

PRIMARY EDUCATION: WHAT IS AND WHAT MIGHT BE

Cambridge Primary Review Trust National Conference
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**WHAT WORKS AND WHAT MATTERS:
EDUCATION IN SPITE OF POLICY**

Robin Alexander

- I -

This conference marks the tenth anniversary of the launch of the Cambridge Primary Review and the fourth, almost, of its successor, the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

The [story of the Review](#) is told, albeit briefly, in your conference programme and in greater detail on the Trust's website, so I'm not going to repeat it. But I must pay tribute to Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, whose five consecutive grants supported the Review from 2006 to 2012, and to Pearson, who have supported the Trust since 2013. I must also stress that although, publicly, such initiatives tend to be identified with the person who leads them, the Review was genuinely a collective effort, and I'm delighted to see some of its 100 associates here today.

Although various awards - from the National Union of Teachers, the Association of Managers in Education, the Society of Educational Studies, the British Educational Research Association and Sage - all testified to the Review's perceived significance, assessing its impact isn't straightforward. However, on one key measure we were certainly successful. We achieved extensive press coverage throughout, and independent media analysis shows that on five of the ten occasions when the Review published its reports it was the top UK news story overall.

But such exposure came at a price, for despite the balanced content and measured tone of our [31 interim reports](#) the headlines they provoked mostly sensationalized our findings. Here's a selection:

Backlash against testing regime ... The pain of a generation forced to grow up before their time ... Children being robbed of their innocence by guns, gangs and celebrities ... Primary tests blasted by experts ... Literacy drive is flop, say experts ... Kids lose love of books ... Why are children so unhappy? ... England's young among the most tested ... Our children tested to destruction ... Failed! Political interference is damaging children's education, report says ... A shattering failure for our masters ... Underfunded primary schools fail to teach literacy ... 'Moral panic' and 'policy hysteria' harming schools, report says ... Schools failing to fire the imagination ... The winnowing out of happiness ... Children deserve a broader curriculum ... Where now after damning indictment of education? ... Disadvantage lies at heart of review ... Stalinist schools: Labour's centralised control of education ... A study that should sound the death knell of league tables ... Alexander review: give us back our schools ... Rowan Williams

condemns 'oppressive' education system ... The government's greatest failing is ignoring advice.

But also:

Cambridge Review team, take heart - your ideas may yet triumph.

There was some even-handed reporting, but overall the narrative was Review versus government, or in respect of the Rose review, Alexander versus Rose.

Actually, I happen to know that Jim Rose argued that this was a golden opportunity for collaboration between the two reviews in the interests of a really well conceived primary curriculum, but according to Mick Waters, who was then at QCA and close to the action, Rose's ministerial bosses wouldn't allow it. Like much of the press, they preferred confrontation.

Thus it was to the headlines rather than the reports that the government responded, dishing out rebuttals and insults of almost Trumpish ferocity, and showing that despite our careful briefings of DfE officials before each report was published they had less interest in what we actually said than in protecting the government from media scorn by attacking us. Here is a selection from DfE media releases, quoted in [the final report](#) (p 24) in the hope that government might be shamed into a more mature and considered response:

'These reports use tunnel vision to look at education. Primary standards are at their highest ever levels' ... 'A spokeswoman for the DCSF attacked the Primary Review for peddling "a collection of recycled, partial or out of date research" ' ... ' "I am not going to apologise for delivering what parents want, even if these researchers – often on the basis of out-of-date research – don't like it," Ed Balls said'... 'Professor Alexander is entitled to his opinions but once again we fundamentally disagree with his views – as will parents across the country. Parental interest in children's education in the home is vital for their learning. We need parents to make books available, read to their children and take an interest in their homework. Many parents already do this, and unlike Professor Alexander, we think they are right to do so' ... ' "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 "standards" ... A return to a situation where the teaching of the basics is subsumed into a process of osmosis would destroy another generation of primary schoolchildren in the same way that the children of the seventies were failed ... The Primary Review 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.'



A forlorn hope indeed. The process reached its sorry climax when far from welcoming the final report as a contribution to evidence-informed policy, ministers first cynically misrepresented and then dismissed it - a response for which they were widely criticised and which when I met them at DfE they later accepted was wrong, though only in private.

But, and it's a crucial 'but', the CPR final report ended with these words:

The Cambridge Primary review ... is not just for the transient architects and agents of policy. It is for all who invest daily, deeply and for life in this vital phase of education, especially children, parents and teachers.

'Transient architects of policy'. So here we all are, education professionals, soldiering on, investing in primary education daily, deeply and for life. And there goes our one-time nemesis, former Secretary of State Ed Balls: out of office, out of Parliament and into Strictly Come Dancing, closely followed by Michael Gove and Nicky Morgan – dancing not the tango but a weird caper called the Brexit. It was on the basis of this contrast, between here today gone tomorrow politicians and the rest of us who are in it for the long haul, that we argued in 2009, and I repeat now, that people who judged the Review solely by how much notice the government took of it were missing the point. True, we made policy recommendations and some of them were heeded; but most of what we reported was for teachers, not policymakers.

