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Debate and Comment

New Labour has turned education into drudgery

The Cambridge Primary Review has piled pressure on the government. We should grab the chance to build resistance, writes Terry Wrigley

New Labour is facing a crisis in its education policies. Following widespread dissatisfaction from parents and teachers, and alienation and unhappiness among children, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation asked professor Robin Alexander to coordinate a comprehensive study into primary school education.

This was called the Cambridge Primary Review. The review marks a new turning point in resistance to New Labour's stranglehold on England's schools.

It is the largest study of primary schooling in 40 years and all the major teaching unions have warmly welcomed its conclusions.

It condemns the damage done to learning under the pretence of "raising standards". It says that there is too much emphasis on memorising facts leading to a superficial understanding and no time for children to explore or discuss new ideas.

It calls for an end to government micro-management and condemns the government's "Stalinist" control over teaching.

It says there is no evidence to show that authoritarian methods are effective and a lot of evidence that they do harm.

The review insists on a broad curriculum that would give children not just literacy and numeracy skills, but knowledge about the world from science, history, geography.

It also argues that children should be given the opportunity to express themselves creatively through music, art and drama.

It says that too much time is spent cramming children for tests in literacy, numeracy and basic science.

It accepts the need for a common core curriculum but says teachers also need time to respond to current events, the local neighbourhood, and children's interests.

A sensible government would listen to this body of experts.

But New Labour has simply gone into denial, claiming it is "out of date".

No they won't abandon the Sats tests, they say, and neither will they allow more play-based learning for five and six year olds.

It has even tried to sidestep this independent review by setting up its own tame version, also called Primary Review, led by Sir Jim Rose.

The big issue behind all this is the domination of education by big business.

Primary education is seen as a tool for developing basic skills for future work – literacy, numeracy and elementary science.

New Labour has even set targets for what three to five year olds must know.

The review, in contrast, argues for play-based learning in the early years, rather than locking five year olds behind desks. It says formal schooling should be delayed until the age of six, as in many other European countries.

The review also insists that reading is about much more than pronouncing the letters. Real literacy involves enjoyment, excitement and curiosity.

New Labour has imposed a system based exclusively on “phonics”. This includes force-feeding children books without stories or characters they can identify with.

Learning to read is becoming meaningless drudgery.

New Labour ministers claim they want to help children growing up in poverty whose parents can't afford to buy books. But it denies them enjoyable reading when they get to school.

The review places well-being, empowerment and concern for the wider world at the heart of primary education. It wants children to engage with learning and develop greater autonomy.

Government policy has lost sight of real educational quality because of an obsession with test scores. It has turned knowledge into simply memorising dead facts.

Developing a concern for the wider world requires more creative teaching and learning.

The report's key phrases include promoting independence and sustainability, celebrating culture and community, and exciting the imagination.

Since the National Curriculum and its policing methods – Sats, league tables, Ofsted inspections – were introduced 20 years ago, many teachers have lost confidence in themselves.

They have done a lot of grumbling but have come to doubt their own good sense in the face of know-all ministers of education and their tame “experts”.

The Cambridge Primary Review should help restore courage to teachers to defy a government that is dead in the water.

It is high time to band together to bring about real change.

This will take organisation and mutual support.

The immediate challenge is carrying out the union threat to boycott Sats tests for 11 year olds.

Conferences, workshops and networks are needed to develop and share new ways of teaching and learning.

It is time to rethink education and deal with the challenge of a fast changing and crisis-ridden world.

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