

# Still no pedagogy? Principle, pragmatism and compliance in primary education

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This article revisits Brian Simon's 1981 judgement that for deep-seated historical reasons English education lacks a coherent and principled pedagogy. Given that since 1997 the tide of educational centralisation has added teaching methods to those aspects of schooling which the UK government and/or its agencies seek to prescribe, it is appropriate to test the continuing validity of Simon's claim by reference to a major policy initiative in the pedagogical domain: the government's Primary Strategy, published in May 2003. This article defines pedagogy as both the act of teaching and its attendant discourse and postulates three domains of ideas, values and evidence by which both are necessarily framed. It then critically assesses the Primary Strategy's account of some of the components of pedagogy thus defined, notably learning, teaching, curriculum and culture, and the political assumptions which appear to have shaped them. On this basis, the Primary Strategy is found to be ambiguous and possibly dishonest, stylistically demeaning, conceptually weak, evidentially inadequate and culpably ignorant of recent educational history. The article is an extended version of the last in the 2002–2003 Research Lecture series at Cambridge University Faculty of Education, and preserves some of the style of its initial mode of presentation.

## Introduction

In 1981, Brian Simon published 'Why no pedagogy in England?' (Simon, 1981). On 20 May 2003 the UK government unveiled *Excellence and enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools* (DfES, 2003a).

'Why no pedagogy?' is an academic critique which commands attention by force of argument and evidence. *Excellence and enjoyment* relies on large print, homely language, images of smiling children, and populist appeals to teachers' common sense. Substantively, it seeks to secure professional goodwill, and possibly to disarm criticism, by relaxing the pressure of government prescription and targets. But beyond this surface appeal are important statements on learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment, which are arguably the core of that pedagogy whose absence Simon deplored. On these and other matters, *Excellence and enjoyment* designates itself not just a National Primary Strategy but also a 'blueprint for the future' (DfES, 2003a, para 8.14). It therefore provides an appropriate test of how far, a quarter of a century on, Simon's criticisms remain valid.

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Simon believed that pedagogy—the act and discourse of teaching—was in England neither coherent nor systematic, and that English educators had developed nothing comparable to the continental European ‘science of teaching’. Consequently, teachers here tended to conceptualise, plan and justify their teaching by combining pragmatism with ideology but not much else. This approach, he believed, was reinforced in their training, where trainees encountered an educational theory which they could not readily connect with what they saw and did in schools.

Simon traced this condition back, in part, to the Victorian public school view that education should be concerned with ‘character’ rather than the intellect, and partly to the heavily utilitarian mission of the elementary schools which existed at the opposite end of the Victorian educational spectrum—delivering the 3Rs, social conformity, and cheapness with or without efficiency—and from which today’s primary schools directly descend. Though Simon readily acknowledged the growing influence of psychology on educational thinking during the later twentieth century, he did not concede, even when he re-visited his ‘Why no pedagogy?’ article in the 1990s, that it or its cognate disciplines yet offered anything approaching the coherent pedagogy which he could point to elsewhere in Europe (Simon, 1994).

Of course, all education is grounded in social and indeed political values of some kind, and necessarily so; and Simon himself was nothing if not ideological in his sustained pursuit of causes such as non-selective secondary education. So his critique is less a rejection of ideology as such than a complaint that the enacting of social and political values through the specific and complex activity we call teaching cannot be undertaken on the basis of ideology alone, or even ideology leavened with pragmatism. Ideology may define the ends in teaching and hint at aspects of its conduct, but it cannot specify the precise means. Professional knowledge grounded in different kinds of evidence, together with principles which have been distilled from collective understanding and experience, are also called for, in order that—as Paul Hirst put it some years ago—teachers are able to make ‘rationally defensible professional judgements’ both while they teach and in their planning and evaluation (Hirst, 1979, p. 16).

But Simon’s was nevertheless an uncompromising assessment, and it was open to challenge even in 1981. Research on professional thinking published at about the same time as ‘Why no pedagogy?’ showed how the decision-making of individual teachers, especially those who had advanced beyond mere ‘coping’ into the reflective judgement of mature expertise, was much more principled, informed and subtle than the Simon characterisation seemed to allow (Berlak & Berlak, 1981; Schön, 1982; Elbaz, 1983; Calderhead, 1984; Clark & Peterson, 1986). But Simon was concerned less with the many private theories of teaching and learning than with the theory and discourse which were collective, generalisable and open to public scrutiny.