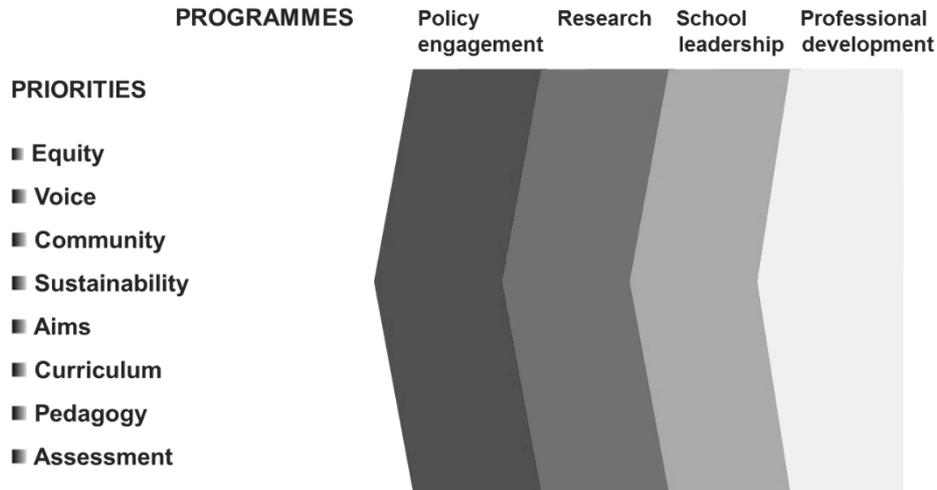
It's the teachers who have heeded this message that the Cambridge Primary Review Trust celebrates. Their insistence on professional autonomy underpinned by reflection, evidence and vision underlines the force of another often-repeated quote from the final report: 'Children will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers merely do as they are told.'



Taking the Review as its starting point but responding to what by 2012 were rather different circumstances, the Trust identified the eight priorities on which I'll reflect in a minute: equity, voice, community and sustainability as guiding principles, and aims, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as practical imperatives. These derived from the Review and the dissemination events that followed it, and have been pursued through policy engagement, research, school leadership and professional networking and development through CPRT's regional networks, its Schools Alliance and its CPD partnership with Pearson.

The most widely visible aspect of CPRT's work has been the succession of research reports and briefings that we commissioned to update and extend those produced by the Cambridge Review. The final two will be published shortly and all are listed in your programme. But there's more. Our regional networks have organised an impressive array of events and

THE CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW TRUST PROGRAMMES AND PRIORITIES



initiatives, often working closely with local members of the [Trust's Schools Alliance](#). We have contributed to numerous official consultations. We have joined forces with other organisations on campaigns such as Better Without Baseline, More Than a Score, and Bacc for the Future. Our (almost) weekly blogs have commented on issues and developments both transient and fundamental, and they have been contributed by heads, teachers, student teachers and journalists as well as academics. If you want to see how all this activity feeds into the eight CPRT priorities, [go to 'Priorities in action' on the CPRT website](#).

-II -

Let me turn next to the titles of this conference and my keynote: 'What is and what might be' and 'What works and what matters: education in spite of policy'.

'What is and what might be' is the title of Edmond Holmes's 1911 critique of English elementary education. It reminds us of a shared objective of the Cambridge Primary Review and the Trust: to combine reliable *evidence* about children, their world and their primary education with a valid *vision* for the future.

'What works' is the mantra of those who cut to what they see as the only educational question worth considering. Not 'What is education for?' – for that's the one question they never ask - but 'What methods are most effective at delivering the required educational outcomes?' Required, that is, by ministers.

And what of those outcomes? Of course we must have clear learning goals and we need to know to what extent those goals have been achieved. That is blindingly obvious. But while some outcomes may well be laudable and appropriate, others may not, and all must be a matter of debate rather than decree. Is it really essential, as one ministerial convert to

E.D.Hirsch insisted to me, that every Year 6 pupil should know who shot England's King William II, especially when this is a question that no historian can answer?

In any case, too exclusive an emphasis on outcomes, even those that are sensible, neglects the truth that for the child the process and moment of learning are no less important. Primary teachers were rightly incensed a few years ago when another minister announced that the most important outcome of primary education is making children 'secondary-ready', as if children's experiences during their intensely formative primary years have no value in themselves. Anyway, given that last year Ofsted published a report entitled *Key Stage 3: the wasted years?* [the idea of 'secondary ready' is problematic, to say the least.](#)

Further, from the broad range of possible outcomes of learning - academic, social, emotional, behavioural, aesthetic, moral, physical - only a small proportion are amenable to measurement, and in our data-driven education system this intrinsic weakness inevitably and seriously distorts the curriculum. So, as my title invites, we must ask whether what works in education - or rather, what is claimed to work on the basis of the less than perfect measures available - is what really matters.

What is and what might be. Evidence with vision. What works and what matters. To these I add a metatheme that suffuses all of them. It's called *policy*.

Ever since the 1988 Education Reform Act started transferring hitherto devolved powers from local authorities and schools to Westminster, policy has become ever more inescapable, intrusive and impervious to criticism. Witness those 459 government documents on the teaching of literacy that were issued to primary schools between 1996 and 2004 - that's over one official document on literacy every week for eight years. School leaders here today can probably update that figure.

