

## **PRIMARY EDUCATION: LESS REFORM, MORE VISION**

**Robin Alexander**

First, let's be thankful that primary education is no longer the Cinderella of public education, confined to the servants' hall of policy while secondary and higher education pirouette and hobnob in the ballroom. The belief that educating children aged 5-11 is a sideshow, and that teaching them is in every sense child's play, has at last begun to yield to a simple, demonstrable and indeed momentous truth: that humans learn more and faster during their pre-adolescent years than at any other stage of their lives, and that what and how they are taught during those years profoundly conditions their future prospects and hence their contribution to the society in which they grow up. Primary education is a matter of the utmost importance.

Politicians of all parties can take some credit for attending to this belated cultural shift. But they must also acknowledge that it wouldn't have happened without the sustained advocacy of those teachers, academics, inspectors and parents who have argued the case for primary education in the teeth of well over a century of patronising disdain from governments no less than from the educational establishment.

Such benighted attitudes, though, haven't entirely disappeared. The Janet and John tone of much that DfES sends out to primary schools attests to that. Do those who write this stuff *really* think that people who teach small children have small minds? Do officials or advisers whose ignorance of learning and teaching is matched only by their callow arrogance really believe that they have a right to tell primary teachers what to do and how to think? Would they try this on with any other professional group?

It would be a mistake, too, to conclude from the initiative deluge of the past few years that primary education is now, as they say, 'sorted'. The picture remains decidedly mixed. Not all the recent initiatives have been properly researched and conceived, let alone successful. The quality of provision is uneven. Some of the most fundamental needs of a modern system of primary education haven't even been accepted as such, let alone addressed.

Take the curriculum. In 1988 the Conservatives introduced a national curriculum, thus at last giving all primary pupils an entitlement to a reasonably broad foundation of knowledge, understanding and skill. That was an important gain. But they did so with such disregard for the logistics of the whole that it rapidly proved unmanageable. And properly concerned about standards though the Conservatives were, they also imposed the whole debateable apparatus of national tests and league tables in a way which turned many primary schools into Ofsted-fearing SAT crammers.

The Conservatives also initiated projects to tackle the undeniably serious problem of poor and patchy standards in literacy and numeracy. Again, a positive development with not wholly positive consequences. New Labour stepped in and repackaged these two projects as multi-million pound national literacy and numeracy strategies with targets, deadlines, support materials and a tightly-specified approach to planning and teaching which all schools were invited but in effect obliged to adopt.

To maximise the strategies' chances of success and minimise embarrassment to the minister who had rashly said he would resign if the 2002 targets were not met, the government then intervened, twice and damagingly, in the process of primary curriculum reform. First it instructed QCA, the body responsible for the scheduled 1997-8 National Curriculum review, not to ask, as any review worth its name should, whether the KS1/2 curriculum was right for today's children and tomorrow's society, but instead to tidy it up at the margins and change as little as possible so that teachers could

concentrate all their attention on the daily Literacy Hour and Numeracy Lesson. Second, for a hapless generation of children the 1988 principle of curriculum entitlement was sacrificed on the altar of 'standards' when in 1998 ministers decreed that primary schools need do no more than 'have regard to' the programmes of study for the seven non-core subjects. I was a member of the Board of QCA at the time: I remember these episodes, and our frustration at ministers' imperviousness to both reason and evidence, only too well.

What happened? In many primary schools, as Ofsted later revealed, the curriculum beyond the protected zone of literacy and numeracy was squeezed almost out of existence or was simply abandoned. Was this necessary? HMI and Ofsted reports from 1978, 1997 and 2002 showed that it was not, for the schools which did best in literacy and numeracy also most successfully sustained curriculum breadth and balance, while those that did worst failed to do so. It's obvious, really: you can't teach the basics in a vacuum. Curriculum breadth is about standards no less than entitlement. The evidence was there, but ministers ignored it. Not for the first time, or the last.

So we come up to date, with a Primary National Strategy which claims to usher in an era of breadth, balance, enrichment and creativity for children in our primary schools. Do not be deceived: by this grand gesture government is merely giving back in 2005 what it took away in 1998. If it is doing even that: with at least fifty per cent of the week mandatorily devoted to Literacy Hours and Numeracy Lessons, the problem of curriculum manageability stands exactly as it did in the early 1990s. Meanwhile, beyond the see-saw of hastily-cobbled policy the big questions about the proper goals and character of a primary curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century remain unasked and so unanswered.

What about the implications of the recent tendency towards political intervention in the way the curriculum is, in DfES and Postman Pat parlance, 'delivered'? Does that, too, give pause for thought? Well, it's self-evident that *how* schools teach is as important as *what* they teach and that curriculum acquires meaning for children only as classroom transactions. Yet even in the most centralised national education systems governments have been wary about translating that truism into prescription.

Thus, in 1992, though he had clear views on the matter, the then Secretary of State prefaced the so-called 'three wise men' report on primary education (of which I was co-author) by insisting that 'questions about how to teach are not for Government to determine'. From 1998 such restraint was cast aside and a regime of four-part literacy lessons, three-part numeracy lessons, interactive whole class teaching, plenaries and all the rest was imposed on every primary school in England.

Of course, had the impact of all this on standards been decisive and unequivocal, such unprecedented interference in a profession's day-to-day decisions and practices might just have been excusable. But the evidence offers no such comfort, though you wouldn't think so from the triumphant spin from the Downing Street Delivery Unit.

