment of academies and free schools. Each of these illustrates, sometimes in extreme form, my initial concerns about politico-evidential selectivity and methodological bias.

Thus in the 2011-13 national curriculum review ministers deployed exceptionally reductionist and naive interpretations of the wealth of international evidence with which they were provided by DfE officials and others. They resisted until the last moment overwhelming evidence about the educational centrality of spoken language. They ignored Ofsted warnings, grounded in two decades of school inspection (and indeed evidence going back long before Ofsted) about the damage caused by a two-tier curriculum that elevates a narrow view of educational basics above all else – damage not just to the wider curriculum but also the 'basics' themselves. And they declined to publish or act on their own internal enquiry which confirmed the continuing seriousness of the challenge of curriculum expertise in primary schools, an enquiry which – and this much is to ministers' credit – DfE undertook in response to, and in association with, the Cambridge Primary Review. The report of

that enquiry, and the wider evidence that informed it, still awaits proper consideration. A job for the Education Committee perhaps?

Similarly, DfE, like its predecessor DCSF, has stubbornly held to its view – [challenged by the Education Committee as well as numerous research studies and the Bew enquiry](#) – that written summative tests are the best way both to assess children’s progress and hold schools and teachers to account, and that they provide a valid proxy for children’s attainment across the full spectrum of their learning.

Then, and in pursuit of what has sometimes looked suspiciously like a vendetta against those in universities who undertake the research that sometimes rocks the policy boat, DfE has ignored international evidence about the need for initial teacher education to be grounded in equal partnership between schools and higher education, preferring the palpable contradiction of locating an avowedly ‘world class’ teacher education system in schools that ministers tell us are failing to deliver ‘world class’ standards. Relatedly, DfE has accepted a report from its own enquiry into professional standards for teachers which showed even less respect for evidence than the earlier and much-criticised framework from TDA, coming up with ‘standards’ which manage to debase or exclude some of the very teacher attributes that research shows are most crucial to the standards of learning towards which these professional standards are supposedly directed.

Finally, in pursuit of its academies drive [government has ignored the growing body of evidence from the United States](#) that far from delivering superior standards as claimed, charter schools, academies’ American inspiration, are undermining public provision and tainted by financial and managerial corruption. England may not have gone that far, but new inspection evidence on comparative standards in academies and maintained schools ([in HMCI’s Annual Report for 2013-14](#)) should give the Committee considerable pause for thought about the motivation and consequences of this initiative.

In relation to the Committee’s enquiry as a whole, the experience of the [Cambridge Primary Review \(2006-10\)](#) and its successor the [Cambridge Primary Review Trust](#) is salutary, depressing and (to others than hardened cynics) disturbing. Here we had the nation’s most comprehensive enquiry into English primary education for half a century, led by an expert team, advised and monitored by a distinguished group of the great and good, supported by consultants in over 20 universities as well as hundreds of professionals, and generating a vast array of data, [31 interim reports](#) and a [final report](#) with far-sighted conclusions and recommendations, all of them firmly anchored in evidence, including over 4000 published sources.

Far from welcoming the review as offering, at no cost to the taxpayer, an unrivalled contribution to evidence-based policy and practice in this vital phase of education, DCSF – DfE’s predecessor – systematically [sought to traduce and discredit it by misrepresenting its findings in order to dismiss them](#), and by mounting *ad personam* attacks against the Review’s principals. Such behaviour in the face of authoritative and useful evidence was unworthy of holders of elected office and, for the teachers and children in our schools, deeply irresponsible.

It is with some relief that we note that DfE’s stance towards the Review and its successor the Cambridge Primary Review Trust has been considerably more positive under the Coalition than under Labour, and we record our appreciation of the many constructive discussions we have had with ministers and officials since 2010. Nevertheless, when evidential push comes to political shove, evidence discussed and endorsed in such meetings capitulates, more often than not, to the overriding imperatives of ideology, expediency and media narrative. This, notwithstanding the enhanced research profile applauded by other contributors, remains the default.

TRUE GRIT

Robin Alexander

Those who thought that the departure of Michael Gove might give schools a breather before the 2015 election, liberating them from the weekly explosion of initiatives and insults, reckoned without the ambition of his successor. These days, few education secretaries of state are content to do a good job, deeming it more important to leave an indelible mark in the name of 'reform'. To this lamppost tendency Nicky Morgan appears to be no exception.

Her wheeze, and it's a biggish one, is to make Britain 'a global leader in teaching character and resilience ... ensuring that young people not only grow academically, but also build character, resilience and grit.' To that end, [DfE has invited bids](#) for projects showing how 'character' can be built, and on 16 March there'll be a grand ceremony at which the [2015 Character Awards](#) of £15,000 each will be presented to 27 schools, with a £20,000 prize for the best of the best. Morgan modestly defines her chosen legacy as 'a landmark step for our education system.'

In the same way that New Labour claimed, witheringly but inaccurately, that before the imposition of its national literacy and numeracy strategies England's primary teachers were 'professionally uninformed', so Nicky Morgan's happy discovery of something called 'character' implies that schools have hitherto ignored everything except children's academic development; and that creativity, PSHE, moral education, religious education and citizenship, not to mention those values that loom large in school prospectuses, websites and assemblies and above all in teachers' daily dealings with their pupils, were to do with something else entirely. Remember the not-so-hidden 'hidden curriculum'? If there is a 'landmark step' then, it is not character education but its political appropriation and repackaging.

So what, in Morgan's book, constitutes 'character'? Its main ingredients, [as listed in the guidance to applicants](#) for the DfE grants and character awards, are 'perseverance, resilience and grit, confidence and optimism, motivation, drive and ambition.' (Readers will recognize 'resilience' as one of the most overused words of 2014). Rather lower down the list come 'neighbourliness', 'community spirit', 'tolerance' and 'respect.'

Like so much in recent English education policy, this account of character is imported from the United States. The Morgan character attributes are almost identical to those in the eponymous Paul Tough's book *How Children Succeed: grit, curiosity and the hidden power of character*, and in Dave Levin's evangelising [Knowledge is Power Program](#) (KIPP). Here, then, we have a melding of the no-holds-barred values of corporate America with that fabled frontier spirit portrayed by John Wayne. 'Grit' anchors the education of character in both worlds.

But there's a third element. In a speech in Birmingham last November prefiguring the DfE announcement, [Morgan said](#) pupils should 'leave school with the perseverance to strive to win ... to revel in the achievement of victory but honour the principles of fair play, to win with grace and to learn the lessons of defeat with acceptance and humility.' No prizes for spotting the source of that little homily. These are unambiguously the values of England's nineteenth century public schools: values directed not to the nurturing of mind but to physical prowess on the games field, an education veritably conceived as no more or less than a game of rugby or cricket. And not just education: life and death too, as immortalised in the Newbolt poem in which the playing field morphs into the trenches of 1914-18: 'There's a breathless hush in the close tonight / Ten to make

and the match to win / The Gatling's jammed and the colonel dead / Play up, play up and play the game.'

If character is important, which it surely is, is such an idiosyncratic and unreconstructedly male account of it good enough, and is it for government to impose this or any other notion of character on every child in the land, of whatever inclination, personality, gender or culture? In one of two excellent blogs on this subject that I urge prospective applicants for the DfE awards to read, [John White](#) thinks not. He says: 'Nicky Morgan is not wrong to focus on personal qualities, only about the set she advocates. This is tied to an ideology of winners and losers.' (As, appropriately, is DfE's Character Awards scheme itself). He reminds us of the considerably more rounded values framework appended to the version of the national curriculum that was introduced in 2000 and superseded last September, and he argues that 'no politician has the right to steer a whole education system in this or any other partisan direction.' For White, Morgan's foray into character education is further confirmation of the need for curriculum decisions to be taken out of the hands of politicians and given to a body which is more representative, more knowledgeable and culturally more sensitive.

The other recent must-read blog on character education is by [Jeffrey Snyder](#) in the United States. He cites evidence that 'character' is more likely to be determined by genetically-determined personality traits than the efforts of teachers, and indeed he argues that anyway nobody really knows how to teach it. In this context it's worth asking what those pupils subjected to 1850s/1950s character-building really learned, and whether there is indeed a correspondence between success on the playing field, in work and in adult life. And since you ask, did fagging and flogging really make for manliness (whatever that is) or were they merely perversions by another name?

Snyder argues, too, that the 'perseverance, resilience and grit' account of character 'promotes an amoral and careerist "looking out for number one" point of view' adding, tellingly: 'Never has character education been so completely untethered from morals, values and ethics.' As a result, 'character' is as likely to be harnessed to the pursuit of ends that are evil as to those that are good. 'Gone', adds Snyder, 'is the impetus to bring youngsters into a fold of community that is larger than themselves ... When character education fails to distinguish doctors and terrorists, heroes and villains, it would appear to have a basic flaw.'

Snyder's third objection, and it applies equally to the Morgan view of character and to the Gove definition of essential knowledge, is the sheer narrowness of the educational vision being promoted. In this context, it's worth asking how the [Cambridge Primary Review's 12 educational aims](#) might be classified. Are 'wellbeing', 'engagement', 'empowerment' and 'autonomy' about character or something else? Do such responsive and responsible CPR aims as 'encouraging respect and reciprocity', 'promoting interdependence and sustainability', 'empowering local, national and global citizenship' and 'celebrating culture and community' have anything to do with resilience and grit?

Actually they do, for it takes considerable grit and resilience to live the values of reciprocity, interdependence and community in a culture of winner-takes-all individualism; or to champion sustainability when the prevailing ethic is rampant materialism and unfettered economic growth; or, as so many educationists have learned to their cost, to hold firm to a principled vision of children's education in the teeth of government atavism and disdain. Captains of industry and sports personalities do not, as Morgan appears to believe, have a monopoly of courage and determination. In any event, the imperative here is to tie perseverance, grit and resilience to socially defensible aims and values, for, as Snyder noted, that for which we teach children to strive must be educationally worthwhile.

It will be interesting to see what accounts of character, and what strategies for promoting it, DfE rewards when it distributes its grants and prizes for character education on 16 March. With the

national strategies Labour gave us what one CPR witness called a 'state theory of learning'. Will the coalition government's bequest be a state theory of character? (Which, for those who know about *vospitanie* in Russian and Soviet education, has similar political overtones). Let's hope that Morgan's judges put vision, ethics, social responsibility and plurality back into the frame.

We can presumably trust that proposals to reintroduce fagging and flogging are unlikely to be shortlisted, though these days one never knows.

30 January 2015

MINDFUL OR MINDLESS?

Robin Alexander

I've been invited to attend a conference on the educational and economic importance of 'non-cognitive skills'. The invitation is accompanied by a glossy booklet in which various notables expatiate on the 'development of character, non-cognitive skills, mindfulness and well-being'.

The invitation arrived while I was checking the final draft of the [new CPRT report on children's cognitive development and learning](#), commissioned from leading cognitive neuroscientist Usha Goswami and published earlier this week.

The two documents couldn't be more different. In Goswami's report, cognition – the ways, in Bruner's words, that humans 'achieve, categorise, remember, organise and use their knowledge of the world' – is at the heart of the educational enterprise. But the conference booklet castigates this focus on cognition, re-labelled 'cognitive skills', for neglecting much of what education should be about.

What is going on here? And does it matter?

Let's take the second question first. Well yes, how we think about thinking, learning and knowing matters a great deal, and to no group of professionals should it matter more than to teachers, for exciting and advancing these processes in pursuit of an educational vision is their job. Indeed, one of the strengths of the professional world of primary education used to be its belief in the need for classroom relationships and decisions to be grounded in evidence about how young children develop, think and learn. Reflecting this, the first 10 chapters of [the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review](#) are devoted to children and childhood.

Such evidence doesn't stand still, which is why CPR commissioned [the research reviews](#) that CPRT is now revisiting and updating. Nor is child developmental evidence on its own a sufficient basis for teaching, though there was a time during the 1960s and 1970s that some believed this and constructed teacher training courses accordingly, thereby offering trainees knowledge of children but not of how to teach them. Now, thankfully, our take on pedagogy is more comprehensive.

So when someone says 'I've seen the future and it's non-cognitive' is this the latest stage in the refinement of our account of teachers' core business or merely the latest educational fashion? What, to return to my other question, is going on here?

My conference booklet answers thus: today's schools are not equipping tomorrow's citizens and employees with what they will need in order to cope, work and prosper in a fast-changing world, so something different is needed. Nothing new here of course: during the past few decades pundit after pundit and report after report – including the Cambridge Primary Review – has levelled this same charge at established patterns of schooling in the UK. The current iteration focuses, with some justice in view of the UK's poor showing in international studies, on the importance of well-being and children's capacities to manage their lives positively and productively. This was the claimed impetus for the Secretary of State's recent intervention on character, grit and resilience ([see our blog on 30 January](#)).

But what is worrying about the current packaging of character, grit and resilience under the apparently novel banner of 'non-cognitive skills' is the way that far from offering something new it

recycles and perpetuates some of the oldest, most damaging and least tenable dichotomies in the book, wrapping them in a brace of terminological contradictions.

One such is the conference title's stunning paradox of non-cognitive mindfulness. Another is the very concept of a 'non-cognitive skill'. Is this possible? The [authoritative Foresight Report on mental capital and wellbeing](#) thinks not. Though in execution some skills become so habitual that we stop thinking about them, few if any skills are genuinely mindless. Acquired and honed through training and practice, skills also require knowledge and reflection, especially when – as with the skills with which education is particularly concerned – skills are infinitely perfectible. But then the problem here is in part linguistic, for these days every conceivable educational goal is tagged a 'skill' and knowledge is nowhere: basic skills, numeracy skills, literacy skills, creative skills, emotional skills, interpersonal skills, hard skills, soft skills, cognitive skills, non-cognitive skills ...