But it's not only the DfE documentary deluge. There's also the question of the validity of what is promulgated. Some feel that in terms of quality as well as quantity education policy has now become dangerously counterproductive. This was certainly the view of those four eminent educationists who in 2008, at the height of New Labour's standards drive in the name of 'education, education, education' (which turned out to mean 'basics, basics, basics' and 'tests, tests, tests') wrote this in an [open letter to a national newspaper](#):

Despite significant additional investment in education since 1997 and many welcome measures in all phases of education, our research shows that government policy is now working against the Government's own intentions. The current frenetic pace of change must slow down to what is possible ... We have become increasingly dismayed by ministers who are intent on permanent revolution in every aspect of the education system from structures to qualifications. In so acting, they demonstrate a deep lack of trust in the professional education community ... We have come independently to the same conclusion, namely that government policy is no longer the solution to the difficulties we face but our greatest problem.

So: 'Education in spite of policy'. What of the *focus* of policy? In his introduction to *What Is And What Might Be*, Edmond Holmes wrote (pp v-vi), in terms which I think speak as directly to our situation in 2016 as to that in 1911:

My aim ... is to show that ... the prevalent tendency to pay undue regard to outward and visible 'results' and to neglect what is inward and vital, is the source of most of the defects that vitiate education in this country.

Having anticipated behaviourist psychology - undue regard to [the] outward and visible - and the tyranny of SATs - undue regard to results - he then anticipated the backlash. He went on:

There is at least a breath of healthy discontent stirring in the field of elementary education, a breath which sometimes blows the mist away and gives us sudden gleams of sunshine, whereas over the higher levels of the educational world there hangs the heavy stupor of profound self-satisfaction. I am not exaggerating when I say that at this moment there are elementary schools in England in which the life of the children is emancipative and educative to an extent which is unsurpassed, and perhaps unequalled, in any other type ... of school.

'The heavy stupor of profound self-satisfaction'. DfE, its advisers and acolytes take note.

-III-

Well, that's enough pessimism, for the moment anyway. I want to turn next to those eight priorities that have guided the Trust's efforts since 2013. In relation to each of them, what can we say about what is and what might be? About what policy has achieved and what policy has frustrated? And about what works and what really matters?

Voice

Let's begin on an upbeat note with voice: *Advance children's voice and rights in school and classroom in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. [Carol Robinson's CPRT research update](#) on voice has stimulated several initiatives in our regional networks, for it speaks to a wider interest in children's voice and rights that has taken the movement far beyond the formal procedures such as school councils that we documented in the Cambridge Review final report. So, for example, there are now 4000 UK schools working towards the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award and many more that are not part of this scheme but have signed up to the idea.

However, it is to be hoped that they all understand that the real test of a school's commitment to voice lies not so much in national schemes and school structures, helpful though these are, as in what happens in the classroom; and that if a commitment to voice doesn't translate into a pedagogy that empowers children's talk, respects their ideas and thereby gives them ownership of their learning - which is what the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly requires - it has barely scratched the surface of what 'voice' should mean.

Here's another angle. 'Voice' and 'vote' have different Latin roots - vox/voice and votum/vow

- but in a democracy the vote is the citizen's ultimate voice and in today's febrile political climate how people vocalise their views and use their votes has implications for voice in the classroom.

On the one hand, an EPPI research review at the University of Bristol has shown that children's path to active and discerning citizenship starts not with lessons that preach 'British' values or the virtues of British parliamentary democracy but with classroom talk that encourages children to question, argue, reason, challenge the opinions of others and justify their own - what I call dialogic teaching. On the other hand, and as far removed from this as it is possible to imagine, we have the divisive demagoguery and populist tribalism of Trump, Farage and some of the tabloids, the verbal and physical violence that they encourage - let us never forget Jo Cox - and the replacement of evidence and reasoned argument by claims, lies and accusations that appeal to humanity's worst rather than its best. Voice is the not just the opportunity to talk, but how that opportunity is exercised.

Another angle again. It would be facile to claim a connection between the growing abusiveness of political discourse and the rise of cyber-bullying, but for today's children social networking is routine and pervasive and it's therefore a dimension of voice that demands our attention, and urgently. Here I'd commend another recent CPRT report, Cathy Burnett's *The Digital Age and its Implications for Learning and Teaching in the Primary School*.

Equity

If we ask whether the voices of all children have an equal chance of being heard, then we see how voice relates to the next CPRT priority, equity: *Tackle the continuing challenge of social and educational disadvantage, and find practical ways to help schools to close the overlapping gaps in educational attainment*.

In recent years, governments of all persuasions have told us that they are committed to reducing inequality in society and education. Building on a legacy of positive discrimination going back to the Educational Priority Areas of the 1960s, significant public money now goes to the Pupil Premium and the 'what works' strategies evaluated by the Education Endowment Foundation. One of these is [the joint CPRT/University of York project on dialogic teaching](#), which I jointly direct.

Meanwhile, we have a level of child poverty - currently 28 percent - that is matched by few other rich countries, a growing gulf between rich and poor, and gross and stubbornly persistent inequalities of gender, race, culture and opportunity. And of course, and critically, the demographics of social and educational inequality closely coincide.

