



# Conor's Commentary

A blog about politics, education, Ireland, culture and travel. I am Conor Ryan, Dublin-born former adviser to Tony Blair and David Blunkett on education. Views expressed on this blog are written in a personal capacity.

Friday, 20 February 2009

## Let's not go back to 70s primary education

Despite the [Today programme's](#) insistence on the term, "independent" is certainly not an apt description of today's report from the self-styled 'largest' [review of primary education](#) in 40 years. It is another deeply ideological strike against standards and effective teaching of the 3Rs in our primary schools.

Many of its contributors oppose the very idea of school 'standards' and have an ideological opposition to external testing. They have been permanent critics of the changes of recent decades. And it is only in that light that the review's conclusions can be understood.

Of course, there is no conflict between teaching literacy and numeracy, and the other subjects within the primary curriculum. And the best schools do indeed show how doing them all well provides a good and rounded education. Presenting this as the point of difference is a diversionary Aunt Sally.

However, there is a very real conflict between recognising the need to single literacy and numeracy out for *extra* time over the other subjects as with the dedicated literacy and numeracy lessons, and making them just another aspect of primary schooling that pupils may or may not pick up along the way.

For far too long, after the [Plowden review](#) and a move towards so-called 'progressive' teaching, children were not being taught to read and write properly. Schools too often expected children to

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pick up reading by looking at books rather than being taught phonetically. Grammar and tables were often not taught, as they were seen as elitist.

The literacy hour started to undo this damage, and Jim Rose's excellent [report on phonics](#) pointed the way forward for the future. Part of the 'prescription' of the literacy hour included an expectation that children learn to spell and express themselves correctly. Good teachers pointed the way to synthetic phonics, not government diktat. Equally, many primary teachers lacked confidence in teaching basic arithmetic before the daily numeracy lessons.

But some university schools of education remained wedded to the old ways and were reluctant to accept these changes. After all, they had often failed to teach teachers properly how to teach these subjects. A return to a situation where the teaching of these basics is subsumed again into a process of osmosis would destroy another generation of primary schoolchildren in the same way that the children of the seventies were failed.

Of course, we need to get the balance right, and [I argued last week](#) that we can do so with primary testing, but the Primary Review is not about getting the balance right; it is about reversing the changes of the last twenty years and returning our schools to a time when there was no public accountability and the basics were largely subsumed into other lessons.

Ministers and their Tory shadows need to start saying so, and doing so loudly.

*This post has been picked up by the [Reading Reform Foundation](#).*

Posted by [Conor Ryan](#) at 08:35:00 

Labels: [3Rs](#), [Flow den](#), [Primary Review](#), [testing](#)

## 1 comment:

### Geraldine Carter said...

This is a very worrying development but there has been enormous opposition to synthetic phonics by the Establishment in spite of its successful implementation in many schools. SATs tests have been too prescriptive - not actually testing on those basic skills that need to be in place - and schools which lack confidence have suffered great impoverishment. Six serious mistakes in the implementation of Rose, imo:

- i. No effective pressure has been put on ITTs to teach their students how to teach reading. Unless a way is found to tackle this situation, Whole Language is likely to flourish unabated.
- ii. Advisors on the implementation of Rose recommendations were drawn from

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- [The "best blogger" on education - John Rentoul, Independent Minds, March 2009](#)
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- ["Excellent, well-written blog" - Nick Gibb, Schools minister, Hansard April 2009](#)

### GOOGLE ANALYTICS

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the inner circle - largely from the generation that had embraced Whole Language for decades. Two days' introduction to synthetic phonics turned out to be a woefully inadequate training.

iii. The insistence of DCSF in producing their own hastily constructed materials led, inevitably, to a 'manual' more complex and lengthier than necessary. Letters and Sounds drew heavily on excellent and much loved SP programmes - honed and revised over many years through use in the classroom. Inevitably these superior 'trailed and tested' programmes have been sidelined.

iv. Reading Recovery, the universally-criticised remedial arm of Whole Language, has been widely introduced and its proprietors are aggressively planning to extend influence throughout primary school (see their ECAR pronouncements). Not only is it the antithesis of synthetic phonics, its cost is phenomenal. At around 10% of the cost, extended practice in the sub-skills of synthetic phonics has proved far more effective for struggling readers.

v. The term 'Synthetic Phonics' has been dropped by Ed Balls and by DCSF (except in the case of Rose himself). This has allowed bit-phonics to enter the equation. The kind of eclectic phonics that Whole Language proponents accept and the kind of phonics that was included in the ill-fated 'Searchlights' model which the Rose Report attempted to eradicate.

vi. The SATs tests were not fit for purpose. Much simpler tests need to be devised that demonstrate exactly what pupils have learned - as in a music exam. Tests, moreover, that cannot be manipulated and are proof against 'teaching to the test'.

