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When is a review not really a review?

Comparing Sir Jim Rose's review of the primary curriculum with the Plowden report of 1967



Mike Baker
The Guardian, Monday 18 May 2009

Do governments still know how to conduct thorough inquiries into education? Or are politicians today simply in too much of a hurry to hold genuine, evidence-based inquiries and too wary of asking open-ended questions in case they don't get the answers they want? I have just been comparing Sir Jim Rose's review of the primary curriculum with an illustrious predecessor, the Plowden report of 1967. The contrast is startling.

The schools secretary, Ed Balls, said the Rose review would be a "root and branch" review, comprising the "most fundamental" inquiry into the primary curriculum for a decade

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primary curriculum for a decade.

But Rose's remit was far narrower, his deadline much tighter, and his resources far fewer than those given to his predecessor, Lady Bridget Plowden.

Consider the differences. The Plowden committee was asked to "consider primary education in all its aspects". The Rose review was warned off trespassing on to assessment and testing.

The Plowden committee was required by law to include people with direct experience of working in state education as well as people outside that system.

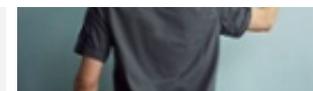
It comprised 25 members, including several headteachers. They ranged from a professor of logic at Oxford University to a "housewife and parent", from the editor of a current affairs magazine to an education psychologist, and from a brigadier who led a county council to the head of a rural school.

The Rose review was made up of one, albeit very experienced, person: Rose himself. He did have a wider advisory group of leading heads, which met five times. But Plowden had headteachers in its core membership and benefited from having six school inspectors and one local authority inspector seconded to it throughout.

The Plowden committee had three years to review the evidence and draw up its recommendations. Rose was given just 14 months, and was expected to publish interim findings within 10 months.

The Plowden report was 556 pages long; Rose's is 154 pages. And, while sheer length is not in itself a merit, Plowden covered far more factors affecting learning, including the physical development of children, the growth of the brain, parental attitudes, social change, health and social services, and the ways schools were organised, designed and equipped.

Nor did Plowden buckle under the weight of its evidence. It took a clear, and radically different, view of the way ahead. It started with the bold statement, characteristic of its philosophy: "At the heart of the



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educational process lies the child."

Plowden had a huge influence on [education policy](#), from the support for "positive discrimination" in "education priority areas" to the expansion of nursery education. It influenced school building design, classroom layout, teaching methods, the introduction of a more flexible school starting age, and greater involvement of parents.

These were the long-term benefits of a thorough review. Rose, of course, could only work within the remit he was given, although it was very odd to consider the curriculum separately from assessment.

Plowden followed in a tradition of big, solid inquiries. But these times are different. Education is more politicised. Governments are in a greater hurry. Teachers and education experts are less trusted.

There is, of course, another inquiry currently under way, which aims to match the thoroughness of Plowden. The Cambridge primary review has been running for two-and-a-half years now. Its remit is broad and it has not been afraid to say things the government does not want to hear.

And there is the rub. In the past, governments set up big independent education inquiries; now they prefer to have their own short, sharp reviews - and seem scarcely interested in anything else.

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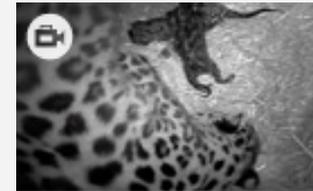


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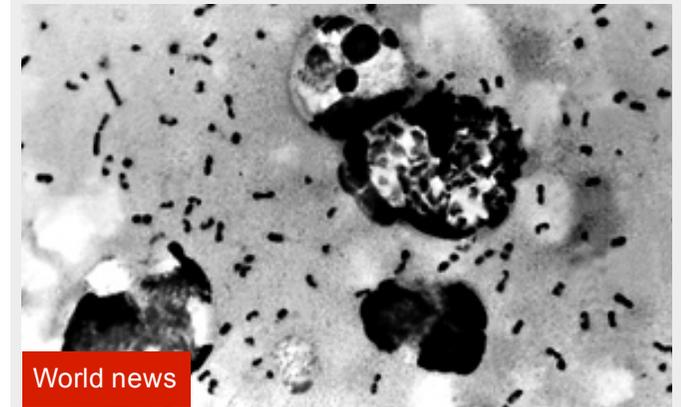
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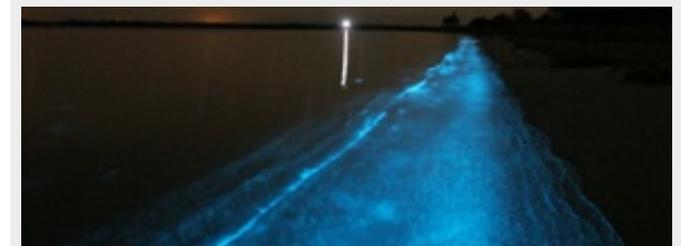
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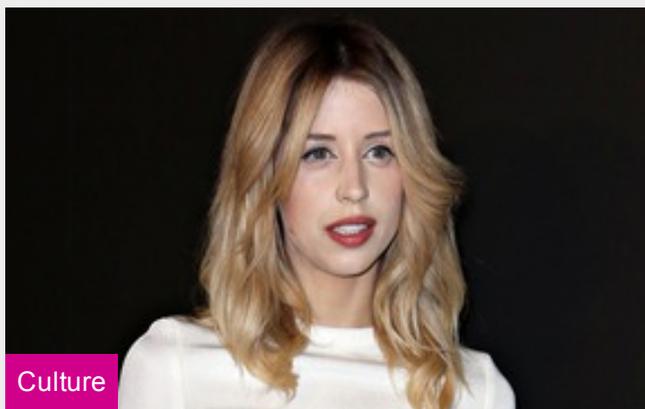
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