All this is well documented in not one but three CPRT reports. Together with Laura Vanderbloemen, Kate Pickett, co-author of the brilliant 2009 book *The Spirit Level*, has produced for us *Mind the Gap: tackling social and educational inequality*, revisiting and developing her central thesis that unequal societies have unequal educational systems and that you can't eliminate *educational* inequality without tackling *social* inequality. Mel Ainscow and his Manchester colleagues have given us *Primary Schools Responding to Diversity: barriers and possibilities*, and from Michael Jopling and Sharon Vincent we have *Vulnerable Children*:

needs and provision in the primary phase. Michael and Sharon focus on what local authorities and agencies do and might do better. The other two reports have more to say about national policy, and while both Kate Pickett and Mel Ainscow acknowledge the welcome boost to school income that the Pupil Premium provides, they highlight its limitations. Worryingly, Mel and his colleagues argue that the Premium may narrow rather than widen the vocabulary of social diversity. They say: 'Teachers now commonly refer to "Pupil Premium pupils" as though such a group can be defined meaningfully, when in fact it consists of no more than a highly diverse aggregation of individuals whose only common feature is that they have free school meals.'

And the government's response? On the one hand, certainly, the Pupil Premium - thanks to the moderating influence of the coalition government's LibDem partners. On the other, flying in the face of 1960s evidence about the damage to the self-esteem and life chances of the majority who were *not* deemed worthy of a grammar school education, we have the grammar schools proposal. To have two initiatives from the same government department pulling in opposite directions, both in the name of narrowing the gap, is bizarre. But hey, that's policy.

In any case, as Mel Ainscow warns, the definition of the gap to be narrowed has itself become narrower. Here we might recall that Labour's Narrowing the Gap programme, which followed Every Child Matters, focused on a much wider spectrum of disadvantage than income, including looked-after children, children with disabilities, children with special needs, those excluded from school, those with records of poor or patchy attendance, young offenders, young carers, children at risk, children living with vulnerable adults, children not fluent in English, children of asylum seekers and refugees, children with mental health problems and children from marginalised groups such as travellers.

Community

Which leads to CPRT's priority of community: *Promote community engagement and cohesion through school-community links and a community curriculum that supplements and enriches the national curriculum, and by developing communal values in school and classroom.* You may recall that the Cambridge Review's final report showed, not least on the strength of the '[community soundings](#)' with which the Review started - 87 focus group meetings in nine regional locations - that primary schools are not only pivotal to their local communities, but also, at their best, they model what community is about. As we said, like many others cribbing the words of W.B.Yeats: 'Primary schools may be the one point of stability and positive values in a world where everything else is changing and uncertain. For many, schools are the centre that holds when things fall apart'.

Like voice, community is a priority that is not subject to DfE policy requirements and where schools can make their own way. But, also like voice, policy can make community harder to achieve. For while teachers and school leaders strive to create communal relationships and patterns of behaviour, communities outside the school that are fractured have a habit of intruding, and this fracturing is economic as well as social and cultural. Meanwhile, the stripping away of local educational governance and accountability diminishes community investment in neighbourhood schools, while performance tables, enforced academisation and the drive to an American-style marketised system are about division rather than solidarity. Here you should read [Warwick Mansell's CPRT report on academies](#). Warwick is particularly

concerned about the dangers of unaccountable admissions policies, financial discretion and governance, and in the spirit of community argues: 'In the absence of good evidence showing why they should be dispensed with, local democracy, accountability and support should be maintained for all state-funded schools' and 'there should be maximum transparency at all levels of decision making about the future of schools. Users of services, and citizens generally, need to be involved in these decisions.'

Sustainability

The last in the cluster of CPRT priorities relating to children and their world is sustainability: *Embed sustainability and global citizenship in educational policy and practice, linking to the UN agenda for global education after 2015.*

Well, the same prime minister who claimed that he was going to head 'the greenest government ever' later told his ministers to 'cut the green crap', and his successor Theresa May duly obliged by abolishing the Department of Energy and Climate Change. And this despite the United Nations 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement and its ratification only last month.

Meanwhile, although education for sustainable development was a cross-curriculum requirement from 2000 to 2013, it was excluded from the national curriculum introduced in 2014. Meanwhile too, Brexit and its attendant nationalism, xenophobia and racism have dealt a body blow to the idea that learning and citizenship in our interdependent and fragile world must be global rather than merely national; and all over Europe right wing nationalist politics, emboldened first by Brexit and now by Trump, are following suit.

As with voice, community and equity, the priority of sustainability carries forward the agenda of the Cambridge Primary Review which in turn reflected concerns expressed by parents, teachers, community leaders and children themselves. Children of course have most to gain or lose from our decisions. So there's nothing remotely maverick about our pressing for education for sustainability and global citizenship. As with voice and community, the achievement of this priority is partly in your hands, in spite of policy, and to help you there's the CPRT report from Doug Bourn and his colleagues at the UCL Institute of Education, [Primary Education for Global Learning and Sustainability](#), not to mention practical ways forward floated in our [blogs by Ben Ballin of Tide~ Global Learning](#).

Aims

This takes us to the central question of what primary education is for. Once again policy fails us. Every version of the national curriculum since 1988 has been prefaced by a brace of goals that are not only platitudinous but also bear no relation to the content they precede. They are also habitually ungrammatical. Thus the current national curriculum, like its predecessors, says that the curriculum should promote 'the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society.' I can see how it is valid to speak of the spiritual, moral and cultural development of society, but what on earth is meant by the 'mental and physical development ... of society'? Do societies have arms and legs? Anyway, Margaret Thatcher, on whose watch this crass phrase was invented, decreed that there's no such thing

as society - though she presumably accepted the existence of legs.

