

Pupils will never learn unless we make it fun

Yes, children need literacy and numeracy, but they also need the space to socialise, run about, sing and engage with stories

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In their seven cheerful years of primary school - mostly in a small village - my children got through three Secretaries of State for Education. If they had been born twenty years later they could have scored four in even fewer years, and seen the education ministry itself bisected. In UK education policy, everything accelerates except improvement.

Report follows review, white papers flutter weightlessly down as if from some celestial pillow fight, government initiatives sprout like mushrooms round a cow-pat. Anguished philosophical voices ask "What is education for?" and political ones snarl back "To fuel the economy, stupid!". On the other hand every social problem - knives, gangs, racism, pregnancy - is referred back to schools to be cured, supposedly, by ploddy Whitehall curricula. Infants who once footled around happily with Play-Doh, songs and stories are now formally assessed against 69 government targets, to the loud dismay of experts in child development.

Schools themselves, ranked by flawed tables and subtle cheating, diversify in a ceaseless ideological and managerial blizzard: from Comp to Technology College to Academy to Trust. The British educational landscape, although it has its happy corners, is becoming a ruined city of abandoned and half-finished projects with never time for the gentle growth of flowers and trees in between.

This I know, because after some 16 years of working on two Radio 4 education programmes, I threw in the towel late last year, explaining to the controller that, despite the good things we covered, the pressure of watching political and ideological footballery applied to real children was getting to me. I genuinely feared that I would shortly launch myself across the studio table and physically assault someone. I did not wish to endanger the network's civil impartiality by grabbing some junior minister or curriculum-authority wonk and shaking them as a dog shakes a rat, driven mad by the churn and chunter of perpetual revolution. But believe me, it was going to happen. It is not that I no longer care about education; just that I could not trust myself not to scream and weep in an unprofessional manner. Stronger spirits must take over for a while.

There were compensations. Away from the centre, the recorded reports from distant schools up and down the country were often heartening. One heard children's voices, teachers being amused and interested, sounds of activity and inventiveness and, yes, tenderness. For the real joy of the education world is children. Not systems, not paperwork, not neatly met targets: children. That is why primary school teachers, however insulted and overloaded, tend to stick at it. They in particular breathe a wilder, purer air than the rest of us. Like any explorers they are often tired and frustrated, yet on good days they are flying, surfing, laughing, wonderstruck: high on the company of small children with their fresh hilarity and optimism and wacky visual and linguistic sense. I sense sneering voices when I describe them thus, but it is true of the best and could be truer of the rest. As a voluntary parent-helper in the mid-1980s, I witnessed such glee and gusto close up.

I also witnessed the beginnings of the centralising, prescriptive impetus that carries on to this day. Our staffroom table groaned beneath drifts of patronising leaflets, telling four experienced teachers how to do a job they already knew brilliantly. The national curriculum arrived, and the first crazily complex set of tests for every seven-year-old. We were told, at the time, that SAT tests were merely a diagnostic tool to identify bad schools (most of them identified years before by the old HM Inspectors, only nobody took much notice). We were assured that the children themselves would not be made nervous. It has not turned out that way.

Instead, as the authoritative Cambridge Primary Review put it last week, "many children are under excessive pressure... from an overcrowded curriculum, a high-stakes national testing regime and the backwash of teachers' anxiety about league tables, inspection, and the public and somewhat punitive character of school accountability". This, the authors say, lies alongside the outside pressures of consumerism, celebrity culture and need to "adopt the trappings of adolescence too soon". So instead of easing the pressures of modernity, schools now add to them.

That Review, by Professor Robin Alexander, is the fruit of two years' independent analysis. The authors hope it will be heeded by Sir Jim Rose, who is doing the government report. For at the core of the Cambridge report is a deep concern that primary education is being narrowed, not broadened: that anxiety about literacy and numeracy has caused a "blinkered focus, to the exclusion of arts, music and humanities". It talks of "superficial change masking underlying inertia... political calculations" replacing "honest appraisal".

Well, good on it. Go back now to those real children, arriving aged four or five. What do they actually need? Obviously the basic toolkit: literacy and numeracy. But that is not enough. They need to know something about the world's story, beauties and fascinations; for even the most brutalised or telly-deadened child has a sense of wonder ten times greater than any adult. They need to learn gentleness, conversation and co-operation, not from being lectured but by watching relaxed and benign teachers. They need to have their questions answered, which entails learning in smallish groups. They need space to run and a chance to sing.

Above all, each group needs to have its joy and interest engaged in a slightly different way. Some children arrive from harsh backgrounds, some from a dull, uncommunicative infancy in front of the TV. Some are country children, some city; some verbally bright and some virtually speechless. Of course they all need the three R's, but unless the learning is fitted to their needs, by teachers given freedom and permission to use their initiative, they won't take it in. Why do you think so many children stay illiterate? It's not because they don't do enough phonic chanting: it's because they're bored, weary, nervous, unengaged and just can't see the point.

Central government targets, tables and prescriptions, the "deficient and narrow education" that the Cambridge report describes so pitilessly, will not achieve the necessary joyful élan. Treating children as tiny workers tied to formulaic targets has failed. Respecting and empowering them as fresh, curious, brand-new people carries its risks - of course it does - and inspectorates must watch closely. But there has to be change. Not from the centre but school by school, with freedom, wonder and affection.

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