21 February 2009 09:00

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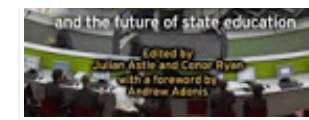
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### Excellence in Education (2005)



### About Me

 **Conor Ryan**

Keynsham, United Kingdom

Dublin-born in 1963, from September 2012 I am Director of Research and Communications for the Sutton Trust. I was previously senior adviser to David Blunkett from 1993-2001 and Tony Blair's senior education adviser from 2005-7. I have also been an independent writer and consultant. I am the author (with Cyril Taylor) of Excellence in Education (David Fulton, 2004) and

Freedom from Failure (CPS, 2002); and editor of Bac or Basics (SMF, 2004) and Staying the Course (SMF, 2008), co-editor with Julian Astle of a book on Academies (CentreForum, 2008) and author of Lessons for Life (HTI, 2011). I have also written many articles for the Guardian, TES, Independent, Daily Mail, Evening Standard, Irish Times, Public Finance, New Statesman and Tribune, among other publications, and contributed to BBC radio and TV news programmes. All views expressed on this blog are my own and appear in a personal capacity.

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#### **Daily Mail articles**

- [A Great Short Term Plan?](#)
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- [Clarke's Top-Up Dilemma](#)

- Death of the Evening Class?
- Fight on Failure Goes on
- Fresh Air, Fresh Ideas
- Girls Enter the Equation
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- History's Fighting Back
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- How to ease those 'Big School' Blues
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- Let's All Work Together
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- Pay up or risk a crisis
- Return of Old Values
- Return to the Chalkface
- Ruling the Unruly Roost
- School's out for Some
- Schools Happy To Learn
- Single Way to Success
- Sixth form dilemma
- So Will a Click Replace a Tick?
- Sounds Like A Good Idea
- Stress Gets A Caning
- Success in the 'Sin Bins'
- Superteacher's Secrets
- Swopping Ideas, and Pupils

- Tailor made lessons
- Take care: Big Mother is Watching
- Targets taken as read
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- When a House is a Home
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- Where Minds Can Blossom
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#### **Guardian Articles**

- A question with no answer
- Accounted for
- After the acronym explosion
- Basic write
- Bench marks
- Cherry-pick Tomlinson
- Class divide still rules in Ireland
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- Fairness and Choice
- Finding direction
- Firm but fair
- Grammar schools should give pupils a fair chance
- Hard-won cash
- Industry back in
- Irish eyes are watching



- It's not cricket
- Labour's tuition tussle
- Middle march
- Misogynist, conspiracist and zealot
- More is needed to restore A-level credibility
- Personal preference
- Plan IB
- Porridge with attitude
- Qualified to differentiate
- Reforming student finance
- Rostrum - Individual Learning Accounts
- Strategic planning
- The challenge for colleges - to set the agenda
- To distribute money sensibly
- Trades Secret
- Union blues
- Why politicians ignore colleges
- Widening the net
- Won't add up
- You can't beat a bac

#### **Independent Articles**

- All parties are making promises they cannot keep
- Brown is right to set tough targets
- Can Collins sack all those civil servants?
- Can the NUT be saved from itself?
- Change primary tests but don't scrap them
- Don't panic: the private sector will help only a handful of schools
- Great concept, shame about the expectations
- How good is a teacher? Check the exam results
- In a crisis, you still can't reach a social worker

- Ministers need the levers for their plan
- Parents want choice - and they can have it
- Pupils need better advice on their options
- Schools need super parents to support them
- Schools should be free to have big classes
- The buck shouldn't always stop at the top
- The pupil premium won't work unless it's new cash
- Tories grab a head start from Blunkett legacy
- Union victory is poor pupils' loss
- Universities must earn the right to charge higher fees
- We have too many - but targets do work
- We must not baby our schoolchildren
- We need a cross-party fees review after 2010
- We need tests to improve bad schools
- We should break up the exam quango
- We should keep tests to check on schools
- When talent is the bottom line
- Where has all the schools' money gone
- Why Ed Balls should keep tests and tables
- Why league tables must stay
- Why ministers should follow Eton on the IB
- Why money must go straight to schools
- Why reading should be a primary concern
- Why we must not ditch national tests
- Why we will be keeping A levels
- You've got to have faith

**Public Finance Articles and blogposts  
available online**

- A hard lesson to learn
- Back to basics?
- Back to schools

- Best laid plans
- Big society or BS?
- Blue school thinking
- BSF backtracking is bad for business
- Cameron's chaotic reforms
- Centred on localism
- Class of their own?
- Cracking the code
- Do Michael Gove's changes add up?
- Easy targets
- Education is no longer sacrosanct
- Election skirmishes
- Elitist or copycat
- Failsafe futures
- Get on your bike to study
- Gove in a muddle
- Gove's curriculum conundrums
- Green greeted with groans
- Grim reality of a graduate tax
- Hanging in the balance
- Has Osborne really protected school budgets?
- Heads on collision
- Heads you win
- Home truths on tuition fees
- Ireland: new politics, old problems
- Learning to Share
- Michael Gove: What U-turn?
- New schools of thought
- No protection for schools
- Not quite the heirs to Blair
- Parent power battles
- Political pariahs?
- Press Freedom, Public Interest and the PCC
- Pupil premium: another funding row in the making