It's not so much that the national curriculum doesn't have aims, for notwithstanding DfE's silly statement about the mental and physical needs of society, aims are all too clearly expressed by the subjects that ministers include and exclude, what they define as core and non-core, and the extent and kind of content they require for each; and it all adds up to the familiar regime of hammer the 3Rs, don't worry about the rest. No, my objection is the sheer dishonesty of the government's approach, with its expressed aims, however illiterate, claiming a broad, balanced, liberal education that celebrates 'the best that has been thought and said' while the curriculum itself as specified in the current national curriculum framework heads in the opposite direction towards minimalism, narrow instrumentalism and a disdain for culture that would have Matthew Arnold spinning in his grave at the barefaced cheek of those ministers who use his words to paper over the poverty of their vision.

A year ago, and underlining the government's failure both to come clean on aims and to engage in a proper debate on the matter - for the aims of public education are for all of us, not just ministers - the House of Commons Education Committee launched its own enquiry into the quality and purpose of education in England. In some irritation I penned a CPRT blog entitled '[What's the point?](#)' and asked: 'When the mother of parliaments asks 'What's the point of education?' we might retort, descending to even greater depths of cynicism than usual, 'What's the point of telling you? What's the point of contributing to yet another consultation when on past form nobody takes any notice?' and indeed, 'You ask about educational purposes now? After hundreds of so-called reforms? Are you telling us that these reforms have all been, in the strict sense of the word, pointless?'

But then I remembered my duties as citizen, educator and chair of this Trust, and submitted, on behalf of the Trust, a copy of the Cambridge Primary Review aims for primary education together with [a commentary](#). Those aims, [which you'll find set out in full on our website](#), were grounded in an extensive enquiry that trawled the views of thousands of witnesses from all walks of life as well as official statements from many other countries. Out of this we crystallised the twelve aims in three groups - children their world, their education - that many schools have now adopted and which I firmly believe remain wholly apposite. Indeed, when you look at the middle four about 'self, others and the wider world - encouraging respect and reciprocity; promoting interdependence and sustainability; empowering local, national and global citizenship; and celebrating culture and community - you may agree that in light of the way our society and world are going, these four are if anything more urgent now than they were then.

But the crucial procedural point about aims is that they should mean what they say. They are not the icing on the curriculum cake but its raw ingredients. They should drive what is taught and how, and they should shape and inform the values and life of the school as a whole. If a school claims to foster children's engagement and autonomy, or sustainability and global citizenship, or to excite their imaginations, we are entitled to ask where and how. In the words

of CPRT's aims priority: *Develop and apply a coherent vision for 21st century primary education; enact [it] through curriculum, pedagogy and the wider life of the school.*

AIMS FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION

(Cambridge Primary review final report, pp 174-202)



Curriculum

And what of curriculum? CPRT's priority is to *develop a broad, balanced and rich entitlement curriculum which responds to both national and local need, eliminates the damaging division of status and quality between core and non-core, and teaches every subject, domain or aspect to the highest possible standard.* We add that in the world's fifth richest nation this is surely a minimal requirement for public education, not an unattainable ideal.

After a protracted national curriculum review starting with great Govian fanfares in 2011, the government invited but largely ignored the advice of its expert group and thousands of equally expert submissions, bent the international evidence to suit its purposes, and proposed what it had decided before its review was launched. Subsequent consultations achieved some trimming at the margins - and I count the reinstatement of a programme of study for spoken language as a personal victory, for a Freedom of Information request has shown that it was in direct response to the [evidence I presented](#) at a ministerial seminar in March 2012. But otherwise, the September 2013 framework says it all. 89 pages for English, 52 pages for maths, 44 pages for science and just 35 pages for the remaining nine subjects, or two or three pages for each subject that are so brief and generalised as to be almost useless.

So the old, deeply damaging two-tier curriculum continues to reign supreme, notwithstanding concerns expressed by chief inspectors as well as teachers and researchers. Meanwhile, drama is no more than implicit and what the framework *does* say, for example about literacy, has attracted as much dismay as what it doesn't. In any case, after all the fanfares and frustrations, it turns out that this national curriculum is not national at all, because it applies only to some schools. Indeed, it is neither national nor, in the sense that most people understand the word,