Simon’s claim provoked interest in all sorts of places and ‘Why no pedagogy?’ has become one of the more frequently cited academic titles of recent years. Interestingly it has gained this distinction mainly since government and its agencies started issuing pedagogical pronouncements at a level of prescriptive detail which was unthinkable when the first and even the second of Simon’s two articles on this theme

appeared. For the second ‘Why no pedagogy?’ article was published in 1993, just a year after an initiative in which I myself was involved, the so-called ‘three wise men’ enquiry on behalf of the UK government into the evidential basis of primary education at Key Stage 2. The document which came out of that initiative began by quoting the then Secretary of State, also named Clarke, who roundly insisted that ‘questions about how to teach are not for Government to determine’ (Alexander *et al.*, 1992, para 1).

In the 2003 Primary Strategy, Secretary of State Charles Clarke echoes Kenneth Clarke’s assurance: ‘A central message of this document is that teachers have the power to decide how they teach, and ... the Government supports that’ (DfES, 2003a, para 2.7). If some people were cynical about the intentions of Clarke K. in 1991—given that he launched the so-called ‘three wise men’ enquiry with a pre-emptive strike in the form of a letter to every primary school in England, telling their heads exactly what he expected the enquiry to conclude before a word of its report had been written—then the contrary evidence about the present government’s approach to pedagogy should make them even more wary about the protestations of Clarke C. in 2003; decisively so since the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in 1998 and 1999, which are nothing if not pedagogical prescriptions, but also in view of other evidence which this paper considers.

I have explained the title ‘Still no pedagogy?’ and trust that the significance of the subtitle’s themes of *principle*, *pragmatism* and *compliance* is also apparent. Since the launch of New Labour’s *Education, Education, Education* project in 1997, ministers and DfES have elevated the quintessentially pragmatic mantra ‘what works’ to the status of ultimate criterion for judging whether a practice is educationally sound; and the word ‘compliance’—not to mention sanctions such as ‘special measures’ or withdrawal of that accreditation by which compliance is enforced—feature prominently in the procedural vocabulary of DfES, Ofsted and the Teacher Training Agency (TTA). We shall need to establish whether the Primary Strategy’s new criteria for defining pedagogical quality still stop there or whether educational principle is now discernible.

### **Conceptualising pedagogy**

Part of the ‘Why no pedagogy?’ problem is the word ‘pedagogy’ itself. It is used more frequently than in 1981, but still does not enjoy widespread currency in England. The spectrum of available definitions ranges from the societally broad to the procedurally narrow. Basil Bernstein (1990) saw pedagogy as a ‘cultural relay’ and located it within his grand theory of social structure and reproduction. However, in England pedagogy is commonly used in a more restricted sense, to equate with the practice of teaching. Symptomatic of this narrower definition is the complaint by Anthea Millett, the previous head of TTA: ‘I am always struck by how difficult teachers find it to talk about *teaching* ... They prefer to talk about *learning*. By contrast, they can talk with great clarity about ... curriculum, assessment ... [and] classroom organisation ... almost anything except teaching itself’, an agenda which she said should cover ‘competence, excellence and failure in teaching methods’ (Millett, 1999).

To be fair, I think many of us who have been in this business for a while recognise the condition to which Anthea Millett was referring. There certainly was a time when it was common to hear people in primary education say things like ‘let’s talk about learning, not teaching’ or ‘child, not curriculum’, or ‘learner-centred not teacher-centred’, and this kind of oppositional pedagogical discourse has been tracked on both sides of the Atlantic (Entwistle, 1970; Alexander, 1984, 2000, 2002). It illustrates Simon’s concern about the dominance of ideology over principle, and of course sets up dichotomies which are unnecessary and unhelpful, not just when they become part of that ‘discourse of derision’ which passes for educational debate in some newspapers and among some politicians (Wallace, 1993, p. 324), but also within the teaching profession itself. However, Millett’s definition compounds rather than resolves the problem, for it simply weights the dichotomy at the other end and excludes matters such as learning, curriculum, assessment and classroom organisation, which are arguably essential not just to a comprehensible pedagogy but also, as it happens, to a meaningful discussion of Millett’s own preferred pedagogical agenda of ‘competence, excellence and failure in teaching methods’ (Millett, 1999). Tellingly in this era of centralisation and tight political control, her definition also excludes any sense of how pedagogy connects with culture, social structure and human agency, and thus acquires educational *meaning*. Such matters, the definition dangerously implies, are either unimportant or not for teachers to worry about.