Then, recycling that ancient dichotomy, my conference glossy continues: 'Schools need to teach students not only academic knowledge and cognitive skills, but also the knowledge and non-cognitive skills they will need to promote their mental and physical health and successfully contribute to the economy and society ... to counter the idea that promoting cognitive development and academic attainment is all that matters for the economy.' Here, not only are 'cognitive' and 'academic' equated; they are also seen as neither conducive to children's mental health nor economically relevant. So much for maths, science, design and technology and, oh yes, literacy.

Or take this definition, from a companion source: 'Non-cognitive skills are those academically and occupationally relevant skills and traits that are *not* specifically intellectual or analytical in nature'. Academic but non-cognitive? Academically relevant but not intellectual?

Or this: 'Non-cognitive skills include persistence, communication skills and other "soft" skills that are not objectively measured ... unlike cognitive skills, which educators can measure objectively with tests.' So communication, that most basic and demanding of basics, is 'soft', non-cognitive and unable to be assessed. And what touching faith in the objective measurability of the rest of the mainstream curriculum.

Or again, pursuing the same eccentric process of re-classification, the conference glossy helpfully includes in its list of 'non-cognitive skills' not just familiar items like 'perseverance' and 'self-control' but also 'meta-cognitive strategies' and 'creativity'. Apart from the mind-boggling idea that something can at the same time be meta-cognitive and non-cognitive, it's the assertion that creativity excludes cognition – in the face of centuries of artistic and scientific endeavour – that most brutally nails this nonsense.

Knowledge versus skill, hard subjects versus soft, cognitive versus creative, cognition versus meta-cognition, thinking versus feeling, mind versus body. Here, sartorially updated for 2015, is that same 'muddled and reductive discourse about subjects, knowledge and skills' of which in 2009 the [CPR final report](#) complained (pp 245-50); a discourse in which 'discussion of the place of subjects is needlessly polarised, knowledge is grossly parodied as grubbing for obsolete facts, and the undeniably important notion of skill is inflated to cover aspects of learning for which it is not appropriate.' Which is why, of course, supposedly 'non-cognitive' creativity is relegated to the non-core and Friday afternoons – something that in the interests of a more rounded education the apostles of non-cognitive skills rightly want to change, but for the wrong reasons. What a muddle.

So it was with relief that I turned back to Usha Goswami's new report for CPRT. For here in place of fads, fancies, cod psychology and epistemological car crashes we have evidence carefully accumulated, searchingly sifted and expertly assessed; and, interestingly, a kind of resolution of the problem of how to define and place those wider attributes we all accept are necessary in today's

world – for I stress that I’m as concerned as anyone that schools should motivate and engage children, build their confidence, help them to manage their learning and their lives, and develop their social and communicative capacities. But, crucially, what the non-cognitive skills people see as separate from academic activity Usha Goswami sees as intrinsic to it. Her stance is not the exclusivity of cognitive *versus* non-cognitive, but the inclusivity of cognitive *plus* metacognitive. In a key section on metacognition and executive functioning (which, taken together, are not far removed from ‘mindfulness’), she writes:

Metacognition is knowledge about cognition, encompassing factors such as knowing about your own information-processing skills, monitoring your own cognitive performance, and knowing about the demands made by different kinds of cognitive tasks. Executive function refers to gaining strategic control over your own mental processes, inhibiting certain thoughts or actions, and developing conscious control over your thoughts, feelings and behaviour... As children gain metaknowledge about their mental processes, their strategic control also improves. Developments in metacognition and executive function tend to be associated with language development, the development of working memory (which enables multiple perspectives to be held in mind) and nonverbal ability.

The report then goes on to document strategies through which in the classroom these capacities can be developed.

In other words, what the non-cognitive skills people present as a curriculum issue is in reality a pedagogical one. Of course, there are always questions to be asked about the relevance, scope and balance of the curriculum, and England’s new old national curriculum has certainly not answered them. But communication, motivation, engagement, perseverance and self-control do not require the addition of a battery of pseudo-skills to an overcrowded curriculum. They require us to think differently about how we teach what is already there. So, given that one of the non-cognitivists’ main concerns is the contribution of education to the economy, I might just arm myself with an update of Bill Clinton’s 1992 election slogan, turn up at that conference and shout, ‘It’s the pedagogy, stupid.’

27 February 2015

TESTING, TESTING

TEACHING OR TESTING: WHICH MATTERS MORE?

David Reedy

On 26 September the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, was extremely pleased to announce that the results of the phonics check for 6 year olds in England had improved considerably: 18 per cent more children had reached the 'expected standard' in 2014 than in 2012 when the test was introduced. A government spokesman stated that '100,000 more children than in 2012 are on track to become excellent readers'.

As primary teachers are aware, the phonics check has become a high stakes test. School results are collated and analysed in depth through RAISEOnline and made available to Ofsted inspectors, who are explicitly told to consider these results as evidence of the effective teaching of early reading in the current framework for Ofsted inspections.

The [CPR final report in 2010](#) pointed out that primary children in England were tested more frequently than in many other countries, including some that rank higher in the international performance league tables. Since then the difference has become even more marked. Further tests have been introduced – the phonics check and the introduction of a grammar strand in the tests for 11 year olds – with the intention of introducing a similar grammar strand for 7 year olds in 2016.

Politicians like Nick Gibb like to claim that tests like these raise standards, yet CPR found that the evidence of a causal relationship between tests and raised standards was at best oblique. It continues to be unconvincing. Scores in the tests rise, certainly. But what high stakes tests do is 'force teachers, pupils and parents to concentrate their attention on those areas of learning to be tested, too often to the exclusion of much activity of considerable educational importance' (CPR final report, page 325).

This is particularly true of the phonics check with its 20 phonically-regular real words and 20 non-words to be decoded, with 80 per cent accuracy required if it is to be passed. Indeed, as [Alice Bradbury](#) points out, there is considerable disquiet that the check was introduced by politicians as a means of forcing teachers to change the way they teach early reading.

In his rather approving analysis of the test results [David Waugh](#) said, 'I know many teachers who now concentrate a lot of time on teaching children how to read invented words to help them pass the test.' This has been my experience too.

Thus the test promotes a distortion of reading development. Teachers in primary classrooms spend extra time on teaching children how to read made-up words, diminishing the time for reading real words and teaching the other strategies needed for accurate word reading (whole word recognition of irregular words, the use of context for words such as *read*, for example), let alone comprehension and the wider experience of different kinds of text.

Increased test scores do not infallibly demonstrate improved standards. Wynne Harlen confirms this in the [forthcoming review of research on assessment and testing](#) which CPRT has commissioned as one of its 2014 research updates of evidence cited by CPR (to be published shortly: watch this space). It is therefore hardly surprising that results of the phonics check have improved as teachers become familiar with the demands of the test and adapt their teaching in line with them. Yet here we have a test that undermines the curriculum and is unlikely to give any useful information about children's reading development; a government which is committed to increasing the number of tests young

children are subject to despite evidence of their negative effects; and an opposition that has given no indication that it will change this situation if elected in 2015.

In 2010 the Cambridge Primary Review cited assessment reform as one of its [eleven post-election policy priorities](#) for the incoming government. As we approach the 2015 election assessment reform remains, in my view, as urgent a priority as it was in 2010.

10 October 2014

TIME FOR SOME INSUBORDINATION

Stephanie Northen

Before July 14, I was happy. OK, I'm lying, but who cares about the feelings of someone barely out of NQT nappies? Certainly not the education politicians who can break teachers with a brisk sweep of a policy brush – 'Heh, let's abolish levels!' 'Tell you what, let's assess all subjects ... all the time!' (Pause for righteous fear and loathing.) Yet, though the powers-that-be are not remotely interested in the content of my opening sentence, they are interested in its grammar. They care about my use of the word 'before'.

How do I know? Well, back in July, I read these three sentences on the Department for Education website:

'We left the cinema before the end of the film.' ... 'The train ticket is cheaper before 9:00 in the morning' ... 'I brush my teeth before I have breakfast.'

I then read the accompanying question: which of the sentences uses the word 'before' as a preposition and which as a subordinating conjunction? Hmm. Tricky. First, I had to put aside any normal thoughts such as train tickets are actually more expensive before 9am. And isn't it better to brush your teeth after breakfast? Never mind the human drama that lurked behind the decision to leave the cinema early. Spilled popcorn? Spilled tears? The sight of a lover with a rival... Stop!

Yes, I admit it. I didn't know the answer. As a child of the 1960s, I was not taught grammar any more than I was taught the scientific composition of the paint we used in art. 'Today, children, we will be learning how to collect and dry the corpses of female cochineal beetles. Artists can use the resulting red colour to paint fabulous sunsets...'

In that BG (Before Gove) era, the explicit teaching of grammar was regarded as harmful. Young imaginations risked being cabined, cribbed, confined. Young minds would be pained by concepts too abstruse for them to grasp. No longer. The question on the use of the word 'before' appears in the sample Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation test, published on July 14, and intended to be taken by Year 6s in 2016. Hedged about by caveats and disclaimers, this test is nevertheless the only concrete example of the ordeal that awaits the current Year 5s – and their teachers. Remember, the 2016 test is going to be Much Harder (ungrammatical use of capital letters for emphasis) than its three predecessors as it is the first to be based on Mr Gove's new primary English curriculum – the one which devotes 15 more pages to spelling and grammar appendices than it does to actual aims and content.

The sample test does include a little story, no doubt a sop for those who pleaded for grammar to be taught in context. What a shame it is a pitiful non-story about a squirrel in a park notable only for an unnaturally large number of semi-colons and colons. Helpful hints for teachers also appear. One reads 'this question assesses the ability to transform given verb stems into the past progressive form, and understanding of the term.' Clear as mud is the simile that springs to mind. Don't the powers-that-be realise that some children in Year 6 struggle to remember their full stops and capital letters? Shocking maybe, but true.

Gove's decision, back in 2012, to impose a formal grammar test on Year 6 children was hotly debated at the time. The NUT and the NAHT talked of a boycott. [Michael Rosen](#) argued powerfully that this pernicky, 'there-is-a-right-answer' approach to grammar was wrong-headed in linguistic terms. He

also warned that it was yet another mechanism to control schools and would add to the 'army of passive, failed people' needed to keep wages down. [Even the government's own advisers warned against it.](#)

So of course in 2013 the Spag test, based on the old curriculum, went ahead. Now the protests have faded – or at least so it seems to me. Occasionally last year, I would look up from my marking/assessment/lesson planning/resource hunting/display mounting/behaviour managing/weeping to wonder why no one was shouting any more that teaching young children about fronted adverbials was not going to help them read, write or function as human beings FULL STOP.

Instead, there are now numerous education resources and organisations promising to help teachers with their modal verbs and relative clauses. The message seems to be, 'No one really believes in teaching this stuff, but here's a way to do it.' But if no one believes in teaching it, perhaps – radical thought here – it shouldn't be taught. What a shame teachers are not permitted, in accordance with [CPRT principles](#), 'to exercise the responsible and informed autonomy that is the mark of a mature profession'.

After all, as the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review pointed out, 'the goal of literacy must be more than just functional'. Literacy should confer the skill 'not just to read and write but to make these processes genuinely transformative, exciting children's imagination, extending their boundaries and enabling them to contemplate lives and worlds possible as well as actual'.

I did extend some boundaries this summer. Sadly I was not planning literacy lessons rich with talk of how to write wondrous stories, whimsical poems and powerful letters to politicians. Instead, I was shamefully and secretly working on my grammar. My time could have been so much better spent – and so could the children's. Let's ditch the grammar test before* it is too late.

* Subordinating conjunction or preposition? You decide.

12 September 2014

LABELLING BY ANOTHER NAME?

Warwick Mansell

Tim Oates, who led the ‘expert panel’ that initiated the government’s review of England’s national curriculum, was very clear as to why the old levels system had to go.

Speaking in a video which was [uploaded by the Department for Education to YouTube](#) in May, he offered a set of reasons explaining why the 25-year-old levels structure was being ditched.

Top of the list was what seemed a powerful thought: that summing up children’s performance numerically ran the risk of labelling them, and that this could end up harming their education.

Oates said: “Kids are labelling themselves as being a particular level: ‘I’m a level 3 and all my friends are level 4’. That’s very dysfunctional in terms of learning. That’s the first compelling reason [for scrapping levels]: this idea of kids labelling themselves and that being inappropriate in learning. It can actually hold back their learning rather than encourage it.”

This chimed with a finding in the [Cambridge Primary Review’s final report](#), which concluded (on page 316) that reducing children’s learning to a single level “serves to label children rather than to enlighten parents and other children about the range of their achievements”.

Yet labelling children is exactly what the new national curriculum and its associated assessment, the final details of which now have emerged from the DfE, still seems likely to encourage.

If anything, the new version stands to be worse than the old. And this is just one of several of Oates’s reasons for removing levels which seems not to have been addressed in the DfE’s new curriculum, assessment and accountability regime for primary schools.

With the details so fundamental to school life, and therefore vital to get right, I am left marvelling again at the ability of our ultra-politicised, short-termist policy-making structure to produce something so incoherent: so demonstrably at odds even with its own stated aims.

So, to expand on the point about labelling, last month the [DfE set out its plans](#) for a new system of “performance descriptors” for primary pupils.

At the end of key stages 1 and 2 in reading, writing, mathematics and science, teacher assessment will see professionals giving their charges what sounds suspiciously like a level, but is not being called one.