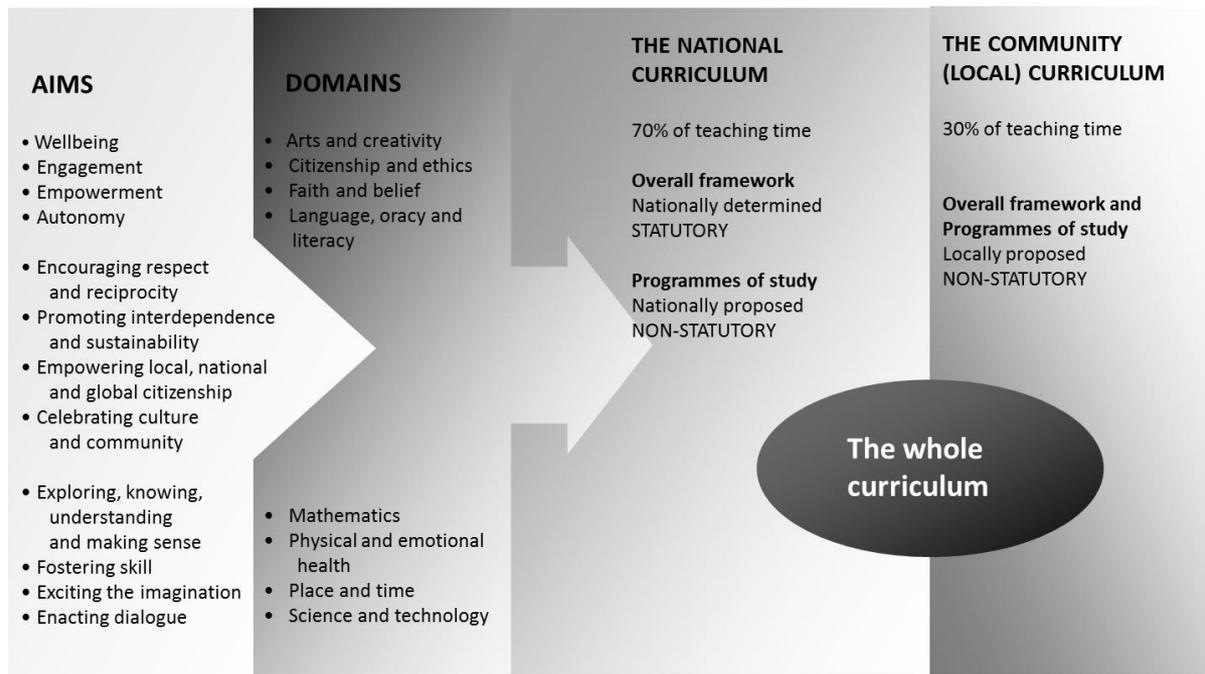
a curriculum. Rather it is a list of subjects that starts in massive prescriptive detail before tailing off into please-yourself insignificance, thus giving the lie to all that talk of 'breadth and balance', let alone 'the best that has been thought and said.'

There is of course an alternative: the Cambridge Primary Review primary curriculum framework of aims and domains, which balanced national entitlement and consistency with, through its community curriculum, local responsiveness (*Children, their World, their Education*, pp 237-278).

What this sorry tale illustrates is not just ministerial arrogance and poverty of vision but also

AIMS & DOMAINS, LOCAL & NATIONAL - THE CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

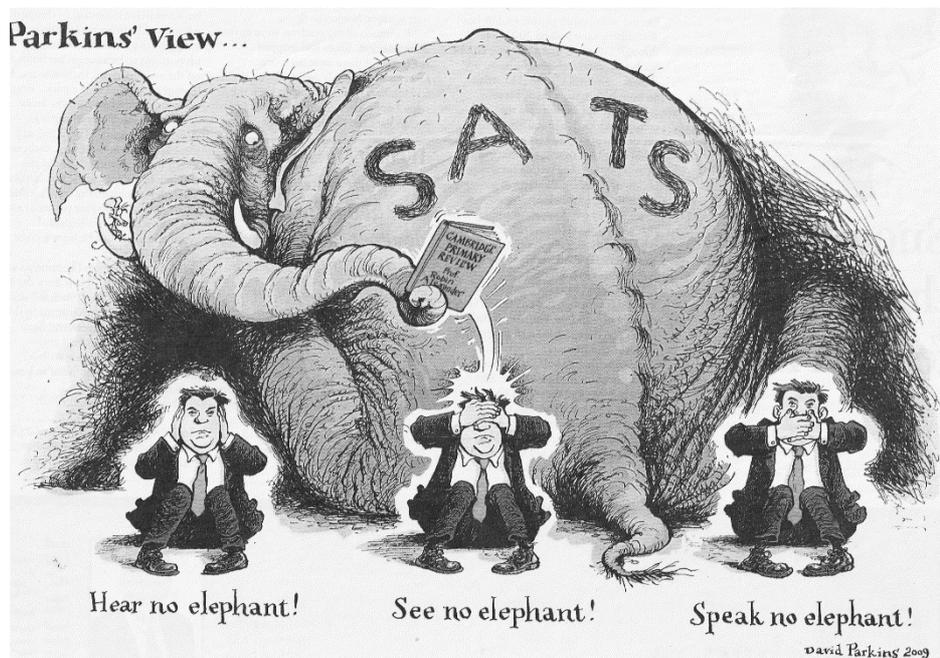
(Cambridge Primary Review final report, chapter 14)



resistance to evidence. In the national curriculum, as in the proposed EBacc, from which the arts are excluded all together, the arts fall victim to all three. Yet we know that the arts are not only profoundly significant in themselves for both individual development and national culture, but they are also extremely useful in terms that even the most utilitarian of ministers should understand. Last year the arts industries contributed £84 billion to the UK economy, and a US research review provides evidence that properly conceived and rigorously taught - and, sadly, neither condition can be guaranteed - the arts can enhance: *pupil motivation and engagement*, including attendance, persistence, attention, aspiration and risk-taking; *pupil achievement* in tests of reading and mathematics; *skill transfer* from the arts to other subjects, including, again, reading and mathematics; *habits of mind* across all areas of learning, including problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, and the capacity to deal with ambiguity and complexity; and *social competencies* including collaboration, teamwork, tolerance and self-confidence. If all that isn't useful to children, the economy and society and then I don't know what is.