- Put to the test
- Qualms over quango cull
- Rocky road to a national funding formula
- Schools funding: getting behind the spin
- Shuffling the pack
- Spare us another bout of quango-bashing
- Testing times
- The no-win generation
- The social cost of tuition fees
- The trouble with boys
- Time for a genuine cross party consensus on care
- Today vs Parliament
- Tories education appeal busted
- Unhappy returns
- Unions should embrace academies
- University challenge
- Vocation, vocation
- Yew turns and U-turns

#### **TES articles**

- 'I told you so' culture infects A level counsel
- Anyone listening to the Tories
- Bad news on the test tactic
- Battle won but not the war
- Bell's top spin and Tomlinson's off spin
- Blair expands Clarke's empire
- Blair holds off baying press pack
- Blair pins election hopes at the gate
- Book review: A shared childhood
- Brighthouse: education authorities saviour
- Cash as elusive as Iraqi WMDs
- Cheeky Miliband pits the Daily Mail against Middle England
- Chief inspector drags watchdog into the spotlight

- Children in need of a decent education
- Clarke's gangster lingo backfires
- Cult bedevils Kelly's first days
- Defector adds to Tory blues
- Desperately seeking a headline
- Did we really need more reform, Estelle?
- Do teachers have the heaviest load?
- Employers can plug the degree funding gap
- Error lets press pack pounce
- Estelle's hell of a week
- Every August it's the same old cynical stories
- From shaky beginnings to Sure Start
- Green wants a happy party
- Honest reformer needed no spin
- How are we doing? Very well actually
- How ministers made exams popular
- Iain should be grateful to Edwina
- Inventing names is a brainstorm in a teacup
- Is health taking over as the new buzz word
- Is this intervention divine?
- Is Welsh grass greener
- Let's be open about exams
- Maligned exam is now fighting for its life
- Mr Blair forced to face friendly fire
- Mum's the word for Blair
- No return to the secret garden
- Nuggets to replace the spin cycle
- OK, I admit it, the coalition's got some good ideas
- Our target should be to streamline targets
- PM's passion fails to excite media
- Politicians set to dance around May poll
- Press hail Tony, saviour of A levels
- Pukka Tukka is a choice for parents

- Pundits praise the bruiser
- Red tape must not strangle new learning accounts
- Repeat, there's more innovation in 'ER'
- Self-flagellation leaves Abbott out in the cold
- Short term spin may be a long term mistake
- Should we scrap tests at age seven?
- Six-stop pledge to destination unknown
- Snail mail allowed for second thoughts
- Student top-up fees look inevitable
- The carping and political fudging starts here
- Throwing out the baby
- Timely confirmation of minister's humanity
- Tough Estelle who wins without a fight
- Tough talk to impress the voters
- Tuition fees and exams will test Blair to the limit
- We should trust ministers not a quango to rule on exams
- What happened to the choice advisers?
- What to put in a 20-min mix
- Winners and losers in the spinning game

#### **Other Articles**

- A growing consensus (Progress)
- A third term must complete reforms (Progress)
- Book Review: Keane on Havel (Independent on Sunday)
- Book review: The Rise and Fall of Self-Taught Man (Evening Standard)
- Could Brighthouse be London's saviour? (LGC)
- End of the road for Lane (LGC)
- Frontline first - council performance (LGC)
- Frontline first - education cuts (LGC)

- Frontline first - faith schools (LGC)
- Frontline first - school funding (LGC)
- Frontline first - specialist schools (LGC)
- Frontline first - teachers' pay (LGC)
- Frontline first - teaching unions (LGC)
- Frontline first - union conferences 2003 (LGC)
- Gove put to the test (Progress)
- How to bury the Truth (Evening Standard)
- Labour's first lady in Belfast (Irish Times, 1988)
- Labour: where to next? (Irish Times, 1987)
- Leading over a million students (Irish Times, 1988)
- Learning curve (Progress)
- Making the most of the pupil deprivation grant (Teaching Wales)
- Making the most of the pupil premium (Teaching Leaders)
- Middle earners will pay most in this student loans mess (The Times)
- More Revision Needed (House Magazine)
- Not out of the woods yet (LGC)
- Radical with results? (Parliamentary Monitor)
- Raising our Game (Vision 2020 - Learndirect)
- Right way to raise the bar (House Magazine)
- Second term issues (New Statesman)
- Should early GCSEs be discouraged? (The Times)
- Sizing up the problem of regional disparities (ESRC Society Today)
- Spin doctors play key role in health of our democracy (Irish Times, 2002)
- Teacher shortages (LGC)
- The Day of the Censor (Irish Times, 1985)
- Towards fairer school admissions (Progress)

- Unions must share blame for teaching shortage (Evening Standard)
- Whatever happened to the University for Industry? (New Statesman)
- Where are all the £100k heads? (Evening Standard)
- White paper, bleak future (LGC)
- Working with the blind man who saw politics clearly (Sunday Times)



#### Labels

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