At key stage 1, in reading, writing and maths, children will be assessed as either at “mastery standard” or at “national standard”; “working towards national standard”; or “below national standard”.

For key stage 2 writing, an extra performance descriptor is added to the above: “above national standard”.

For the subjects of key stage 2 maths, science and reading – where, presumably, national curriculum tests will provide greater differentiation of pupil performance – and key stage 1 science, there is only one performance standard: “working at the national standard”.

Surveying the above, it seems impossible to comprehend how it gets away from any problem of labelling. Indeed, in replacing, say, a child achieving level two or three in key stage 2 writing with the judgement of “below national standard”, it probably exacerbates the problem as described by Oates, in the linguistic bluntness of the description if nothing else.

The single “working at national standard” – or not – verdict, where it is to be offered, also seems to invite a simple “pass/fail” judgement. This, it is hard to avoid thinking, will set up the view among many children that they are failures at an early age: from the age of seven, in the case of science.

There will be arguments about the defensibility of that, but above all it is hard to see how it can be squared with the stated aim of reducing labelling.

The labelling issue is probably the most glaringly contradictory output of this process, when set against the original rationale for removing levels. But other aspects of the vision, as set out by Oates, seem also to bump up against reality.

So Oates describes another problem of the old levels system: that it encouraged a sense that pupils had to be rushed from one level to the next. “The whole of the system has been focused on getting kids to move quickly through the levels,” he says in the video.

However, again, pushing children on to “tougher” material earlier seems to have been exactly ministers’ thinking in introducing the new national curriculum. And that thinking is reflected in what the new curriculum says.

For example, in maths, pupils are supposed to be progressing through the manipulation of fractions at a younger age than they used to, are to be taught their 12x tables in year four as opposed to knowing up to 10x tables by year six in the old system, and now to be using square and cube numbers during year five.

As teacher [Karen Mills](#) told me last year in relation to the latter: “Year 5 children are supposed to be using square and cube numbers. The assumption in the new curriculum is that they are ready for this, but many of them do not really understand the number system. If we try to force them forward on to new material, we are going to lose half of the class.”

And yet here we are, with the new curriculum and assessment regime seemingly being billed enthusiastically by the politicians overseeing the system as pushing children on to more challenging material earlier (as shown [here](#) and [here](#)).

Finally, Oates talked about the new national curriculum building deep conceptual understanding and focusing on “fewer things in greater depth”. The notion of stripped-down content seems largely true in subjects other than English, maths and science. But the new performance descriptors hardly suggest subjects concentrating on a few essentials.

Indeed, the question as to whether this new curriculum really moves away from the tick-box approach which is widely thought to have troubled its predecessor and its associated assessment seems very real, when one considers the new performance descriptors.

Prompted by the advice of a very experienced assessment expert, I noted that, for a KS1 teacher assessing whether or not a pupil is at national standard level across reading, writing, maths and science, there are 129 assessment bullet points to work through. At KS2, the equivalent figure is 144 bullet points.

There is one final point to make about the performance descriptors: we still seem in the dark about who exactly wrote the consultation document. So, if people are unhappy with this outcome, who can we hold to account for it, or at least explain it?

Criticism of the lack of transparency around the development of this new curriculum has dogged it throughout. Sadly, that is just one aspect of the dysfunctionality around policy-making that this national curriculum review, 2010-14, has exposed so vividly.

14 November 2014

ARE WE NEARLY THERE YET?

David Reedy

February saw a flurry of government announcements about assessment in English schools.

On 4 February [information about reception baseline assessment was published](#). In summary this states that from September 2015 schools may use a baseline assessment on children's attainment at the beginning of the reception year. DfE has commissioned six providers which are listed in the document. Schools can choose the provider they prefer. This is not compulsory but the guidance states:

Government-funded schools that wish to use the reception baseline assessment from September 2015 should sign up by the end of April. In 2022 we'll then use whichever measure shows the most progress: your reception baseline to key stage 2 results or your key stage 1 results to key stage 2 results.

From September 2016 you'll only be able to use your reception baseline to key stage 2 results to measure progress. If you choose not to use the reception baseline, from 2023 we'll only hold you to account by your pupils' attainment at the end of key stage 2.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) stops being compulsory in September 2016 too.

DfE is therefore essentially ensuring that emphasis is placed on a narrowing measure of attainment in language, literacy and mathematics (with a few small extra bits in most of the six cases), rather than an assessment which presents a much more holistic view of a child's learning and development. There is a veiled threat implied in the information quoted above. If a school doesn't use one of these baselines, progress will not be taken into account when a primary school is judged as good or not. Not doing the baseline might be an advantage to a school where children would do very well on it, and then only make expected progress, but still achieve high scores at the end of KS2, and the reverse if children would score very low on the baseline. Are schools now going to gamble whether to do these or not?

There are other serious issues leading to further uncertainty for schools. Almost all the recommended schemes are restricted mainly to language, literacy and mathematics and therefore progress and the school's effectiveness would be based on a narrow view of what the aims of primary education is for. Five of the six chosen systems do not explicitly draw on parents' and carers' knowledge of their children and thus will be based on incomplete evidence. As [TACTYC has pointed out](#), there are fundamental concerns about reliability and validity.

Comparisons between schools and overall judgements would be compromised when there are six different ways to measure the starting points of children in reception. It is inconsistent to allow schools to choose between six providers at baseline but only allow one choice at age 7 and 11.

Finally, as the first time progress will be measured from the baseline at age 11 will be in summer 2023 there will be at least two general elections before then. Will education policy in assessment remain static until then? On current experience that is highly unlikely.

Alongside this inconsistency and uncertainty about the reception baseline [the government published its response to the consultations about the draft performance descriptors](#) for the end of KS1 and KS2.

The responses were significantly more negative than positive with the vast majority of respondents indicating that these descriptors were not good enough and would not be able to do the job they were designed to do. Indeed nearly half thought the descriptors were not fit for purpose.

At the same time, and no doubt as a result of the consultation, [DFE announced an Assessment without Levels Commission](#) with the remit of '*supporting primary and secondary schools with the transition to assessment without levels, identifying and sharing good practice in assessment*'.

This is clearly to address the significant uncertainty about ongoing and summative assessment at the end of key stages where schools continue to struggle to understand what DfE's thinking actually is now that levels have been abolished.

Schools in England are in a cleft stick. Do they choose to do one of the baseline tests, which will take considerable time to administer one to one without knowing if it will be used in seven years' time or be of use next week to help plan provision? Can they afford to wait for the assessment commission to recommend an approach to assessment without levels or do they get on with it and possibly end up with a system that doesn't fit with what is recommended?

Thus to answer the question in this blog's title, the answer on the basis of the evidence above is 'Who knows?'

What a contrast to the situation in Wales where, also in February, *Successful Futures*, the review of the curriculum and assessment framework for Wales led by Professor Graham Donaldson, was published.

This states:

Phases and key stages should be removed in order to improve progression, and should be based on a well-grounded, nationally described continuum of learning that flows from when a child enters education through to the end of statutory schooling at 16 and beyond.

Learning will be less fragmented... and progression should be signaled through Progression Steps, rather than levels. Progression Steps will be described at five points in the learning continuum, relating broadly to expectations at ages 5, 8, 11, 14 and 16.... Each Progression Step should be viewed as a staging post for the educational development of every child, not a judgement.

What a sensible and coherent recommendation for assessment policy. Thus Wales may very well end up with a coherent, agreed, national framework for both mapping progress and judging attainment at specific ages within a broad understanding of the overall aims of education.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Professor Donaldson's review drew significantly on the Cambridge Primary Review's Final Report in coming to its conclusions.

Maybe England's policy makers should too.

13 March 2015

BEYOND BASICS

THE PARTS THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM DOESN'T REACH

Robin Alexander

Numbed by the unrelenting horror of this summer's news from Gaza, Israel, Syria, Iraq and South Sudan, and the heartrending images of children slaughtered, families shattered and ancient communities uprooted, we ask what on earth we in the West can do.

With our historical awareness heightened by the current centenary of the 1914-18 war and what, in terms of the redrawing of national boundaries, it led to, we also recognise that the fate of countries such as these reaches back in part to political decisions taken, like it or not, in our name and as recently as 2003. So collectively we are implicated if not complicit. If, as H.G. Wells warned soon after the 1918 armistice, history is a race between education and catastrophe, we must surely ask at this time why, for so many, that race has been lost; and whether and how education can do better. If ever we needed a reminder that true education must pursue goals and standards that go well beyond the narrow confines of what is tested, here it is.

We know that England's new national curriculum mandates what DfE deems 'essential knowledge' in the 'core subjects' (the quotes remind us that these are political formulations rather than moral absolutes) plus, in the interests of 'breadth and balance' (ditto) a few other subjects of which much less is said and demanded. But we've also been told that the school curriculum is more than the national curriculum. We should therefore take this opportunity to think no less seriously about what is *not* required than about what is.

One of my keenest memories of the period 2006-9 when the Cambridge Primary Review was collecting and analysing evidence on the condition and future of English primary education is of visiting an urban Lancashire primary school that exemplified England's ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. We were there as part of a journey crisscrossing the country to take '[community soundings](#)' - a few days earlier we had been with Roma and Travellers in Cornwall – and having heard from children, teachers, heads, parents and local officials we found ourselves in a small room discussing faith, education and social cohesion with an imam, a rabbi and a priest.

What was illuminating about this encounter, apart from the manifest respect each religious representative had for the other, was the extent of common ground between them. Predating by several years the [current DfE consultation on 'British values'](#), our three faith leaders readily identified a moral core for education to which they and we could all subscribe. Significantly, this did not merely look inwards at Britain and to cosy clichés like fair play but unflinchingly outwards to the fractured and despairing world we see daily on our television screens.

Partly in response to soundings such as this, the [twelve educational aims](#) proposed by the Cambridge Primary Review included the promotion of *respect and reciprocity, interdependence and sustainability, culture and community and local, national and global citizenship*; while the [Review's curriculum framework](#) sought to advance the knowledge and understanding with which values in action must always be tempered through domains such as *place and time, citizenship and ethics and faith and belief*. The last of these was deemed integral to the curriculum because, as our community soundings confirmed, 'religion is fundamental to this country's history, culture and language, as well as to the daily lives of many of its inhabitants.'

Yet where is any of this reflected in [the national curriculum](#) that England's schools are about to implement? The exploration of faith and belief (which is not necessarily the same as compulsory RE)

remains anomalously outside the walls, even as religion is invoked to justify unspeakable atrocities. World history receives scant treatment, the ethical dimension of science has been removed, culture – however one defines it – gets short shrift and in the primary phase citizenship has disappeared completely.

For the society and world in which our children are growing up is this an adequate preparation? Some of us think not, and this autumn CPRT hopes to join with other organisations to explore curriculum futures which engage more directly and meaningfully with that world, believing that citizenship education is not only more urgent now than ever but that it must be local and global as well as national.

So when schools consider how they should fill the gap between the new national curriculum and the school curriculum they may care to start by reflecting on another gap: between the curriculum as officially prescribed and the condition and needs of the community, society and world in which our children are growing up.

Of course, we speak here of the task for education as a whole, not primary education alone, and we must be mindful of what is appropriate for children at different phases of their development. The vision of a childhood untroubled by adult fears and responsibilities cannot be lightly dismissed, though such a childhood is beyond the reach of millions of the world's children. Yet consider this, from [CPR's community soundings report](#): 'The soundings were pervaded by a sense of deep pessimism about the future, to which children themselves were not immune ... Yet where schools engaged children with global and local realities as aspects of their education they were noticeably more upbeat ... Pessimism turned to hope when witnesses felt they had the power to act.'

So in the global race between education and catastrophe what exactly should England's primary teachers do and what should England's primary children learn? The question is entirely open: please respond.

12 August 2014

PRIMARY SCIENCE: THE POOR RELATION?

Marianne Cutler

We are reminded by Ofsted of the qualities of an effective science education in their 2013 report [Maintaining Curiosity](#), where the best science teaching observed

- was driven by determined subject leadership that put scientific enquiry at the heart of science teaching and coupled it with substantial expertise in how pupils learn science;
- set out to sustain pupils' natural curiosity, so that they were eager to learn the subject content as well as develop the necessary investigative skills;
- was informed by accurate and timely assessment of how well pupils were developing their understanding of science concepts, and their skills in analysis and interpretation so that teaching could respond to and extend pupils' learning.

But regrettably not all primary schools, and probably not even the majority, are offering this quality of experience to their children regularly. The reasons are well documented in the Wellcome Trust's 2014 report *Primary Science: is it missing out?*, and the CBI's *Tomorrow's World: inspiring primary scientists* in 2015. At the heart of this lie issues of leadership and accountability. Taking the pressure off science by the removal of statutory tests at the end of primary education in England in 2009 was a move generally welcomed by the science community to address concerns that science teaching had become defined and restricted by those tests. But it resulted in leaders taking broadly two different approaches to science.

Some enthusiastically embraced the new opportunities and freedom to enrich their pupils' science experience, particularly through practical, enquiry-led teaching.

Others – often those in leadership positions – disappointingly perceived science as less important than the other core subjects of English and mathematics; a tendency noted in the [Cambridge Primary Review's final report](#). This situation continues today in many schools. In over half the schools visited in Ofsted's 2013 review, the leaders 'no longer saw science as a priority' and its status has declined visibly. In those schools, science has become the poor relation.

This results in an all too familiar picture in these schools: a lack of planning for learning, unclear ideas about what achievement looks like that can be shared and understood by children, inadequate monitoring of the quality of science teaching and a lack of time and resources allocated to it, and little commitment to subject-focused professional development.