In contrast to all this, the continental view of pedagogy, especially in northern, central and eastern Europe, brings together within the one concept the act of teaching and the body of knowledge, argument and evidence in which it is embedded and by which particular classroom practices are justified. Thus, at a typical Russian pedagogical university, pedagogy encompasses: ‘general culture’ comprising philosophy, ethics, history, economics, literature, art and politics; together with elements relating to children and their learning—psychology, physiology, child development, child law; and as a third group, aspects relating to the subjects to be taught, or *didaktika* and—linking all the elements—*metodika*, or ways of teaching them. The subject element, *didaktika* in Russia, *la didactique* in France, *die Didaktik* in Germany, subdivides variously into, for example, *allgemeine Didaktik* and *Fachdidaktik* (general and specialist or subject didactics) in Germany, *didactiques des disciplines* and *transpositions didactiques*, or *savoir savant* and *savoir enseigné* (scholarly and taught knowledge) in France (Moon, 1998; Alexander, 2000, pp. 540–563). These are equivalent to what Lee Shulman (1987) calls ‘content’ and ‘pedagogical content’ and TTA’s precursor body, CATE, called ‘subject’ and ‘subject applications’ (DES, 1989).

Of course, English etymology doesn’t help us here. Respectable though on the continent both ‘pedagogy’ and ‘didactics’ may be, here we can never completely escape the way ‘pedagogy’ suggests the pedantry of the pedagogue (and indeed through their shared Greek root the words are related) and ‘didactics’ elides with the chalk-and-talk intimations of ‘didactic’. Thus pedagogy and didactics, to many, suggest just one kind of teaching, traditional direct instruction.

The problem of terminology and discourse is not completely one-sided. What is frequently missing in continental debate about education is the rich discourse

surrounding the idea of *curriculum*, which in Britain and the United States is more fully developed. That, I submit, is partly because both of those countries inherited traditions of curriculum decentralisation which meant that curriculum matters were always bound to be contested, even more so when their governments sought to curtail that autonomy by introducing a national curriculum in England from 1988 and state curriculum standards in the USA from about the same time. In contrast, in many continental countries the scope and balance of the school curriculum had long been centrally determined and the remaining questions concerned the character of the subjects of which it was constituted and how they should be taught. There are of course oppositional curriculum discourses there too: that of Pierre Bourdieu in France is a prime example (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970).

The prominence of curriculum in English educational discourse has meant that we have tended to make pedagogy subsidiary to curriculum. My own preferred definition has it the other way round. Pedagogy is the act of teaching together with its attendant discourse. It is what one needs to know, and the skills one needs to command, in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted. Curriculum is just one of its domains, albeit a central one.

With this ground-clearing in mind, let us return briefly to Millett's belief that pedagogy should concern itself with competence, excellence and failure in teaching methods rather than learning, curriculum and assessment. The demarcation is precise and absolutist. It is replicated by DfES and its agencies. In tenor and purpose this preferred pedagogy deals with judgement rather than substance and justification; and with teaching rather than the wider sphere of morally purposeful activity, of which teaching is a part, which we call education. Teachers, in this characterisation, are technicians who implement the educational ideas and procedures of others, rather than professionals who think about these matters for themselves.

That is one kind of definition. Here is an alternative: if pedagogy is the discourse which informs and justifies the act of teaching and the learning to which that teaching is directed, then substance must *precede* judgement, or at the very least the two should go hand in hand. Otherwise it is hard to know by what criteria judgements of competence, success and failure in teaching can be devised and defended.

In the alternative pedagogy, the teacher engages, as a matter of necessity, with a number of distinct but related domains of ideas and values. Firstly, and most immediately, these are concerned with:

- *children*: their characteristics, development and upbringing;
- *learning*: how it can best be motivated, achieved, identified, assessed and built upon;
- *teaching*: its planning, execution and evaluation; and
- *curriculum*: the various ways of knowing, understanding, doing, creating, investigating and making sense which it is desirable for children to encounter, and how these are most appropriately translated and structured for teaching.

With, that is to say, what is to be taught, to whom, and how. But teaching takes place in a context and responds to requirements and expectations. At its most immediate this context, and its requirements and expectations, comprise:

- *school*, as a formal institution, a microculture and a conveyor of pedagogical messages over and above those of the classroom;
- *policy*, national and local, which prescribes or proscribes, enables or inhibits what is taught and how.

