

WHOSE FREEDOM, WHOSE CURRICULUM?

Robin Alexander

(The Guardian and Guardian Online, 15 March 2011.

The article appeared with the title 'Give all children the riches they deserve' in The Guardian and 'Primary schools need a broad curriculum' in Guardian Online)

How capacious yet capricious is the dustbin of history. Just over a year ago the 600-page final report of the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR), product of the most comprehensive enquiry into English primary education for half a century, was dismissed by Labour misrepresented and unread. For many, this underscored the report's significance. Meanwhile, the 'independent' Rose curriculum framework was imposed on England's primary schools. According to Mick Waters, then head of curriculum at the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), this too was a pre-emptive strike against the inconvenient truths emerging from Cambridge.

It was reckless too, for Labour knew that Rose's implementation depended on legislation for which Parliament had almost run out of time, and the Conservatives in opposition had made it clear that they would drop Rose if elected. Which they did.

Now we have a new national curriculum review for England's schools. It promises 'rigour, fairness and freedom', an end to exhaustive prescription and bloated documentation, and a return to the national curriculum's initial purpose: a statement of children's minimum entitlement to core knowledge in a few essential subjects which leaves teachers free to decide how these should be taught and what else should be included. With QCDA consigned to Cameron's quango tumbrel, the review is being undertaken at the Department for Education by an advisory committee supported by an 'expert panel' of senior academics who are charged with ensuring that what emerges 'is based on evidence and informed by international best practice.' Two of the panel's four members, as it happens, were on the implementation team of the Cambridge Primary Review.

In direct response to a key recommendation in the CPR final report, the government has also agreed to undertake a review of primary schools' capacity to teach a broad, balanced and coherent curriculum to the highest possible standard. For, as the CPR insists, 'entitlement' must be about the quality of teaching, not merely the number of subjects taught; and Ofsted evidence shows that our best primary schools achieve high standards in literacy and numeracy by celebrating, not neglecting, everything else. Politically counter-intuitive perhaps, but true.

Yet Ofsted has also reported that many children encounter a two-tier curriculum in which the undeniably crucial 'basics' are protected while the rest takes its chances in terms of the quality of teaching as well as allocated time; and research shows how this qualitative hierarchy has been reinforced by the relative neglect of the non-core subjects in primary teachers' training and by an ill-conceived 'standards' regime which has eroded the wider curriculum while using test scores in literacy and numeracy as proxies for children's attainment across the board – as if, beyond the 'basics', standards don't matter. It is encouraging, then, that the government acknowledges the need for liaison between its reviews of curriculum, assessment and primary schools' curriculum capacity.

Yet those who want to make a grounding in basic skills part of a rounded education should remain vigilant. The national curriculum review's consultation asks what should be included in just four subjects whose pre-eminence is presumed but barely argued. In less than even-handed contrast, we

are invited to say whether the remaining eight subjects in the current national curriculum should be compulsory or left to chance, though not whether anything not on the current list should be there or whether this is the best way to frame a curriculum. Like most official curriculum reviews, this one also bypasses that discussion of the purposes and priorities of public education without which decisions about a curriculum's scope, balance and content are meaningless. True, educational aims and assumptions are implicit in the choices that the consultation invites and forecloses, but these are not up for debate.

So, at the start of the latest national curriculum review, two versions of 'minimal entitlement' appear to be on offer. Minimalism 1 reduces entitlement to a handful of subjects deemed uniquely essential on the grounds of utility and international competitiveness. The first criterion is too narrowly defined and the second falls foul of the hazards of international comparison.

Minimalism 2, which the review's remit makes possible but doesn't overtly encourage, foregrounds the educational imperative of breadth by making a wider range of subjects statutory. Minimalism 2 strives to balance the different ways of knowing, understanding, investigating and making sense that are central to the needs of young children and to our culture - and hence, surely, to an entitlement curriculum - and achieves the required parsimony by stripping back the specified content of each subject to its essential core. This is a very different core curriculum to the winner-takes-all version with which we are more familiar. Rather than a small number of core *subjects*, we have core *learnings across a broad curriculum*, every subject or domain of which, by reference to a well argued set of aims, is deemed essential to a basic education.

And what price the new freedoms? During the 1970s and 1980s inspection evidence showed that many primary schools exercised their pre-national curriculum autonomy by pursuing, *de facto*, Minimalism 1. Literacy and numeracy were always taught, but the fate of the rest of the curriculum depended on the inclinations and subject expertise of a school's largely generalist teaching staff. In our best primary schools this autonomy yielded a curriculum of vision, vitality and rigour. At worst it meant that during their seven critical years of primary education many children encountered little or no science, history, music or drama, and when they did those encounters were fleeting and undemanding. In these primary schools, teachers' freedom to choose what subjects to teach, and with what degree of conviction, effectively denied their pupils the later freedom of choice for which a balanced and well-taught foundational curriculum, grounded in much more than functional literacy, is the minimum prerequisite. Especially hard hit, as always, were those children whose families lacked the resources to make good the deficit out of school.

This is the warning from recent educational history that the government's national curriculum review must not ignore. Freedom for teachers – a necessary corrective to 13 years of obsessive and patronising government micro-management – cannot be pursued at the expense of young children's need for a proper foundation for later learning and choice. But breadth alone is not enough, and that's why the government's other review, prompted by the CPR, of primary schools' capacity to advance high standards across the entire curriculum, is such a vital part of the reform effort.

And what of the free schools and academies? In gaining the freedom *not* to teach the national curriculum are they exempted from these imperatives? The principle of entitlement, surely, is indivisible.

Professor Robin Alexander is Director of the Cambridge Primary Review, now in its dissemination and networking phase: www.primaryreview.org.uk.