Whilst whole school priorities as a focus for professional development are important, research in 2014 by the [Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education](#) indicates that pupils are more likely to benefit from subject focused professional development because it changes teachers' practices by making links between professional learning and pupil learning explicit. This is particularly relevant to primary science where teachers frequently report that they lack confidence in their science subject knowledge to be able to provide their children with the inspirational experience that they seek. The number of primary teachers who may describe themselves in this way is potentially very large – [estimates from the Campaign for Science and Engineering in 2015](#) indicate that only 5% of primary teachers have a science related degree – and for these teachers (in post and in initial teacher education), opportunities to engage with subject-focused professional development will be particularly important and valued. This is especially significant while the new curriculum in England is

being implemented, with its increased emphasis on working scientifically, and on different types of enquiry with which teachers are not yet familiar.

This is not a time to be complacent. Putting efforts into planning an effective, rich and actively engaging primary science curriculum that embraces working scientifically – with opportunities to develop, use and apply children’s mathematical and literacy knowledge and skills at its core – will pay dividends. Research by [King’s College London’s Aspires project](#) reported in 2013 that by the time young people reach secondary school, they may already have disengaged with science.

But let’s not forget that science is in a strong position, with a vibrant community that offers a vast range of opportunities for leaders and teachers to take charge of their own professional learning journey and to make the most of primary science in their schools. More than any other subject, science has supporters in industry, charitable foundations and learned societies, all keen to help teachers to make primary science a stimulating and rewarding experience for all children. These opportunities include enrichment initiatives from the [Royal Society partnership grants](#) and the [British Science Association](#), membership of the [Association for Science Education](#) (ASE), professional development through the [National Science Learning Network](#), recognition of one’s own achievements through [Chartered Science Teacher](#) (CSciTeach) or the [Primary Science Teacher Awards](#), and the achievements of your school through [Primary Science Quality Mark](#) (PSQM).

Taking advantage of these opportunities, there are numerous examples of inspirational science taking place across the country, commonly supported and championed by strong and insightful leaders who recognise the value of reflective professional development and the opportunities to learn from, and contribute to, the many thriving networks of those who are passionate about primary science – including members of [CPRT’s Schools Alliance](#) – and who understand the important contribution of science to wider school priorities, culture and ethos.

Cathy Dean, assistant headteacher at [Queen Edith Primary School](#) in Cambridge, a member of CPRT’s Schools Alliance with Gold PSQM, comments

‘Queen Edith was motivated to work towards PSQM because of the range of science already being completed in school and we felt that this should be celebrated. The year we completed the PSQM coincided with a Science and Technology Learning Saturday. For this event a working group helped to recruit members of the local community (including parents, university staff and other professionals) to come in and run workshops throughout the day for children and their parents.

We had a very positive response from children, parents and volunteers, and have then used some of those links to enrich our curriculum for future teaching. Completing the PSQM allowed the science subject leader to dedicate time to think about resources and teaching of science in the school and how this could be enhanced. Resources were reorganised and distributed, allowing science lessons to be practical and exciting. Staff meeting time was also dedicated to enhancing the science curriculum. It allowed the science subject leader to work closely with science leaders from other schools, enabling them to share ideas, resources and contacts.’

For this school, and many others, science is certainly not the poor relation.

24 April 2015

EDUCATING FOR CREATIVITY

Teresa Cremin

On 5 March I attended the first of the [Anna Craft](#) memorial lectures which will be given annually in commemoration of the life and work of this influential educator and Co-Director of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

It was a bittersweet occasion, shared with Anna's colleagues from multiple arts and cultural organisations, universities and schools and her family and friends. The 150 seats went within the first fortnight and a waiting list grew rapidly, testifying to the esteem in which Anna's work is held; it remains an important force in the shaping of theory and practice in creativity and education.

Anna would have been honoured by the words of Sir Ken Robinson, who gave the first lecture, entitled '*Educating for Creativity: From what is to what might be*'; he described her contribution as 'immense'. Filmed in Los Angeles, the lecture was shown simultaneously at the Open University's centre in Camden (where I was) and at Exeter University (she was working in both universities at the time of her death at just 52 years old). The intention of the annual lecture series is to help sustain her legacy and to disseminate the best contemporary thinking about creativity and education, both in the UK and internationally.

Ken Robinson began by masterfully dismissing some of the myths of creativity: that it is 'rare', an attribute of 'special' people or that you are either creative or you are not, an absurd idea, since as Ken observed; 'if you're human it comes with the kit'. He also asserted that confusion remains over the concept itself. In his view, this is one of the key reasons that creativity in education is still not taken seriously by policy makers.

This was a timely reminder that as educators and researchers if we cannot agree our terms, we will not be able to teach for creativity nor document the impact of children's creative learning.

As [Csikszentmihalyi](#) notes, the education profession lacks a commonly accepted theoretically underpinned framework for creativity that can be developed in practice. Without common understanding new myths will develop, like the one currently circulating about the so called 'creative curriculum'. I keep hearing this described by teachers as if were an entity, a planned and prescribed monolithic given – delivered in the afternoons – as a form of respite from the morning rituals of literacy and numeracy. Last Saturday, at the London Festival of Education, (run by UCL, Institute of Education), one session was devoted to achieving literacy and numeracy targets creatively through using technology aligned to cross curricula themes. This 'creative curriculum' focused on individual set learning tasks and offered sets of planned deliverables.

Where, I ask myself, are the children in all this? [Where are their voices, their views and their funds of knowledge?](#) How do these shape the curriculum as planned and lived? In the recent CPRT review [Children, their voices and their experiences of school: What does the evidence tell us?](#) Carol Robinson highlights that in order to empower children to act as partners in their own learning, they need to be partners in decisions about teaching and learning. A curriculum which is forged creatively through dialogue, collaboration and interaction must surely involve children since, as Anna and Bob Jeffrey argue, creative practice is learner-inclusive and enables children to have some agency and control over their school learning life.

One school which seeks to involve children in co-designing the curriculum and fosters creative learning is [St Leonards C of E](#) in Devon, a [CPRT Schools Alliance](#) institution which is imaginatively led by [Jo Evans](#). Teachers in Jo's school, as in many others, even in accountability cultures such as ours, can and do choose to exercise their professional agency.

Many teachers, encouraged by working with partners from creative and cultural organisations, and determined to offer co-constructed creative curricula, proactively seek out ways to shape their school curricula responsively, drawing on the CPR's conception of a broad and balanced curriculum. These professionals show considerable commitment and imagination, despite, or perhaps because of, the persistent performativity agenda.

For another example, see head teacher [Iain Erskine's account](#) of the work at Fulbridge Academy in Peterborough, also a CPRT Schools Alliance member. Already a National School of Creativity, Fulbridge have adopted [CPR's eight curriculum domains](#) (including that of arts and creativity) from nursery to Year 6; they teach, assess and plan with reference to these. The five staff who recently presented at a [CPRT London regional network meeting](#), on [Fulbridge's approach to assessment without levels](#), certainly demonstrated that they take risks, have the power to innovate and problem solve – together.

Though it has to be acknowledged that these schools may be exceptions to the rule, since in recent years the relentless quest for higher standards has tended to obscure the personal and agentic dimensions of teaching and learning, and may have fostered a mindset characterised more by compliance and conformity than curiosity and creativity.

For primary educators tensions abound, not only because the policy of performativity appears contradictory to the apparent freedoms and professional agency offered in political rhetoric, but also because teachers' own confidence as creative educators has been radically reduced by prescribed curricula and the endless barrage of change and challenge. This has had consequences. The recently published Warwick Commission report, [Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth](#), identifies a worrying reduction in emphasis on, and capacity for, creative opportunities in schools, and asserts that the impoverishment of creative experience in the early years is linked to lack of engagement in adult life. More worryingly still it identifies a link between economic disadvantage and low levels of creative engagement. Primarily this is an issue of equity, which demands, as Ken Robinson did also, that we respond. To borrow [Anna's term](#), we need to 'possibility think' our way forwards here in order to move from 'what is' to 'what might be'.

One route onwards is to surely revisit our purpose, and re-consider the aims and values underpinning the curriculum. The final Cambridge Primary Review report innovatively proposed 'exciting the imagination' as one of the [12 core aims for primary education](#):

Exciting the imagination. *To excite children's imagination in order that they can advance beyond present understanding, extend the boundaries of their lives, contemplate worlds possible as well as actual, understand cause and consequence, develop the capacity for empathy, and reflect on and regulate their behaviour; to explore and test language, ideas and arguments in every activity and form of thought ... We assert the need to emphasise the intrinsic value of exciting children's imagination. To experience the delights – and pains – of imagining, and of entering into the imaginative worlds of others, is to become a more rounded and capable person.*

In planning to achieve this, through collaborating with children and other adults, (e.g. TAs, parents, and partners from the creative and cultural organisations), teachers will be demonstrating, as Anna Craft did, a deep commitment to fostering creativity in the young, and, if supported, they may also be involved, as Anna was, in researching the consequences of such playful practice on children's

creative learning. As educators, if we afford high value to 'what if' and 'as if' thinking, work harder to include children in shaping the curriculum and recognise their own and their teachers need for agency, we will not only be taking Anna Craft's legacy forward, we will also be cultivating creativity – that potent ['engine of human growth'](#).

6 March 2015

PICTURES FOR SCHOOLS: WORTH REVIVING OR A LUXURY?

Natalie Bradbury

If you had the chance to introduce your pupils to original works of art in the classroom (such as framed paintings and prints, sculptures, ceramics and embroideries), would you take it? And what would you do with it?

Almost seventy years ago, a scheme was established which aimed to enable teachers and educators to do just that. Set up in 1947 under the name of the [Society for Education through Art](#), *Pictures for Schools* was founded and driven by painter and educator Nan Youngman, art adviser to Cambridgeshire's innovative [Director of Education Henry Morris](#).

Pictures for Schools took the form of a series of annual exhibitions held at prestigious London galleries until 1969. Artworks by established artists, students and recent graduates were sold at prices designed to be within the reach of educational buyers. Directors of Education and art advisers from local authorities made the trip to London to purchase work for burgeoning town, city and county art collections for loan to schools. Northern buyers included Rochdale, Manchester, Lancashire and Carlisle, along with the West Riding and Newcastle, West Bromwich, Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottingham regularly visited from the Midlands, and authorities in Bristol and Dorset purchased work for schools in the South West. London County Council, Bromley, Harrow, Croydon, Cambridge, Hertfordshire, Essex, Kent and Great Yarmouth were among the main purchasers from the South East.

Other educational buyers, though smaller in number, included primary, secondary and independent schools, and teacher training colleges. Museum services benefited from levels of staffing and support unimaginable today, such as in-house carpenters to frame paintings and create carry-cases for sculptures, and dedicated vans to transport work to schools. Art advisers visited schools to advise on the siting and hanging of paintings, and insurance, and ran weekend courses on the use of art in schools.

Although submissions of all kinds were welcomed – as long as they did not ‘play down’ to children – and some were bold, abstract and vibrant, there was a bias towards representational work such as still-lives and landscapes. Art educator [Marion Richardson](#), a major influence on Nan Youngman, encouraged her young pupils to seek inspiration in the scenery all around them, and many of the works in *Pictures for Schools* presented children with sights drawn from the everyday. As well as the London monument pictures of [Edward Bawden](#), which consistently sold well, and stylised prints depicting Oxbridge colleges, best-sellers included the murky industrial landscapes of [John Kenneth Long](#) and [George Chapman](#)'s stark black and white images of people going about their daily life and work, and children playing in the street. Prints such as linocuts – especially the colourful prints of [Peter Green](#) – also proved popular, as they were in a medium easily replicable in the classroom.

The ideas motivating *Pictures for Schools* were very much of their time. During and after the Second World War, as the rebuilding of Britain was debated in both the public and political spheres, educators called for art education to be given a central position in the new school system. This received support from the Ministry of Education, as part of a project to promote British culture, improve the public's standards of taste and create a new generation of citizens and educated consumers who were capable of exercising judgment in aesthetic matters and making informed choices and purchases.

By the end of the 1960s, ideas about education were changing and as education budgets were cut *Pictures for Schools* was forced to come to an end. As early as the 1980s, some of the work in county collections was seen as old-fashioned. In the decades that followed, [some work by previously lesser-known artists has risen in value](#), making it difficult to lend and insure, and several local authorities have realised that the work, often in storage and unseen for years, represents valuable potential income.

Although most county collections have been sold, and it is difficult to ascertain the whereabouts of many artworks once in public ownership, in a few areas of the country it is still possible for schools to borrow work purchased from *Pictures for Schools* today, along with more modern work. These include embroideries, along with other work purchased from *Pictures for Schools* in the 1960s by the still-thriving [Reading Museum Service](#). [Derbyshire Museum Service](#), one of the largest, has retained the bulk of its collection. Although some paintings have been sent to local museums for safekeeping the service, based in Derby, continues to invest in new work by visiting local artists. Leeds Art Gallery, meanwhile, has its own school loan scheme, [Artemis](#), which offers workshops to introduce teachers to the collection.

We've all seen sculptures sitting outside the school entrance, paintings of grandees in the school hall, or wishy-washy landscapes displayed in reception areas, but the organisers of *Pictures for Schools* intended that the work in schools should be seen and looked at close-up by children. Here, the use of originals as opposed to reproductions was key, as it was thought to be crucial that children could identify first-hand how the work was made: the mark of the brush-stroke or the pinch of the clay.