Thus, while overall the KS2 test results from 1997 onwards may seem encouraging, the long tail of underachievement which distinguishes England's scholastic performance from that of many other countries stubbornly persists. Then, far from endorsing the literacy and numeracy strategies the government's own evaluation (by the University of Toronto) reported that 'it is difficult to draw conclusions about the effect of the Strategies on pupil learning', while evidence from the many independent research studies has proved even less decisive. A major longitudinal study of primary numeracy standards from 1997-2002 concluded that the numeracy strategy 'had a positive but small effect on numeracy standards' but that 'there are many schools, children and areas of mathematics for whom the effect has been negligible or negative.'

Several other studies have tracked the impact of so-called 'interactive whole class teaching' in the light of the weighty psychological and neuroscientific evidence about the crucial role of high-quality talk on children's thinking and understanding in the early and primary years. They conclude that far from stretching young children's minds, the literacy and numeracy strategies have promoted

classroom interaction which all too often is low-level and cognitively undemanding. And an exhaustive round-up of no fewer than eleven separate national and international studies of primary pupils' achievement, including of course the KS2 tests, has judged that there are far too many data anomalies, statistically faulty procedures and test protocol changes for the government's claims about rising standards to be sustained with anything like the confidence which is needed if such results are reliably to inform or legitimate policy.

But instead of the debate which should have attended these disturbing findings all we heard from government was 'the best standards ever / the best teachers ever', endlessly intoned. This takes me from the primary curriculum and attendant questions about teaching, learning and standards to the way these are handled. It's depressingly axiomatic that governments tend to devise policies and then look for evidence to support them. The National Literacy Strategy is a striking example: someone was actually commissioned to find evidence to sustain this initiative *after* it had been signed, sealed, delivered and introduced to schools. 'Evidence-based policy' is the mantra: 'policy-based evidence' might be more apt.

But beware the policy boomerang. Thus if from 1997 to 2004 government had been more responsive to evidence about the relationship between curriculum breadth and standards - a relationship which to most people is plain common sense but to the government's standards boffins seems to have been counter-intuitive - then standards would actually have benefitted and the education of the primary class of '97 wouldn't have been so impoverished.

The same goes for the examples I have just given from research on the impact of the national literacy and numeracy strategies. To such evidence - rigorously collected and analysed, validated by peer scrutiny - the Department's response is instinctively dismissive and indeed defensive. In the Primary Strategy manifesto *Excellence and Enjoyment* the bending and selective use of evidence is nothing short of breathtaking. We - the country, the education system, our children - simply can't afford such small-minded shuffling in the corridors of power.

And what of the vision? Celebrating the current nostrums of personalisation and choice, DfES tells us that by age 14 pupils will be in a position to choose those subjects, pathways, careers and indeed lives which they find most relevant and worthwhile. Will they? To choose validly is to understand what one is choosing from. That requires a curriculum which is not only broad but in which every subject is given if not equal time then equal seriousness of professional commitment and skill. Choosing to drop a subject which lacks the teachers' insight and passion, the learner's engagement, or sufficient time to make an impact, is no choice at all. Choice at age 14 demands that education at Key Stages 1 and 2, not just at Key Stage 3, should provide a foundation of sufficient breadth, depth and consistency to make that choice meaningful. Alas, we are nowhere near that point, thanks in part to recent policy.

Choice as envisaged also requires that the curriculum up to age 14 is demonstrably right for our changing world, for choice needs purpose and vision as well as a foundation. That's problematic too, thanks again to the refusal of successive governments to countenance genuinely open and radical thinking about the goals and content of public primary education. Instead we have an updated version of the Victorian elementary school curriculum: the 3Rs, a nod in the direction of the arts and humanities but only when it doesn't impede the current policy wheeze, and lots more simply bolted on as it comes into vogue - ICT, citizenship, PSHE, MFL and so on.

Quite apart from the inevitable manageability crisis produced by the bolt-on approach, what precisely is the relationship between this arbitrary mix and the condition of a world for which, by some accounts, moral and environmental time is fast running out? Is it right that primary school 'standards' should still be defined exclusively in terms of reading, writing and number? Is it right that all other forms of human understanding, enquiry and endeavour should at the primary stage be relegated to mere 'enrichment', and then denied the time to make that label even half-way convincing? What, really, should 21<sup>st</sup> century educational 'basics' entail? Where, again, is the debate?

For there's the rub. In under two decades England has acquired one of the most centralised education systems going. True, much has been delegated to schools, but over that which government believes matters most - the curriculum, assessment, teaching methods, teacher training, quality assurance (the real core of education, in other words) - control from Sanctuary Buildings and Downing Street is now absolute. Many of us would like to see that control relaxed, in the interests of education, quality and – yes – standards.

But if a measure of central control on these matters is to be retained, then in pursuit of efficiency no less than democracy let it at least be leavened by proper engagement with the generous range of thinking and evidence which is available to illuminate the questions which need to be asked. And let it, too, abandon both the patronising retold-for-little-teachers tone of what DfES sends to primary schools and the macho gobbledegook of 'tough', 'new', 'hard-hitting', 'step change', 'delivery', 'driving up', 'leading edge', 'world class', 'one-stop shop', 'best practice' and so on with which policy is invariably spun.

Educational 'best practice', incidentally, is the outcome not of political compliance but of enquiry, evidence, a lively debate about values and - something only the teacher can achieve - the judicious matching of decision to circumstance. One size, as government repeatedly tells us, doesn't fit all. If we are to devise a primary curriculum which truly provides an educational foundation for choice, employment, active citizenship and the good society, and which equips children for the difficult and perhaps decisive decades ahead, we'll need a lot more humility, honesty and rigour at the top. That and a proper respect for language.

A shortened version of this article originally appeared in Wragg, E.C. (ed) (2005) *Letters to the Prime Minister: the future of education*, London, New Vision Group.