There's a third group, for schools and policies in turn have their larger contexts, and both they and teaching are informed by purposes and values. It may be argued—it is certainly assumed—that in a centralised system of public schooling government policy is purpose enough. But even the pedagogy of compliance is not immune from:

- *culture*: the web of values, ideas, institutions and processes which inform, shape and explain a society's views of education, teaching and learning, and which throw up a complex burden of choices and dilemmas for those whose job it is to translate these into a practical pedagogy;
- *self*: what it is to be a person, an individual relating to others and to the wider society, and how through education and other early experiences selfhood is acquired;
- *history*: the indispensable tool for making sense of both education's present state and its future possibilities and potential.

Where the first four domains *enable* teaching and the next two *formalise* and *legitimate* it, the last three *locate* it—and children themselves—in time, place and the social world, and anchor it firmly to the questions of human identity and social purpose without which teaching makes little sense. They mark the transition from teaching to education.

Such a list is a start, but obviously not the whole story. So, for example, if we take the domain *teaching* from the first group, it can be conceptually elaborated in several different ways. In my own comparative analysis of international classroom data, for which I needed a framework which was comprehensive yet culturally-neutral, I started with the irreducible proposition that 'teaching, in any setting, is the act of using method x to enable pupils to learn y'. From this I constructed a generic model comprising the immediate context or *frame* within the act of teaching is set, the *act* itself, and its *form*, and then a set of elements within each such category. The core acts of teaching (*task*, *activity*, *interaction* and *assessment*) are framed by *space*, *pupil organisation*, *time* and *curriculum*, and by *routines*, *rules* and *rituals*. They are given form, and are bounded temporally and conceptually, by the *lesson* or teaching session (Alexander, 2000, pp. 323–325).

A framework of this kind can serve both descriptive and prescriptive purposes, and its elements can in turn be elaborated further, as was necessary both within the comparative project in question (Alexander, 2000, pp. 297–528) and in a linked series of applied projects on classroom talk which the comparative research has prompted since then, with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies, and the local authorities of North Yorkshire and Barking and Dagenham. In the latter, the action nexus of *task*, *activity*, *assessment* and (especially) *interaction* are transformed into a set of principles and indicators of 'dialogic teaching' by way of research on the relationship between

spoken language, cognition and learning, and with reference to explicit social values about the kinds of interactive relationship which are implied by the concept of citizenship. This transformation in turn affects the five framing elements and the overall form of lessons. (Alexander, 2003a, 2003b, 2004).

This example underscores a second imperative. It is not enough to delineate the themes of pedagogical discourse: we must also recognise how they inform each other. In the example here, the particular approach signalled by the term ‘dialogic teaching’ seeks simultaneously to attend to a viable concept of teaching, to evidence about the nature and advancement of human learning, and to the conditions for education in a democracy, in which the values of individualism, community and collectivism stand in a complex and sometimes tense contrapuntal relationship (Alexander, 2001).

No less important, if an intelligent pedagogy dictates attention to domains of ideas and values such as these, and to ways of organising and relating them, it also requires that we are aware that such ideas can be, and are, engaged with in different ways. Simon, as we have seen, commends the continental view of a *science* of teaching grounded in explicit principles relating to what children have in common. Eisner prefers the idea of teaching as an *art* in the sense that it is partly improvisatory, is ‘influenced by qualities and contingencies that are unpredicted ... [and] the ends it achieves are often created in process’ (Eisner, 1979, p. 153). Argyris and Schön (1974, pp. 3–12) show how in understanding professional practice it is essential to distinguish the ‘espoused theory ... to which one gives allegiance’ (as in the science of teaching) from the ‘theory-in-use’ which actually, regardless of what one claims to others, informs one’s practice. Taking this further, Sally Brown and Donald McIntyre reveal how the work of experienced teachers is, as a matter of day-to-day reality, grounded to a considerable extent in a *craft* knowledge of ideas, routines and conditions, which they map empirically in respect of pupils, time, content, the material environment and teachers themselves (Brown & McIntyre, 1993). Combining paradigms, Nate Gage (1978) and Maurice Galton commend the *science of the art* of teaching in which scientific pedagogic principles are applied ‘in a flexible manner, according to the characteristics of a particular group of pupils, taking into account the context in which they are working’ (Galton *et al.*, 1999, p. 184).