One of the shortcomings of *Pictures for Schools*, however, was that, once the work had been sold, there was no specific guidance given to schools about how to make the most of it. Some of the individual authorities contacted the organisers asking for artists' contact details with a view to compiling biographical notes, and several authorities later sent out sets of notes with the artworks. One former art adviser from Cambridgeshire, also a teacher in the 1970s, told me that he had passed artworks around the classroom, using them as the starting point for debate and discussion, which is exactly what the organisers envisaged.

Unfortunately, today loan services have to compete for schools' already precious time and monetary resources, and the debate about the value of arts subjects in the curriculum is ongoing. Is there a place for original artworks in twenty-first century schools or are they an expensive luxury?

16 January 2015

JOURNEY TO COHERENCE

Iain Erskine

In 2003, Fulbridge Primary School came out of Special Measures and in 2012 it was judged 'outstanding' in every Ofsted inspection area. Along the way, we were assessed by [Creative Partnerships](#) and in 2008 we gained the status of a National School of Creativity. In 2013, we converted into an Academy. In December 2014, we were invited to be a [Whole Education Pathfinder](#) school. Most significantly however, we became a member of the [Cambridge Primary Review Trust's Schools Alliance](#) in 2014 and adopted the principles, priorities, vision, aims and curriculum domains of the [Cambridge Primary Review](#).

Once we left the Special Measures Club we decided that more of the same would not work, so we embarked on a curriculum and school development journey that can fairly be called never-ending. On this journey we have been lucky enough to learn from the likes of Roger Cole, Mick Waters, Mathilda Joubert, Alan Peat, Lindy Barclay and Andy Hind. But it's our decision to accept the invitation to work with the Cambridge Primary Review Trust that will have the biggest impact.

Before the Cambridge Primary Review we had been working to develop a curriculum based on creativity, first hand experiences and the local environment. This suited our school, its pupils, teachers and community. But when the CPR final report appeared we discovered that it encapsulated both what we had been aspiring towards and what we had not yet addressed. So it not only aligned with what we were already doing but also offered us a way forward that would lead to further improvements. In this we heeded the parting comment of our lead Ofsted inspector: 'Remember: "outstanding" is not perfect'.

So what have we done since becoming a member of CPRT's Schools Alliance?

From September 2014 we started teaching, assessing and planning by reference to [CPR's eight curriculum domains](#): arts and creativity; citizenship and ethics; faith and belief; language, oracy and literacy; mathematics; physical and emotional health; place and time; science and technology. These are not unlike [DfE's seven early years areas of learning and development](#) - and indeed the CPR report made it clear that its domains were intended to encourage curriculum continuity from early years to primary and from primary to secondary – so we decided to adopt them throughout the school, from nursery to year 6. This meant that there would be significant changes to our assessment processes too, because assessment without levels was introduced nationally at the same time.

To demonstrate genuine commitment to a broad and balanced curriculum we wanted to assess children's learning in every domain, so a great deal of thought, research and work went into creating an approach which provides effective assessment without losing the exciting and innovative curriculum that we created, which we believe, in CPR's words, 'engages children's attention, excites and empowers their thinking and advances their knowledge, understanding and skill.'

The time to make changes is when you are doing really well; don't leave it until things start going wrong. The master of this principle was of course Alex Ferguson at Manchester United, hence the unparalleled success that the Red Devils have enjoyed over many years. So we too have adopted that principle in the hope of creating a Theatre of Dreams at Fulbridge as he did at Old Trafford.

September 2014 brought major changes and initiatives such as the new national curriculum, the SEND code of practice and of course the new assessment requirements and we too changed many of

our structures. Meanwhile we have had a new 240-place building constructed which allows us to move from a 3 to 4 form entry school.

We are an enthusiastic Google Apps school, so all the new structures were created in Google Drive on Excel sheets, a format that allows everyone to contribute and add to the master document that will cover all our short, medium and long term planning. This process proved to be a great way to ensure participation and ownership by all staff. Alongside this we are working with Pupil Asset, who have created a bespoke tracking system that will tell you – if you really want to know – whether a child with size ten feet, blue eyes and ginger hair is over or underperforming compared to national averages.

Planning, teaching and assessing are the keys to everything that happens in our classrooms. We took the government's proposed freedoms as a genuine invitation and made sure that each part of the cycle linked to the others. Thus, we use the same criteria to plan, teach and assess. To start the process we look at what we want to assess, having merged the CPR's eight curriculum domains with the new national curriculum. We have created areas of assessment within each domain, aligning them with the attainment targets from the primary curriculum. In addition, we looked at how this linked to the topics and themes we teach, taking away parts of the new curriculum we didn't want to use and adding any parts that were missing – the most serious omission being oracy.

We followed the same process of aligning curriculum domains and assessment strands in our EYFS Developmental Matters statements. Planning, teaching and assessing are now coherently and consistently applied and practised from nursery to year 6. During the current school year we are establishing what works and what fits, modifying elements as necessary so that by the end of the year we will have refined and embedded a system that we can take forward.

In basing all we are doing on the Cambridge Primary Review, we know that what we are doing is based on sound evidence, which makes a refreshing change when we think back to some of the initiatives that successive governments have introduced.

To support all these changes, our [website](#) was updated. Links to the CPRT website were easily made, but ensuring that the site's [curriculum area](#) reflected all we are doing as a member of CPRT's Schools Alliance took more time. After consulting staff and Governors, our new [Ethos and Aims](#) statement was uploaded onto the site. This adapts the [CPR educational aims](#) to reflect our overall approach and the character of our school community.

13 February 2015

LIVING THE CPRT IDEAL

Jo Evans

In 2010 I became head teacher of a primary school in Devon. After assessing the challenges we faced we became involved with the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, and in association with other interested schools we began to research ways to enhance pupils' engagement in their learning. That small scale project became the bedrock of our school improvement plan. Four years on, the same thread of thinking, firmly embedded in the principles of the Cambridge Primary Review, continues to inform our work.

If you visited us, what would you see that's distinctive, or that marks us out as a member of [CPRT's Schools Alliance](#)?

Principles pursued with confidence. We strive for a principled approach not only to the curriculum but also the whole experience we offer to children in our care. [The Trust's aims](#) have been used as aspirational tools to remind us of what is important over and above government priorities. If you visit our [website](#) you can see how we have made our educational philosophy explicit to parents and others. My previous school moved from being deemed inadequate by OFSTED to outstanding, and my experience of leading this process gave me the confidence to take responsibility for the independent path we have chosen to follow in my present school.

Planning informed by CPRT priorities. While continuing to drive for improved progress and attainment in English and mathematics we have incorporated CPRT priorities into the actions we take in relation to these goals and strategic planning more widely. Thus (i) we work to help pupils take greater responsibility for their own learning ([Pupil Voice](#), [Community](#)); (ii) we ensure that assessment drives the progress and attainment of every pupil rather than merely measures it ([Equity](#), [Assessment](#)); and (iii) keeping our aims firmly in mind we use high-quality teaching to achieving the very best outcomes for all ([Pedagogy](#), [Curriculum](#), [Aims](#)).

Practice informed by evidence. To ensure that evidence continues to inform our practice we operate a tiered approach to action research. This includes termly and half-termly whole school classroom-based research projects with shared foci, lesson study in cross year/school groupings, and individual research projects. Following recent training as part of CPRT's South West Research Schools Network, we are now going one stage further and developing pupil-led research projects. All this in-school research activity links to the three strategic strands listed above and gives a depth to our school's practice which it would not have if we merely followed government guidelines or requirements to the letter. Researching and discussing research are therefore no less fundamental to our approach to professional development and performance management and have enabled us to provide leadership for research and development in more than one teaching school.

Flexible curriculum, responsive teaching. Keeping the curriculum meaningful and engaging is essential but also challenging, and we have developed a number of ways to monitor and refine it. Of these, the most obvious yet important is engaging pupils in frequent discussion about their learning. In addition, an assessment tool called Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) provides quantitative whole-school data, while our home learning approach is pupil driven: the more positive the response in the home learning to learning experiences in school, the more inspiring the topic. Our teachers are now used to adjusting the curriculum in line with evidence from these sources so that it is truly responsive to pupils and their world.

Values-based staff recruitment. Being a church school we recruit people who in the first instance can show how they will contribute to its distinctiveness. But as a member of CPRT Schools Alliance we also ask candidates to observe our children and teachers at work and identify how what they observe reflects CPR aims and CPRT priorities. This enables us to identify those who are genuinely receptive to the values and principles in which the school's teaching is embedded.

Revisiting core ideas. In a period of increasing instability and sudden policy shifts it's all too easy to be deflected from the long-term educational path one has mapped out. Re-reading the CPR final report and revisiting the CPRT aims and priorities reminds us why we are in teaching, and it provides the evidence and arguments to justify our belief that we can and must trust ourselves as professionals to provide for our pupils' development and learning.

21 January 2015

BASICS VERSUS BREADTH, YET AGAIN

Warwick Mansell

It was a moment when, listening in the audience, I found myself saying internally: ‘Hold on a minute: that’s not right.’ Or, at least: ‘Hold on a minute: that is debatable, at best’.

The event was a conference this week in central London at which a well-known figure from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development was making claims about the links between pupils’ scores in international tests and their countries’ future economic growth rates.

But the statement at which my ears particularly pricked up did not come from Andreas Schleicher of the OECD. Nor was it on the conference’s main subject matter: the widely-reported if fishy-sounding claim that the UK ‘would gain £2 trillion’ by raising test scores by a few points.

No, it came from another high-profile education figure, on the issue of breadth versus ‘basics’ in the curriculum.

Amanda Spielman, one of the founders of the 31-school Ark chain of academies who is also the chair of England’s exams regulator, Ofqual, said that it was nice to see the OECD acknowledging that schools sometimes needed to focus on the ‘basics’ of English and maths, even if, she implied, this had to be at the expense of other subjects.

Ms Spielman said: ‘There is a trade-off between breadth of curriculum and a focus on the achievement of these basic skills.’

Reiterating, she said: ‘Here is one of those areas of policy where there are trade-offs, and being explicit that there are trade-offs helps the discussion.’

Here, I thought, was a startling repudiation of the view of the Cambridge Primary Review, among other evidence sources.

And, sure enough, here, on page 493 of the [Review’s final report](#), is its warning of a mistaken ‘policy-led belief that curriculum breadth is incompatible with the pursuit of standards in “the basics”, and that if anything gives way it must be breadth ... Evidence going back many decades, including reports from HMI and Ofsted, consistently shows this belief to be unfounded. Standards and breadth are often positively related, and high-performing schools achieve both,’ says the report.

So I pressed Ms Spielman on this. Alongside questioning whether her comments were in line with what research said, I put it to her that while I, personally, had enjoyed both English and maths all the way until the age of 18 at school, the thought of having to take time out of my other subjects for extra lessons in these ‘basics’ would not have been attractive.

She then qualified her position, in two ways. First, she said it wasn’t a case of removing any subjects other than English and maths completely, but of merely sometimes needing extra lessons in those subjects. This was particularly the case when working, as Ark in many cases does, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

That sounded fair enough, but the question (or non-question) as to whether children need to do well in literacy and numeracy – they do – has always seemed to me to be different from the one of

exactly *how* this is to be achieved. Is the answer more lessons in these particular subjects? Or is it using the rest of the curriculum creatively to ensure that those basics are mastered, while children's interests are nurtured and these other subjects are pursued as ends in themselves?

I have never seen that answering 'yes' to the first question means the answer to the second has to be 'yes', but this seemed to be the implication of the comments.

Ms Spielman's second way of expanding on what she said was to argue that she was speaking specifically about secondary education, rather than primary. I emailed her for extra information after the talk, and she told me:

'I was not saying that the primary curriculum should be more limited than it is now...what I was saying is that there are times when there is a clear risk that a child will not reach a satisfactory level of basic education, however that is defined. For example, a child coming into secondary school working three years below expectations might typically fall into that category. The secondary school has to decide how to educate that child to the best of their abilities, using all the information at their disposal.

'One option is to stick with a "standard" Key Stage 3 curriculum, in which the child's achievement in all subjects is likely to be constrained by their relatively weak literacy and maths, even with ameliorating "interventions". A second option is to adopt the "depth before breadth" model used by Ark, which prioritises basic education (and prioritising here does not mean abandoning the rest of the curriculum) ... A third option is to set an "alternative" curriculum that aims to develop the student in areas that do not require high levels of literacy/maths.' The implication was that Ms Spielman and Ark favoured the second option. She said this was in line with the OECD's stress that all children should achieve at least 'basic education'.

Expanding still further to stress that she was talking about secondary and not primary, Ms Spielman said: 'I completely agree with Cambridge Primary Review in principle: when the school is doing a proper job, there should be no need for trade-offs: the problems arise when the preceding phases of education have not been good enough. Primaries have the opportunity to get it right from the beginning; secondaries don't.'

All this is very interesting, I thought. Many, I guess, might commend the Ark approach as reported here. I am not a teacher, so I do not have first-hand experience of any of these approaches.

But two things are, perhaps, worth saying. First, it does seem true that Ark is prepared to devote more time to literacy and numeracy, at least for some pupils. Curious to find out more about Ark's 'depth before breadth' stipulation, I looked it up on [Ark's website](#) and found the following: 'When pupils secure firm foundations in English and mathematics, they find the rest of the curriculum far easier to access. That's why we prioritise depth in these subjects, giving pupils the best chance of academic success.'

The site adds: 'We also dedicate more time to literacy and English than other schools to encourage a love of reading and develop fluent communication skills. We have two programmes that focus specifically on phonics teaching and early spoken language skills.' There is no mention of this applying only to secondary schools.