Assessment

I have the same sense of despair over policy on assessment as I do over policy on curriculum. CPRT's priority is stated in terms which ought not to be problematic but for ministers apparently is: *Encourage approaches to assessment that enhance learning as well as test it, that support rather than distort the curriculum and that pursue standards and quality in all areas of learning, not just the core subjects.* What could be more obvious and desirable than that? Instead we have policies that distort the curriculum, treat tests in literacy and numeracy as proxies for children's learning across the curriculum as a whole, and generate unacceptable levels of stress among both children and teachers. SATs, as I wrote in 2009 during the Cambridge Review, remain the elephant in the curriculum. This splendid cartoon, with Ed Balls being strictly come swatted with a copy of our final report, was in *TES*.



Meanwhile, assessment enquiries are set up, they report, they recommend, they are followed by more reviews, and very little changes. Remember the Secretary of State's Expert Group on Assessment in 2009? Or DfEs' Testing and Accountability proposals in 2013? Or the 2015 Commission on Assessment Without Levels? Or Lord Bew's Key Stage 2 Testing and Accountability Review in 2011? Thus the assessment reviews come and thus they go. Bew, Bew, Barney McGrew, Cuthbert, Dibble and Grubb.

Now it's the Select Committee's turn. On 23 September it launched yet another primary assessment enquiry. We are told that it will 'scrutinise reforms to primary assessment and their impact on teaching and learning in primary schools ... and cover the wider effects of assessment on primary schools, as well as possible next steps for Government policy.'

If the Select Committee were only half aware of the evidence already assembled and cogently presented by teachers, researchers, professional associations, organisations like the Assessment Reform Group, campaigns like Better Without Baseline and More Than a Score,

and of course the Cambridge Primary Review and Trust; if, ignorant of all that, the Committee had read only Wynne Harlen's report for the Trust grounded in a lifetime of distinguished work in the field and entitled *Assessment, Standards and Quality of Learning in Primary Education*, then it wouldn't need to launch yet another enquiry. The evidence of a dysfunctional national assessment system is out there, and in abundance, with the scrapping of this year's KS1 SPAG test as just one illustration among many. The real question is why, when the case for genuine and radical assessment reform has been so strenuously and repeatedly made, and sound and workable alternatives have been proposed, government takes no notice.

Pedagogy

And so we come to the heart of the matter, pedagogy. It is through pedagogy that aims become reality and a paper curriculum is translated into those classroom relationships, decisions, actions, interactions and experiences that produce learning. The Cambridge Review final report said 'Good teaching makes a difference. Excellent teaching can transform lives.' The opportunities are high. So are the stakes.

Here the policy rubicon was crossed not with the current government's obsession with phonics but in 1998 by New Labour's literacy and numeracy strategies. Then, for the first time, ministers told teachers not just what to teach but how. Of course they have banged on since time immemorial about the advantage of so called 'traditional' over so called 'progressive' methods and have heaped insults on proponents of the latter. Yet until 1998 they held to the line drawn by then Secretary of State Kenneth Clarke in 1992, that 'questions about how to teach are not for government'.

For a while the coalition government appeared to revert to this position, claiming to banish New Labour's control freakery and give teaching back to teachers. But there are other ways of exerting influence on classroom life. Michael Gove did it by divisive rhetoric - 'enemies of promise / Marxists hell bent on destroying our schools' and all that. Nick Gibb has done it through phonics, which is essentially a matter of pedagogy but which he defined as curriculum so as to make it compulsory. The other ploy is less direct. Through a raft of so-called 'expert groups' whose generous complement of policy-compliant members produce supposedly 'independent' reports, government ensures that the agenda of a profession that ministers claim to want to liberate remains firmly on message. I exempt from this criticism three of the four members of the national curriculum expert group.

One such 'expert group' has just produced, with DfE support, a report on 'effective teaching practice.' I was consulted while this work was in progress and presented the group with all the relevant material from the Cambridge Review and Trust, including the Review's several reports on aspects of pedagogy and [Usha Goswami's authoritative update for the Trust](#) on the implications for teaching of what we know from neuroscience and psychology about children's learning. But when the report was published it ignored not only all this but also the even vaster body of evidence from Britain's biggest and most comprehensive programme of research into pedagogy, the ESRC Teaching and Learning and Research Programme - TLRP - that Andrew Pollard directed and to which I had also pointed.

Which raises an interesting question about - to coin an old sociological distinction - expertise

that is *achieved* and validated by qualifications and peer judgement and expertise that is merely *ascribed* and therefore may or may not be merited.