Clearly, pedagogy is a somewhat more complex enterprise than may be recognised by those who reduce effective teaching to ‘what works’, or ‘best practice’ lessons downloaded from government websites.

### **The 2003 Primary Strategy**

In the light of all this, what can we say about the pedagogy of the Government’s 2003 Primary Strategy? Time or space do not allow me to comment comprehensively, so I’d like to pick out three aspects—learning, teaching and curriculum—which relate especially to what I have identified as the necessary core of pedagogical discourse, and in as far as it expatiates on these themes the Primary Strategy qualifies as a pedagogical statement. Before that, however, we need to consider, in

light of the paragraphs above, the tone, character and purposes of the document as a whole.

### *Tone and intention*

First there's the soft sell of that title: *Excellence and enjoyment*. The default vocabulary for education policy since 1997 highlights 'standards', 'driving up standards', 'underperforming', 'failing', 'intervention', 'hard-hitting', 'the challenge ahead', 'step change', 'tough', 'new', 'tough new', 'world class', 'best practice', 'delivery' and so on (DfEE, 2001). 'Enjoyment' sits unconvincingly with the more familiar ministerial machismo, and in the wake of the unrelenting tide of initiatives, targets and public criticism of schools' performance since 1997, a certain amount of professional scepticism towards the geniality or even hedonism of 'enjoyment' might be understandable.

On the question of the character of the new discourse, apart from the fact that it is frequently ungrammatical and offers bizarre constructions like 'Every LEA will have a Primary Strategy Manager to provide a one-stop shop support service for primary schools' (DfES, 2003a, p. 6) and 'One common complaint about ... extra funding was that a lot of it came in ring-fenced pots' (DfES, 2003a, para 8.8), the more serious point is that it privileges some kinds of discourse—specifically the pragmatic and political—at the expense of others. Value-positions are pervasive throughout, but few are argued or justified. The report is positively messianic in its confident prefacing of problematic assertions by 'we believe', 'we want', 'we need', and 'we will'. 'What works' and 'best practice' are of, by the same token, presented as givens. And though the report defines an 'excellent primary school leader' as someone who is 'systematic and rigorous in using evidence to inform the development of teaching' (DfES, 2003a, para 6.2), very little evidence is actually cited in the report itself. Instead, the reiterated appeal to experience and common-sense—'Every teacher knows' (for example, DfES, 2003a, para 4.1)—and the wilful amnesia in respect of the accumulated findings of published research on learning and teaching, not to mention the ignoring of findings from the government's own inspections, make it clear that the Strategy is about something other than argument and justification.

So what *is* it about? The Strategy's intentions are more opaque and contradictory than at first sight they seem, especially when the document is set alongside other statements of current education policy. Central to the Strategy's message is the avowed commitment to increasing the autonomy of schools and teachers:

Teachers have the freedom to decide how to teach—the programmes of study state *what* is to be taught but not *how* it is to be taught ... the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, though they are supported strongly, are not statutory ... Ofsted will recognise and welcome good practice ... teachers and schools can decide which aspects of a subject pupils will study in depth ... how long to spend on each subject ... QCA guidance suggesting how much time should be allocated to each subject is not statutory ... Our aim is to encourage all schools to ... take control of their curriculum, and to be innovative. (DfES, 2003a, paras 2.4 and 2.8)

And so on. Legally, the claims about what is and is not statutory are correct, but how many teachers will take this as an invitation to reduce the time spent on literacy and numeracy in order to free time for the rest of the curriculum, knowing as they do how much hangs on the next round of literacy and numeracy targets?

In any event, the messages on this matter are decidedly mixed. The Strategy's DfES press release emphasises that 'testing, targets and performance tables are here to stay' (Downing Street, 2003). The 'key aim' agreed by the Ministerial Primary Education Programme Board which oversaw the development of the Strategy was 'to produce a common approach to teaching and learning across the curriculum ... identifying the key teaching and learning approaches that the [Literacy and Numeracy] strategies have promoted and provide materials and training to help teachers transfer them more widely' (DfES, 2002a, p. 1). Against the ostensible offer of autonomy, we have the continuing pressure of testing, targets and performance tables and the creeping hegemonisation of the curriculum by the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, with three-part lessons, interactive whole class teaching and plenaries soon to become a template for the teaching of everything.