This suggests to me that the issue of whether some or all pupils need more time to be spent on literacy and numeracy is very much a live one, and is therefore worth debating. Does the amount of time spent on the subjects matter, I wonder, or is it better to concentrate on teaching quality in

existing timeframes for these subjects, while maximising curriculum breadth? I'm not sure, but the Cambridge Primary Review evidence suggests this would be worth debating.

Indeed, evidence is relevant both from the United States – where in 2011, as [CPRT's Robin Alexander reported during the UK government's national curriculum review](#), a commission advising the White House showed that many studies found links between pupils' greater involvement in the arts and higher reading and numeracy test scores and increased engagement with school, with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds seemingly benefiting especially – and from the UK, where a report published last month by the [National Union of Teachers](#) said that England's accountability regime was pushing schools to 'offer a narrow education at the expense of a broad and balanced curriculum'. Both of these reports, in common with the Cambridge Primary Review, would seem to raise questions about the 'trade-off' thesis.

Second, and coincidentally, over the weekend a friend from an arts background told me that she recently visited an Ark primary, which educates many disadvantaged pupils, and had been put off by a 'literacy and numeracy above all else' approach. My friend worried about creative subjects losing out as a result. The idea that this might be the case would, no doubt, be denied strongly by Ark. But her child will nevertheless not be attending the school.

As I put it to Amanda Spielman at the conference, is there a danger of setting up a divide between schools using perhaps narrower curricular methods in disadvantaged communities, and more rounded offerings from schools with a more middle-class intake? After all, do not leading schools in the independent sector pride themselves on their rounded curricula?

Whatever the answer to these questions, with Ark arguably the most successful of England's major academy chains, and its methods therefore perhaps likely to be influential in the future, it seems now might be a good time to revisit this debate.

15 May 2015

TEACH LOCAL, LEARN GLOBAL

Robin Alexander

We ended 2014 with one official consultation. We begin 2015 with another. The two couldn't be more different.

In December [we responded](#) to the online enquiry of the House of Commons Education Select Committee into the [UK government's use of evidence to inform policy](#). Not for the first time, but in common with many of the enquiry's other 500 respondents, we voiced deep concern that despite DfE's ostensible interest in 'evidence-informed policy' its approach to evidence is all too often selective, ideologically partisan and methodologically naive. It remains to be seen whether the Select Committee will call DfE to account on this score, or whether its members will merely shrug and say 'That's politics.' Which, depressingly, it is.

But all this will seem parochial in comparison with the agenda to which another organisation invites us to respond, for it deals with nothing less than the responsibility of national educational systems, including our own, 'to improve the quality of life, promote decent employment, encourage civic participation and enable all citizens to lead a life with dignity, equality, gender empowerment and justice'. All citizens, everywhere, not just in the UK.

The quotation comes from a UNESCO concept note outlining how progress in global education should be monitored after 2015, the year in which the current UN Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education (which in many countries won't be achieved) is superseded by an even more ambitious set of goals which apply as much to rich countries as to poor, and tie education firmly to the increasingly urgent global imperatives of equity and sustainable development.

Both of these happen to be among CPRT's eight priorities, and if you check the new [CPRT priorities in action](#) page of our website you'll see how we and our partners are beginning, within our modest resources, to pursue them. But if you want a sense of the gravity of the challenge we all face, read the UN's December 2014 synthesis report [The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet](#).

The report ends thus:

Today's world is a troubled world, one in turmoil and turbulence, with no shortage of painful political upheavals. Societies are under serious strain, stemming from the erosion of our common values, climate change and growing inequalities, to migration pressures and borderless pandemics. It is also a time in which the strength of national and international institutions is being seriously tested. Because of the nature and the scope of this daunting array of enormous challenges, both inaction and business-as-usual must be dismissed as options. If the global community does not exercise national and international leadership in the service of the peoples of the world, we risk further fragmentation, impunity and strife, endangering both the planet itself as well as a future of peace, sustainable development and respect for human rights ...

The year 2015 is hence the time for global action ... We must take the first determined steps toward a sustainable future with dignity for all. Transformation is our aim. We must transform our economies, our environment and our societies. We must change old mindsets, behaviours and destructive patterns. We must embrace the integrated essential elements of

dignity, people, prosperity, planet, justice and partnership. We must build cohesive societies, in pursuit of international peace and stability ... We have an historic opportunity and duty to act, boldly, vigorously and expeditiously, to achieve a life of dignity for all, leaving no one behind.

'Think global, act local' has become a cliché. Worse, it has been hijacked by multinationals to advance enterprises that are anything but sustainable or equitable. But educators can reclaim it. The UN's global education agenda is directed at governments, so at the start of 2015 we should demand to know how our own government will respond, or whether this major report and the evidence that informs it, will be kicked into touch like so many before it. But the UN's education agenda requires no less energetic action in the classroom. Teach local, learn global.

9 January 2015

BEING A TEACHER

TEACHERS, DOCTORS AND WOOLLY TIGHTS

Stephanie Northen

A friend of mine has just qualified as a GP. Her salary is £80K. I have just qualified as a teacher. My salary is £23K. Fair? Right? I don't think so.

My friend drives a BMW generously coated with special glittery paint and with heated seats for those chilly winter mornings. I drive a rusting Ford Focus and wear woolly tights. So much for John Major and his 1990 promise that the 'man in the woolly jumper and battered Sedan' would no longer be the local teacher.

If I sound a trifle peeved, that's because I am. It is a small consolation that my fellow citizens judge teachers' wages too low, but there's [no way the profession is going to get the 15 per cent rise they consider fair](#).

Of course, I realise that my GP friend makes the occasional life-and-death decision – and everyone wants her to get it right. But bear in mind that 'teachers hold in their hands the success of our country and the wellbeing of its citizens'. Quite a tall order.

Teachers are also 'the most important fighters in the battle to make opportunity more equal'. In addition, we are 'the critical guardians of the intellectual life of the nation'. Furthermore, we 'give children the tools by which they can become authors of their own life story and builders of a better world'. And finally, as if we didn't have enough to do, we are '[the unacknowledged legislators of mankind](#)'.

Mr Gove, whose words I have just quoted, expected an awful lot for his £23K.

There are other parallels between teachers and medics. Workload is one. Both professions are overburdened, but it is possible to work extremely part-time on a GP's ample salary. It isn't on mine. This is a controversial point because it is seen as being anti all the GPs who combine raising a family with having a career. Let me just say that I support part-time working for all: men, women – and teachers.

Nevertheless I was peeved (again) by a recent encounter with a local GP. I was suffering from a bad hip; she was young, glowing, Superhero fit and ever so slightly smug. It became apparent that she earned twice my wage for two days a week work. She enquired if my hip pain was enough to stop me jogging. No, I shouted to myself. I hate jogging. I can't work out how to carry and mark all those books at the same time.

Ah but remember, I hear you cry, those poor medical students. Look how hard they work and how long their training is – so much longer than that of would-be teachers. But surely having to do a responsible job with insufficient training is a reason for paying teachers *more* not less? GPs have had eight years to prepare themselves for the routine maladies presented by Mr and Mrs Jones for seven minutes at a time on average. Most teachers have had one year to prepare themselves for routine challenges presented simultaneously by 25 or more young people for several hours a day.

It just can't be done, however good the training – and mine was very good. There is no way the most committed trainers, the best mentors and the most excellent teaching schools can possibly impart

everything a teacher needs to know in a single year. Every day, I discover, stumble over and fall into the inevitable crevasses that await a teacher doing everything for the first time.

I am supposed to be a member of Mr Gove's 'best generation of teachers ever', so why do I feel as if I have been thrown in the deep end of a murky pool with a very small and punctured lilo for support. I do sometimes reach for my passport and check out the price of flights to Helsinki. Teachers in Finland are the most respected and trusted professionals in a country remarkable for its 'paramount commitment to social and educational equity through a genuinely comprehensive school system of consistently high quality,' as the [Cambridge Primary Review pointed out](#). Their training is lengthy, rigorous and thorough. No sinking feelings for them.

But no glittering BMWs either. Perhaps surprisingly, Finnish teachers' pay also lags behind that of GPs – though the gap is not as wide as it is in the UK. I put my passport back in the drawer. Of course, it isn't all about money, but my woolly tights would have to be a lot woollier to see me through a bitter Finnish winter.

3 October 2014

IS THERE TIME FOR READING AND RESEARCH?

Teresa Cremin

At CPRT's [London Teachers Reading Group](#) recently, we debated one of the original CPR research reviews, [Children and their Primary Schools: pupils' voices \(Robinson and Fielding, 2010\)](#). Shortly to be published in updated form (see below), this reviewed published research on what pupils and former pupils think of their experiences of primary schooling.

A mixture of teachers, academics and local authority colleagues, we brought different perspectives to bear on the challenge of listening to and respecting children's voices. We discussed the potential of involving children as co-participant researchers and almost immediately the teachers amongst us were keen to take action. Some considered inviting their classes to take photographs and devise captions to present views on the school environment, or to make collages to represent their experiences of literacy in school or at home. The range of evidence the young people collect could then be used to prompt reflection and dialogue about their experiences and feelings and how to respond to these.

We also found ourselves reconsidering the current role of published research in primary education. Tim, who had been teaching for just two years, voiced the view that keeping up to date in this manner was a professional responsibility, and commented that he'd 'found it fascinating and invigorating' to read research reports during his PGCE, 'not only for the essays as it were, but for teaching'.

Yet since then, in the busy maelstrom of school life, he had received scant encouragement to read and debate his understanding, nor to explore the relationship between theory and practice in his classroom. Although he recognised research can help us as educators to re-examine the implicit theories that undergird everyday practice, he felt pressured 'to deliver, to assess and to raise standards'. He also reflected a sense of professional isolation, since there were few with whom he could debate his reading.

Many in the group felt the emphasis on the 'what works' agenda, which they perceived was almost exclusively focused on raising attainment, sidelines the importance of teachers (and children) being involved in research themselves. There was also agreement that learning is highly contextualised and thus what 'works' in one context may not in others.

The conversation was rather generous and gentle on this first occasion but I am sure over time more robust and critically reflective discussions will emerge as we explore our different perspectives, gain critical distance and interrogate the assumptions, values and beliefs that underpin policy and practice.

What might the consequences be if right across the country such teachers' reading groups developed? Professional space is surely needed to consider quality research evidence, to read new empirical studies and well-established texts, and to debate the methods used and insights claimed. Teachers, whilst respecting children's voices, need to be careful not to dismiss their own views, their own potential as researchers, and the value of connecting to the work of others.

27 October 2014

TIME TO STAND UP, SPEAK OUT AND ASK OUR OWN QUESTIONS

Teresa Cremin

As the year rushes to a close and we add Yuletide shopping to our busy lives (alongside school carol concerts and plays perhaps), there are two significant policy initiatives which deserve our time and attention. Both have December deadlines. One might be forgiven for thinking the timing was well judged, that is if policy makers don't want to hear from the profession...

The House of Commons Education Committee [recently launched an online enquiry into the way the DfE uses evidence](#), with a deadline of December 12th (just before you order that turkey), and the deadline for the [DfE consultation into the new performance descriptors](#) is just six days later, on December 18th (just before you wrap those presents).

Both of these initiatives have been the subject of previous CPRT blogs, with [Robin Alexander](#) raising pertinent questions about the breadth of the enquiry on evidence and [Warwick Mansell](#) observing that the performance descriptors are simply another way of labelling learners, under a different name (this time with the contentious notion of being judged 'below' or 'above' national standards at aged seven). It is surely time to voice our views. We cannot afford to stand back.

Based on government responses to previous 'consultations', there is scant evidence that the perspectives of academics, researchers or teachers will be heard, attended to or indeed in any way influence the outcome. Commas change, but rarely content.

Nonetheless, in gathering with others to talk and listen, whether in school or consortia meetings, in externally organised PD or in university-based groups (such as the [CPRT London Teachers Reading Group](#)), we have the chance to revisit our principles and remind each other of the need to consider research evidence and explore its application when back in the classroom.

However, it is not enough to read and debate research – though it is essential. Nor is it enough to respond to such enquiries and consultations – though again this is important. Surely we must also engage as researchers ourselves? As a profession we must avoid standing back and waiting for others to define the questions for us to answer (as is the case with the performance descriptors consultation, where delimited questions afford little scope for commenting upon wider issues of relevance).

Historically, teachers have been positioned as the objects of research, but in recent decades the involvement of the primary profession in research related practices has diversified, with many studies demonstrating the value of school-university research partnerships. Additionally, practitioners have undertaken their own classroom-based research, framed around self-identified questions, both individually and collectively, as part of teacher action-research networks.

In the South West of England, an arts and creativity focused [CPRT action-research project](#) is being run as part of our national research programme. Coordinated by [Penny Hay](#) at Bath Spa University and [Emese Hall](#) at Exeter University, it involves ten schools and reflects three of the [CPRT's eight priorities](#): children's voice and rights; fostering a rich, relevant and broad curriculum and developing a pedagogy of repertoire, rigour, evidence and principle.

Another such CPRT action-research project is developing at Roger Ascham Primary School in Walthamstow, co-ordinated by Robin Desoer from the school and Amelia Hempel Jorgensen and Gill

Goodliff from the Open University. It is focused on learner identity, autonomy and self-regulation. As a Trust we are seeking to evolve a model of school-led CPRT action research which addresses the overall research concern: how is primary education in England providing education relevant to children's lives and worlds and how is this improving their life chances?

Whilst Kemmis (2006) suggests that harnessing teacher action research to the school improvement agenda has diluted its critical transformative potential, both projects are seeking to ensure attention is paid to the wider social, cultural and discursive consequences of any new practices developed, and are working to enhance the teachers' sense of their professional roles and identities. In the midst of the midwinter mayhem, with personal and professional deadlines looming and not enough time in the day, standing up, speaking out and making time to ask our own questions remain important.