No: making politically-vetted 'expert groups' the gatekeepers of good practice does not give teaching back to teachers. Teachers themselves, like other higher-order professionals, must have the autonomous command of the professional knowledge and evidence that their job requires. As the Cambridge Review said (*Children, their World, their Education*, p 496):

We need now to move to a position where research-grounded teaching repertoires and principles are introduced through initial training and refined and extended through experience and CPD, and teachers acquire as much command of the evidence and principles which underpin the repertoires as they do of the skills needed in their use. The test of this alternative view of professionalism is that teachers should be able to give a coherent justification for their practices citing (i) evidence, (ii) pedagogical principle and (iii) educational aim, rather than offering the unsafe defence of compliance with what others expect. Anything less is educationally unsound.

This, in fact, is in line with the government's professed intention to make teaching a self-improving profession and with the remit of the new College of Teaching, so although in 2009 some found it daunting it anticipated the current direction of travel. But if this seems to place too big a burden on individual teachers - why, you may ask, should each of us have to reinvent the wheel, and when do we have the time? - I stress, as the College of Teaching stresses, that professional development and expertise are about partnership, networking and knowledge exchange, within schools, between schools, between teachers and researchers. The dialogic teaching principles of collectivity, reciprocity, mutual support and cumulative learning apply in the staffroom no less than the classroom. That's the approach that the Trust's networks have adopted through their reading groups, the South West Research Schools Network and the Research Active Schools Roadshows held earlier this year in Leeds, Canterbury and Exeter.

- IV -

Conclusion

The penultimate chapter of the Cambridge Review final report classified New Labour's education policies by the responses that, according to our submission and soundings data, they provoked. At one extreme there was general approval, albeit with reservations, for Labour's childhood agenda - the Children's Plan, Sure Start, Narrowing the Gap and the expansion of early childhood care and education. Most people felt that here the government had been right to intervene and its intervention had made a positive difference. At the other end were national targets and testing, performance tables, the naming and shaming of schools, and Ofsted inspection as it then was, all of which provoked widespread concern. Policies like EYFS and the national curriculum were seen as sound in principle but unsatisfactory in practice, while the national literacy, numeracy and primary strategies produced mixed reactions but veered more towards hostility than support.

Romping through CPRT's last four priorities - aims, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment - I suggest that the situation now is even worse than it was then. Aims remain a yawning gap

between perfunctory rhetoric and impoverished political reality. The new national curriculum is considerably less enlightened than the one it replaced and indeed being no longer national it's hard to understand why it's there at all; national assessment remains contentious and is now even more confused and confusing than it was; and most government forays into pedagogy are naive, ill-founded and doctrinaire. In these matters, then, I submit - in the words of those distinguished figures who wrote to the press in 2008, that policy remains the problem rather than the solution.

And when we observe ministers' dogged insistence, in the face of the growing crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, which itself speaks volumes about the culture that policy has created, that ministers are right and everybody else is an enemy of promise, we might again recall Edmond Holmes's judgement in 1911 that 'over the higher levels of the educational world there hangs the heavy stupor of profound self-satisfaction.'

So it's clear that to our list of eight priorities we must add a ninth. The reform not of education, for successive governments have done more than enough of that during the past thirty years and all too often have made a mess of it, thereby utterly discrediting the word 'reform'. No, we need reform of the policy process itself.

As for the first four CPRT priorities, our task would be much easier if in striving to educate for sustainability and citizenship in accordance with the UN's 2015 Sustainable Development Goals we weren't undermined by government calls to 'cut the green crap' and expand the exploitation of carbon-belching fossil fuels; or if ministers didn't prefer populism to Parliamentary scrutiny and debate. Or if, in relation to equity, the Pupil Premium's inclusivity weren't contradicted by the divisiveness of academies and grammar schools. Or if schools' efforts to foster and model community engagement weren't frustrated by the erosion of local decision-making and accountability. Or if our efforts to nurture voice, dialogue and mutual respect weren't drowned by the rising tide of demagoguery, xenophobia, racism and misogyny that so easily tips over into violence.

And yet ... When I go into primary schools and see, notwithstanding all this, that children are pursuing a curriculum that is so much more imaginative, diverse and challenging than anything dreamed up by DfE, and that it really is the case that community is what, at best, primary schools are about, I am heartened that what works is also what matters, and that an enlightened primary education of the kind that the Cambridge Review and Trust have tried to promote over the past ten years really can be pursued, in spite of policy.

The world today is a frightening and dangerous place, even more so since Donald Trump's election, and here I would urge you to read [Adam Lefstein's blog from Wisconsin](#) and to follow the links to some frankly scary analyses. Of Michael Gove's rant about Marxists 'hell bent on destroying our schools', [I said at the event which launched the Trust in 2013](#), that 'deep and lasting improvements in this country's education system will be secured only when, in their discourse and their handling of evidence, policymakers exemplify the educated mind rather than demean it, and practise the best that has been thought and said rather than preach it.' But the new discourse, on both sides of the Atlantic, is one of Trumpish hatred as well as Govian derision, and its target is not just people who are different but education itself and everything it stands for.

But in saying that, we should also ask ourselves whether what we are seeing and hearing represents not just an attack on education but also education's failure. Either way, it really does feel, as H.G.Wells warned a century ago, that civilization is a race between education and catastrophe.

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Page 2 (Clash of the Titans), *School Leadership Today*, 1(3), 2009

Page 3 (Downing Street), *Times Educational Supplement*, 16 May 2008

Page 13 (Elephant in the curriculum), *Times Educational Supplement*, 27 February 2009