The summation of the Strategy's doublespeak on professional autonomy comes in Chapter 8, 'Realising the vision'. Here, quite apart from the hubris of that word 'vision', there is the problem of its juxtaposition with words redolent of a rather different purpose (my italics below):

We have set out our *vision*, but we want it to be a shared *vision* ... We intend to spread the *dialogue* more widely ... This document is just the starting point for that vital *dialogue* which will shape the future of primary education ... This document begins to offer a *blueprint* for the future ... (DfES, 2003a, paras 8.14–8.17)

Vision? Dialogue? Blueprint? Elsewhere in the report there is less ambiguous talk of 'the project' (DfES, 2003a, para 8.17). How can it be all of these?

### *Political culture and the rewriting of educational history*

Behind this ambiguity of intent—a desire to be seen to be offering freedom while in reality maintaining control—lies a by no means ambiguous view of recent education history and the condition of the teaching profession. Its exponents and guardians are not so much the Primary Education Programme Board which oversaw the writing of the Primary Strategy, or even the Secretary of State, but the Downing Street Policy Unit.

Some months ago I found myself sharing a platform with Michael Barber, formerly director of the DfES Standards and Effectiveness Unit and now head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. The occasion was a conference in Moscow attended by Russian Ministry of Education officials and academics at which I spoke about my international comparative research on pedagogy and primary education, in which Russia features prominently, and Michael Barber gave a glowing account of New Labour's education project/vision/blueprint. He added:

Until the mid-1980s what happened in schools and classrooms was left almost entirely to teachers to decide ... Almost all teachers had goodwill and many sought to develop

themselves professionally, but, through no fault of their own, the profession itself was uninformed ... Under Thatcher, the system moved from *uninformed professional judgement* to *uninformed prescription*. (Barber, 2001, pp. 13–14, his italics)

Note how heavily professional ignorance features in this historical pathology, and how it is presented as an inevitable concomitant of professional autonomy. To be free to decide how to teach is to be uninformed. If you were teaching before 1988, you might care to ponder what those sweeping phrases ‘the profession itself was uninformed ... uninformed professional judgement’ say about your competence. Members of the Thatcher/Major governments of 1988–1997 might even wish to contest the charge of ‘uninformed prescription’; certainly their advisers on QCA’s precursor bodies (NCC, SEAC and SCAA) and Ofsted’s HMI predecessors could do so. It sets things up nicely, of course, for the transformation achieved by New Labour and the Utopia which is now in sight:

The 1997–2001 Blair government inherited a system of *uninformed prescription* and replaced it with one of *informed prescription* ... The White Paper signals the next shift: from *informed prescription* to *informed professional judgement* ... The era of informed professional judgement is only just beginning ... The era of informed professional judgement could be the most successful so far in our educational history ... It could be the era in which our education system becomes not just good but great. (Barber, 2001, pp. 13–14. The final sentence was added to the 2002/2003 versions of Barber’s paper)

Note the abrupt tonal gear-change, half way through this extract, from narrative to incipient political rant. In similar vein, Barber’s Downing Street colleague Andrew Adonis, the Prime Minister’s principal Education Adviser, in a paper to the international Policy Network (studying government material prepared for international rather than home consumption can be very illuminating) writes of ‘the dire situation in England’ as New Labour found it in 1997, and with particular reference to places like Cambridge’s Faculty of Education:

For most teachers, professional development has traditionally been haphazard, off-site, barely relevant, poorly provided, and a chore at best. (Adonis, 2001, p. 14)

I don’t need to labour the point: the Barber-Adonis line is as distorted and partisan an account of recent educational history as one is likely to find, yet *realpolitik* dictates that it’s the one that counts. Quite apart from its disparaging view of the competence of teachers and the quality of teacher training before 1997, its sweeping dismissal of that period as one of ‘uninformed professional judgement’ or at best ‘uninformed prescription’ simply ignores the vast body of information of which many in the education world were acutely aware: HMI reports on individual schools; HMI national surveys on primary and secondary education; Central Advisory Council and other major independent reports on primary, secondary, further, higher and teacher education, and on English, mathematics, the arts and special needs (Plowden, Newsom, Crowther, Robbins, James, CNA, UCET, Bullock, Cockcroft, Gulbenkian, Warnock); HMI and DfES/DfE/DfEE documents on the curriculum; local evidence on standards of attainment from LEA annual tests administered in all primary schools; the results of public examinations in secondary schools; further

national evidence on pupil attainment in English, maths and science at the ages of 7, 11 and 15 from the sampled assessment programmes of the Assessment and Performance Unit begun in 1975; reports from Commons Select Committees, the accumulated body of curriculum guidance and materials from the Schools Council and its successors the SCDC, NCC, SEAC and SCAA; generous in-service provision in LEAs, colleges and universities; and of course research.