28 November 2014

SUPPORTING NEW TEACHERS: SNAKE OIL, EVIDENCE OR WHAT?

Stephanie Northen

Everyone knows that feelings of inadequacy are not helpful in the classroom. As soon as the tears start to roll, the learning stops. And the teaching too, because feeling inadequate is just as destructive of teachers' ability to perform as it is of children's.

It is depressingly easy to make a new teacher feel inadequate: one reason surely that around [40 per cent of us leave within the first five years of qualifying, according to Ofsted](#). [Workload is the major issue of course](#), but combine a huge burden of work with the feeling that you don't know how to do it properly and the result is ... nail-biting anxiety, sleepless nights and finally, for many, departures for pastures less demoralising.

Here is just one example of the ease with which a new teacher can be forced to reach for the tissues. Recently I went on a reading course linked to the new curriculum. All was going swimmingly until, towards the end of the day, the trainer mentioned spelling – an area given a starring role in the new English curriculum. Now I had been feeling confident about spelling, courtesy of a respected website that has created weekly word lists, including rules, for each year group. It's true that some of its choices are a little eccentric – 'nondescript' and 'cohabit' are not the words I would pick to teach eight-year-olds about prefixes – but never mind. At least I had one area of the curriculum sorted.

Foolish thought! Suddenly, I hear the reading course trainer say 'spelling lists' and realise that he's laughing. 'You see,' he says, chortling away, 'spelling lists really don't work. The children learn those 10 or 12 words but then they never use them again and so they're forgotten. It just isn't a good way to teach spelling. A much better way is to teach them is ...'

Well, that was it. Feelings of inadequacy again. I've been teaching spelling badly; the children will fail their Sats spelling test and we will all sit in the classroom with the tears rolling.

On this occasion though, feelings of inadequacy were overtaken by ones of annoyance. If there is a magic recipe for spelling success, why is it a secret? Surely acquiring this knowledge shouldn't depend on the random choice of a CPD course?

This doesn't just apply to spelling of course, but to all areas of the curriculum. Why am I endlessly reinventing the wheel, clumsily and misshapenly, when out there somewhere is someone who knows how it ought to be done?

Finding that mystery expert should not have to rely on anxious trawls of the internet late at night while the bags grow long under the eyes. The web is an invaluable tool and the teachers who donate their lessons for free are generous, public-spirited people. But is downloading Ms Who-ever-you-are's second-hand lessons really the way to ensure the best possible learning experience for children? After all, while much online content is excellent, quite a lot is shoddy, ill-thought-out and, occasionally, just plain wrong.

Nor should finding the mystery expert depend on dawn raids on school cupboards sifting through piles of commercial schemes in search of whatever is that day's holy grail. Be it a guide to teaching division using a number line or how to take those first steps in programming, it must deliver its message in an engaging, efficient and easy-for-Miss-to-understand way. Many commercial schemes

do just that, but quite a few are ill-conceived, out-of-date and, occasionally, just plain wrong. Hence the [warning about snake oil vendors in CPR's evidence to the Gove national curriculum review](#).

Of course, not so long ago, new teachers did not have to search for the needle in the curriculum haystack. They were given sewing machines in the form of the primary national strategies. As the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review points out (p 417), this suited us newbies because the strategies were 'all about rules and this is precisely what novice professionals are more likely to need'. But the Review went on to say (p 307) that the strategies' bid for total control of what and how teachers taught may have helped those who were newly-qualified or insecure but it wasn't right for mature professionals with the knowledge and experience to make their own decisions, especially as government prescription was not necessarily better founded than what was available commercially. Hence [CPRT's insistence on the need for 'a pedagogy of repertoire, rigour, evidence and principle, rather than mere compliance'](#).

Yet is it outrageous or unprofessional to suggest that new teachers would benefit from a reliable source of expert guidance on what to teach and how best to teach it? Just because the national strategies fell into disrepute, becoming inflexible and monolithic monsters, does that mean we abandon all idea of helping our floundering novices, most of whom have had a mere year's training? With standards to be ratcheted up, the pressures on teachers can only increase – as, I fear, will the proportion that leaves within five years of qualifying. One way to tempt them to stay would be to ease the daily burden of having to invent oddly shaped wheels to bump around their classrooms.

5 December 2014

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

CHILDREN'S VOICE AND RIGHTS: DOES DfE GET IT?

Robin Alexander

Children, their World, their Education. The basic premise of the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) was as clear in the title of its [final report](#) as in its choice of investigative [themes and questions](#): education is meaningful only when educators understand and coherently respond to the nature and needs of children and the society and world in which they are growing up. Mastering the practical skills of teaching is a necessary but not sufficient condition, and as an educational rationale mantras like 'effective teaching' take us to the nearest 3Rs test but no further.

A more comprehensive rationale was crystallised in the [twelve aims](#) for primary education that were at the heart of CPR's final report and that now inform the work of an ever-increasing number of schools. In preparing the ground for these, CPR met and listened to children and those who work with them, and many more children added to these face-to-face conversations by writing in. We also commissioned reviews of research on children's development, learning and lives inside and outside school.

One of these research reviews was on children's voice and today CPRT publishes its sequel: Carol Robinson's update of the report that she and Michael Fielding first produced in 2007 and then revised in 2010 for inclusion in *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*.

Last month saw the 25th anniversary of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC). The UK is a signatory, but just how far short of the UN's ideals we fall is daily all too apparent in the media and in CPRT's recent blogs on [young carers](#), [the government's proposed policy 'family test'](#), and [the fate of those millions of children caught up in conflict or lacking access to education as a basic human right](#). Nor is CPRT convinced that the new national curriculum has yet registered that these matters demand a more serious and committed response than DfE has so far provided, though we are certainly convinced that making citizenship optional in primary schools transmits entirely the wrong signal.

Yet all is not gloom, doom and hollow promises. Carol Robinson's report documents the encouraging growth of research and practice in the area of children's agency, voice and rights, and of impressive movements like [Rights Respecting Schools](#). Always at risk of being treated tokenistically, children's voice in many schools now means considerably more than stage-managed deliberations on food and wet playtimes. This progress should be celebrated.

Probably not at DfE, though: its [recent advice on promoting 'British' values](#) rightly encourages schools to 'ensure that all pupils ... have a voice that is listened to' but confines that voice to the task of demonstrating 'how democracy works by actively promoting democratic processes such as a school council whose members are voted for by the pupils.' To DfE, then, voice equates with vote, and we know how little, in Britain's electoral system, votes count for, or how little notice our democratically-elected government takes of the voices of others than those who toe the party line, not least on educational matters. But we won't tell our children about this, will we, for in the official account of British values parliamentary democracy is the envy of the world.

In fact, the most basic test of the seriousness with which we treat what children think and say is not the election of a school council – valuable though its deliberations can be – but the extent to which empowering, exploring and building on children's articulated ideas is central to our every teaching encounter and to the everyday assessment for learning which at best informs both children and

ourselves. Children's voices will remain unheard, and their understanding will advance thus far and no further, if 'speaking and listening' means that teachers do all the speaking and children all the listening; or if the writing through which children express their ideas is confined to repeating those of the teacher.

That's why CPRT's eight priorities include not only a commitment to 'advance children's voice and rights ... in accordance with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child' but also contingent commitments to the development of patterns of teaching and assessment for learning in which genuine dialogue is paramount. This term we have published Wynne Harlen's report on assessment and Carol Robinson's on children's voices. Next term we'll be presenting reports from Usha Goswami, David Hogan, Dennis Kwek and Peter Renshaw on learning and teaching. In parallel, we are working with Pearson to develop jointly-branded CPD programmes in these areas. All these initiatives are united by the imperatives of childhood.

It is classroom pedagogy that most tellingly liberates children's voices; but in the wrong hands it is pedagogy that most decisively suppresses them.

12 December 2014

RESPECTING CHILDREN'S VOICES

Julia Flutter

As an educational researcher who has worked in the field of student voice for the past 22 years, I was fascinated to pick up the recent CPRT Research Report by Dr Carol Robinson, [Children, their Voices and their Experiences of School: what does the evidence tell us?](#), introduced in [Robin Alexander's CPRT blog](#) on 12 December.

Carol's insightful review documents the developing influence of the 'children's voices' movement, and offers an exciting agenda for future practice, policy and research. While the report shows us clearly that much has been gained through researching pupils' views and the adoption of children's voices principles, it also acknowledges that there is still a long way to go before these ideas are fully recognised and acted upon, both in the UK and internationally. While Article 12 of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) confers on every child the right to be consulted and to participate in decision-making, how these principles are put into practice opens up new questions and challenges, particularly for teachers and schools.

Among the questions often raised about the children's voices principles are the following:

- Is the idea of respecting children's voices a 'luxury' that schools no longer have time for?
- Has the children's voices movement overstepped the mark by giving children too great a say in decision-making in schools?
- Should we allow children to take responsibility for their own learning?

Let's look at each of these questions in turn.

Is the idea of respecting children's voices a 'luxury' that schools no longer have time for?

After a presentation on our children's voices research a few years ago, a head teacher stood up and told the audience that he was deeply grateful for the way in which our research had allowed him to re-focus his attention back onto the children in his school and their learning. He spoke of how the pressures and demands of the prevailing educational policy climate had temporarily eclipsed his thinking about the most important concerns. His was a powerful statement about the value of respecting children's voices: centring teaching practice on children's voices in this way redirects us back to the things that matter, that make a real difference to children's achievement and their love of learning. Far from being a luxury, the recommendations in Carol's report show us that respecting children's voices lies at the heart of a successful school community and offers a set of principles which every school should embrace.

Has the children's voices movement overstepped the mark by giving children too great a say in decision-making in schools?

A common criticism of children's voices principles is the concern that giving children an active say and involvement in decision-making could undermine teachers' authority in schools. Some teaching unions have opposed children's roles in interviewing teacher job applicants, for example, on the grounds that such activities might compromise pupil-teacher relationships while this type of decision-making, they argue, represents a step too far in changing the dynamics of power. However, as [Jean Rudduck](#) argued, respecting children's voices does not mean that pupils' views take precedence over teachers' authority, nor must it result in a silencing of teachers' own voices in the

decision-making process. While it is important that children's views are considered seriously and without tokenism, there is a clear balance to be struck, and a school ethos that is framed on values that embrace responsibility, reciprocity and community sets the parameters for ensuring that the voices of all, whether adult or child, are heard and respected. There are many schools around the country which have successfully embedded children's voices principles in their practice. One of them is the Exeter school featured in [Jo Evans's CPRT blog](#) on 21 January. Over the coming months the CPRT website will be showcasing other schools where CPRT principles, on this and other matters, can be witnessed in action.

Should we allow children to take responsibility for their own learning?

There is clear evidence from psychological studies showing that encouraging young learners to develop a sense of responsibility for their learning has a significant and positive impact on their achievement and attitudes to learning. US researcher, Carol Dweck, for example, has demonstrated that the children's motivation and achievement are dependent on having a sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning. Giving children choices in their learning also provides opportunities for teachers to design classroom activities that respond to children's interests and prior knowledge so that learning becomes more engaging and relevant.

Over to you

- What do you think about the role of children's voices in primary education?
- Does your school have interesting children's voices practice or experiences to share?

To discover more about these ideas

Cambridge Primary Review Trust has been working with Pearson to develop a number of professional development programmes, including one focusing on [children's voices](#). This exciting new course looks at involving children in the development of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and is designed for senior leadership teams.

The [Rights Respecting Schools programme](#) has been developed by UNICEF to support schools interested in putting the UNCRC recommendations on children's rights at the heart of their practice. The programme offers training, resources and an award scheme for any organisations working with children and young people around the UK.

6 February 2015

SUPPORTING AND HONOURING YOUNG CARERS

Robin Alexander

[Carers Trust Swansea Bay](#) has devised a board game to raise awareness of the plight of young carers. These are the UK's 178,000 children and young people who according to the 2001 census look after a parent or other family member who is chronically sick, disabled or for other reasons needs the kind of help that would normally be provided by adults.

Young carers shop, cook, clean, provide nursing and personal care, get siblings off to school, give emotional support and much, much more. Their average age is 12, over half of them are younger than 14, and according to [Barnado's](#) the number of young carers of primary school age is increasing, with some as young as five. Small wonder that many of them display levels of poise, modesty and maturity that would shame many adults.

The word 'plight' is used by the Carers Trust, and in obvious respects it is apposite. Given widespread and growing unease, [chronicled and endorsed by the Cambridge Primary Review](#), about the extreme educational, commercial and social pressures to which young children today are subject, the situation of young carers is particularly acute. For if, as [Berry Mayall](#) put it in her evidence to CPR, children's lives are increasingly 'scholarised', what price childhood for those who, in addition to schoolwork, homework and home work (note the distinction) have the added responsibility of providing daily care for others?

Organisations like [Carers Trust](#), the [Children's Society](#) and [Barnado's](#) do a great deal to support young carers and their families, while initiatives like the Carers Trust board game and 'buddying' scheme, the Barnado's counselling and drop-in sessions, and Young Carers in Focus help these children share and put in perspective what otherwise they would experience in vulnerable isolation: the unremitting round of predictable tasks and unpredictable crises; and the way their lives compare not just with those of fellow-carers but also those of children who receive care rather than give it.

Yet it's also clear that all this can take its toll. According to Carers Trust, 'Children who provide more than 50 hours of care a week are five times more likely than their peers to report poor physical or emotional health. Child and teenage carers are also more at risk of missing out on schooling, socialising and other life chances in order to provide round the clock care for a loved one.'

We would expect young carers to struggle to keep up at school, but the bullying suffered by many of them may not be so widely known and is therefore doubly reprehensible. [Researchers at Nottingham University report](#) that a quarter of young carers have been bullied at school as a direct consequence of the way their caring role marks them out as different, while nearly half of the child respondents to the Nottingham survey did not have a teacher to confide in about their situation.

These additional burdens on young carers are of a kind that schools can and should prevent.

There are three reasons why it is especially important to draw attention to young carers at this time. First, from 17th to 21st November it will be [Anti-Bullying Week](#), and this year a number of charities, including [Carers Trust](#), are combining to draw attention to the extent of bullying suffered by already vulnerable groups such as young carers.

Second, 2014 is the 25th anniversary of the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), a declaration that commits signatories – including the UK – to do everything in their power to protect and promote

children's rights 'to survive and thrive, to learn and grow, to make their voices heard and reach their full potential' and 'to rest and leisure, to play and recreational activities'. That includes young carers. The third reason is that on 30 October a group of them, supported by Carers Trust and the Children's Society, met ministers and health officials to urge them to do more to identify and support what the Royal College of General Practitioners called this 'hidden healthcare army'. Let us, as their teachers, endorse and publicise their campaign.

Young carers are among the UK's unsung heroes. Do we give them the care which they in their turn so richly deserve?

5 November 2014

VOICE AND CHOICE

Sarah Ruddy

I am writing this blog in election week, hunched over my headteacher's desk, surrounded by the ephemera of a busy school day: a pile of maths marking; a sheaf of phone message slips; certificates to be given out tomorrow for 'Bankside Best' effort, excellence and perseverance; a SEF that needs updating in the light of our last round of monitoring and evaluation/performance management (all indicators continue to be both upwards and onwards – thank you for asking); 22 class sets of top, middle and bottom sample end-of-year reports to be checked and proof-read by the end of the week; the school finance director's papers stacked more neatly in preparation for the resources sub-committee; the glue-y remnants of some lunchtime card making with year 4 girls (glitter and sequins everywhere – apologies to our lovely cleaners - a sparkling testimony to the triumph of bling over restrained good taste). And at least 15 incoming email alerts have pinged into my in-tray since I resolved to sit down and find a moment, in a busy week, to reflect on the principles of being a member of the [Cambridge Primary Review Trust Schools Alliance](#).

And this has been a busier week than usual – for all of us. After I have written this blog, and before you have read it, three very important things will have happened on Thursday, May 7th. Events that have given me opportunity to consider what my key values are as a headteacher and, as a relative newcomer to CPRT, how these define us as an Alliance school, particularly in relation to the [Trust's priorities of equity, voice and community](#).

The first May 7th event was of course one of national importance: the General Election. The second: the inaugural meeting of our north east area partnership CPRT reading group, based on [Carol Robinson's recent CPRT report on 'Children's Voice'](#). This will be an exciting opportunity to spread the good news about CPRT and to embark on a project, potentially across 43 Leeds primary schools, developing 'rights respecting schools' to support social, emotional and mental health inclusion based on the research reviewed in her report. Watch this space to see how this will create more choices and involve new voices in developing our landscape of school leadership in Leeds over the next year. The third, more local still: the return of our school council trip to the Houses of Parliament.

From national to parochial, the consequences of these events will reverberate in school over the coming weeks and months; a time to be mindful of the importance of creating effective conditions for learning at all levels, whatever the national climate for education may be, and continue to work hard to invest all our resources to create strong social capital and inclusive school practice, which is what being part of CPRT means to me.

And of course I believe that the most important resource to be invested in the future of our nation, whatever political shape this may be taking as you read this, is our children. At Bankside Primary we aim to 'put down strong roots for success'; to be a learning community where pupils are 'loud and proud' and where we passionately want 'every child to have a voice' shaping their future and those of others. Indeed it was one of our school councillors, in the school mock-elections leading up to the trip to the Houses of Parliament, who came up with the hustings slogan 'voices for choices' that inspired me to write this blog. Sadly, I cannot predict at this moment if her crowd-pleasing catchphrase will have led to victory, but I can reflect that none of her more adult political brethren seemed as focussed on embracing the voices and choices of children in the national hurly-burly of soap-boxing and manifesto-mongering around education. Policies appear to focus more on school processes than on pedagogy, with little or no mention of the role of children in helping to shape their own educational futures. But, in spite of their absence in the electioneering this year, the centrality

of children's voices in the creation of first class education will never diminish, as I believe our school community exemplifies.

In our last Ofsted we achieved an 'outstanding' judgement for our early years provision, in spite of 90% of our children arriving at school at well below age-related expectations (and this in a primary school of over 700 children). This reflects the impact of our work at foundation level embedding the principles of Reggio Emilia – an Italian educational philosophy based on the 'image of the child, and of human beings, as possessing strong potentials for development and as a subject of rights learning and growing in relationships with others'. We are a school which aims to create opportunities for constructional, rather than instructional, learning through a constant range of 'provocations' – or talk triggers – which promote conversations and learning ideas, to be included in our more general curriculum planning. Look at [our website](#), where children have a voice to share their learning and express their views. In particular, the video created by the school council for a Leeds Film Festival, called 'Children's Rights', is a testimony to their ambition for other children and a showcase for their voices. If you do nothing else in this week of change find 3'20" minutes to remind yourself of the power of the voice and views of children by watching it.

Creating voices and choices to forge strong communities of learning and love attracted us to joining CPRT six months ago. Robin Alexander, with an ironic nod in the direction of George Osborne, talked of creating a 'northern powerhouse' of CPRT schools in this part of England. We have, as befits our enterprising spirit, a proud history of being educational innovators: William E Forster, MP for Bradford, was the driving hand behind the 1870 Education Act, which defined the future of national state education in England. Perhaps it was his particular brand of non-conformity, shared with many other of the great figures of the northern powerhouse of the nineteenth century, that made this the case. I am proud of that heritage and aspire to create a world where social coherence and personal accountability are the drivers for our school, rather than being servants to uniform conformity. I want the children at Bankside to be amazing, to be wonderful, to grow up in a morally purposeful world where they can use their voices to articulate their views and influence others, not to be sheep to be herded through a one-size-fits-all educational process. Politicians take note.

I started off with a snapshot of what it feels like to be a school leader in election week May 2015, as a reminder of how easy it is to for headteachers to be distracted from the bigger issues that should, and must, inform our choices as educationalists. I truly have the best job in the world, as a leader of children's learning, working with a school team of over 90 adults – all themselves talented creators of learning who believe and understand that, in order to give our children an empowering and respectful education we must design our lessons with care and creativity to facilitate rich opportunities to promote choice and voice. And one further bonus; we do so with glitter and sparkle. As an NQT, I was inadvertently responsible for a blanket ban on all things shiny and sticky; in the eyes of the SMT, it made too much of a mess. Now I am a headteacher, I have a team of staff, including our lovely cleaners, who understand that 'mess can create success' and look for opportunities to embrace it. Amidst the flotsam of school life that has washed up on my headteacher's desk today I welcome this chance to pause and celebrate our partnership with the Cambridge Primary Review Trust in order to give our children good choices and strong voices for educational success: at Bankside, in Leeds and in the whole of the UK at this time of potential and exciting – if possibly messy – change for us all.

8 May 2015

AND THE OCTOPUS WON

Stephanie Northen

I held an election at the school recently. It happened just the day before a similar event took place nationally. The two candidates were an octopus (plastic) and a clown (wooden). This was not intended as a reflection on national politics, they were simply the toys that came to hand as I raced out of the classroom and down to the hall for assembly.

This term the theme for assemblies has been fairness. As I lined the pupils up with their voting slips in front of a cardboard ballot box, I explained that we had gone back in time 200 years. Lord Sam (Year 6) and Duke Timothy (Year 5) were to be in charge of this election and would decide who was to vote. The young aristos very much enjoyed turning away all the pupils, except their two wealthy land-owning mates (Cameron, Year 5, and Freddie, Year 4). And so we carried on, conducting elections right through till 1969 when finally everyone was allowed to vote.

The children, particularly the girls, were refreshingly indignant about the denial of their democratic rights. But what was more interesting was the way they became embroiled in the contest. Who was going to win? Was it going to be the octopus or the clown? Factions quickly developed. Arguments erupted in the corners of the hall. Some were passionate in their advocacy of a particular toy. Some came close to tears when a friend rebelled and voted for the opposition. Yet no policies had been discussed. No one knew what the octopus or the clown stood for despite this being an election to decide the leadership of the school.

You get my point, I'm sure. It was reinforced after the general election when the children told me gleefully that Sats were to be abolished. Yes, I said, but did they know that they were to be replaced with more and harder 'exams'? They didn't know and they were, for once, silent. I suspect they would also be silent if they read the [Conservative manifesto](#). In a few bleak words the government outlines its priorities for primary education: 'Every 11-year-old to know their times tables off by heart and be able to perform long division and complex multiplication. They should be able to read a book and write a short story with accurate punctuation, spelling and grammar.' That the potential achievements of an 11-year-old should be so stale, flat and unprofitable is heart breaking.

I assume no child was involved in drawing up these priorities. What self-respecting young person would sign up to such dreary targets? A very different set of aims emerges when young people are consulted. The [Cambridge Primary Review listened carefully](#) to its many 'prominent and thoughtful' child witnesses. Its final report (p 489) recommended that in line with the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) 'children should be actively engaged in decisions which affect their education' and that schools should increasingly work to ensure pupils' opinions are listened to in a meaningful way. Children told CPR researchers (final report, p 148) that they 'relish a challenge,' that they 'enjoy succeeding' and that they like 'hands-on active learning' in lessons that are full of variety. They dislike 'mundane and repetitive' learning, copying and 'drill and practice' exercises.

Children are begging for a broad, balanced and rich curriculum, as sought by [CPR and CPRT](#). They may not express it in those words, but they do express in their actions. They triumphantly find fossils in the school garden. They catch bugs, beetles and dead butterflies and bring them in to show and discuss. They make up great stories while stirring a magic mud potion. They adore playing with electrical circuits and making bits of paper fly off motor spindles. They copy a Turner painting and say 'Wow, Miss, I didn't know I was good at art'. They wonder why bruises happen and why we shiver or say things like 'I know it's a silly question, Miss, but why did lions evolve?' They love acting, will

volunteer for anything, relish funny books (I wonder if 'Diary of a Wimpy Kid' is the kind of book the Tories have in mind) and, of course, some go wild for long division and complex multiplication. 'Please can I stay in at break and do more maths, Miss?'

So once more, as [Warwick Mansell](#) pointed out last week in his CPRT blog, we are back to the 'basics versus breadth' debate. Except that there is no debate at government level. The only debate is at school level as heads and teachers struggle to square the circle and reinforce the basics while not losing the breadth. Despite their efforts, largely via intervention programmes run by dedicated TAs and squeezed into every nook and cranny of a school day, some children will not meet those manifesto targets. They will not pass the new Year 6 'exams'. Their fate is to have to retake them in Year 7 – how humiliating is that for poor souls struggling to find their feet in their first year at secondary school?

Primary schools will be blamed for failing these children, but the truth is that they have a special need. It will not gain them exemption from the exams, though it ought to. These children are victims of a disadvantaged background where for myriad reasons there is no one at home prepared to listen to times tables or to buy a book, let alone to read it. Primary schools do an awful lot for these children – not least making them feel safe and valued for 30 hours a week. But they cannot and should not run them ragged to meet flawed targets set by a government that doesn't listen to children and doesn't have their best interests at heart.

If children had the vote I wonder if the Tory manifesto would have been different.

By the way, the octopus (plastic) won the school election. Make of that what you will.

22 May 2015

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Robin Alexander is Fellow of Wolfson College, University of Cambridge, Honorary Professor of Education, University of York, Professor of Education Emeritus, University of Warwick and Chair of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

Natalie Bradbury is researching a PhD about Pictures for Schools at the University of Central Lancashire, which she blogs about at www.picturesforschools.wordpress.com.

Teresa Cremin is Professor of Literacy in the Department of Education at The Open University. She is a Co-director of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

Marianne Cutler is Director of Curriculum Innovation at the Association for Science Education. She is a Co-director of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

Iain Erskine is Head Teacher of Fulbridge Academy, Peterborough and Joint Leader of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust's Schools Alliance.

Jo Evans is Head Teacher of St Leonard's C of E Primary School in Exeter, and Joint Leader of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust's Schools Alliance.

Julia Flutter is Research and Teaching Associate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. She is a Co-director of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

Gregory Frame is Administrator of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust and part-time Teaching Fellow in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television at the University of York.

Warwick Mansell is a freelance journalist and the author of *Education by Numbers: the tyranny of testing* (Methuen, 2007).

Stephanie Northen is a teacher and journalist. She was one of the authors of the Cambridge Primary Review final report and is a member of the Board of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

David Reedy, formerly Principal Primary Adviser in Barking and Dagenham LA, is General Secretary of UKLA and a Co-director of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

Sarah Ritty is Head Teacher of Bankside Primary School in Leeds, part-time Adviser for Leeds City Council Children's Services, a member of CPRT's Schools Alliance, and Co-ordinator of CPRT's Leeds/West Yorkshire network.



...children, their world, their education

The Cambridge Primary Review Trust is the successor to the Cambridge Primary Review (2006-12). It aims to extend and build upon the Review to advance the cause of high quality primary education for all. It is supported by Pearson Education, based at the University of York, and chaired by Professor Robin Alexander.

FURTHER INFORMATION

www.cprtrust.org.uk

General enquiries: administrator@cprtrust.org.uk

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