Even on the more limited matter of information about *standards* in primary education with which Barber and Adonis are particularly concerned, the 1991–1992 so-called ‘three wise men’ enquiry on primary education was able to interrogate six major domains of published data dealing with standards, most of them annual and cumulative: APU tests, LEA tests, NFER tests and surveys, HMI inspections, National Curriculum assessment, and the programme of IEA international achievement studies of which the PIRLS report on reading literacy marks just the latest example (Alexander *et al.*, 1992, paras 24–50; IEA/ISC, 2003). The ‘three wise men’ report as a whole cited nearly 100 separate sources of published evidence as well as the extensive pre-Ofsted HMI database and research material in the pipeline (Alexander *et al.*, paras 55–62). Uninformed professional judgement? There was, then as now, a positive glut of information.

This being so, it is clear that in the post-2001 era of ‘informed professional judgement’ to be ‘informed’ is to know and acquiesce in what is provided, expected and/or required by government and its agencies—DfES, NLNS, OFSTED, QCA, TTA—no less and, especially, no more. You may be steeped in educational research and/or the accumulated wisdom of 40 years in the classroom, but unless you defer to all this official material your professional judgements will be ‘uninformed’. As Adonis says in his Policy Network paper, writing of university faculties and departments of education: ‘We have *imposed* a new national curriculum for initial teacher training, setting out the standards and content of training courses, which all providers *must* follow’ (Adonis, 2001, p. 14, my italics, his verbs). Not much room for alternative professional judgement there; and little evidence of government relaxing the iron grip of educational centralisation. If you teach, or train teachers, on the basis of other kinds of knowledge you are uninformed. For ‘informed professional judgement’, then, read ‘political compliance’.

The Primary Strategy holds to this view. It shows little awareness of evidence from outside the charmed circle of government and its agencies; and no awareness of what even previous governments and government agencies did before 1997, the year in which, apparently, history and real education began. Political analysts might suggest that rewriting history has become a habitual device of government, especially within highly adversarial systems such as ours, and we should therefore not be surprised at its use in a high-stakes policy field like education (Alexander, 1998a). New Labour can also claim, rightly, that their Conservative predecessors were no slouches when it came to mythologising the past, scapegoating professionals and demonising doubters (Alexander, 1997a, pp. 183–287; Galton *et al.*, 1999, pp. 10–38); and Berliner and Biddle (1995) have documented, tellingly and in detail, the same process at work in the United States from the Reagan era onward. Interestingly, the terms commentators use to connote this process—‘myth’, ‘mythologise’, and now

‘spin’—somehow manage to render it benign and even acceptable. Few are prepared to call claims like those cited above what they really are: lies.

The failure of *Excellence in schools* in this regard is one of omission. It does not so much rewrite history as ignore it. But in so doing, it tacitly performs its own act of compliance to the Downing Street line: the same line, in fact, that produced the prime ministerial assault on comprehensive education in September 2000 whose mendacity was so scathingly exposed in one of Simon’s last articles (Simon, 2000).

## Learning

The striking feature of the Strategy’s account of learning is its insistence on *individualisation*:

Learning must be focused on individual pupils’ needs and abilities ... Every teacher knows that truly effective learning focuses on individual children ... The new Primary Strategy will actively support more tailoring of teaching to individuals ... Workforce reform will ... be critical to helping teachers focus on individual children’s needs ... Increasing the focus on individual children will serve every child. (DfES, 2003a, p. 39 and paras 4.1–4.5)

In fact, the chapter is not about learning at all, but *social inclusion*, which in itself is a proper and urgent concern, and having trumpeted the importance of individualisation the report then goes on to talk about the needs of specific *groups*: children with special needs; children from minority ethnic backgrounds; the gifted and talented—for which, apparently, in that inimitable Ofsted prose, provision is ‘now good or better in almost half of primary schools and satisfactory or better in some 90% of primary schools’ (DfES, 2003a, para 4.8).

Interestingly, though, gender is not included in this list, even though David Hopkins, DfES Standards Director, blamed boys for the nation’s failure to meet the 80% literacy target in the 2002 KS2 tests, and Schools Minister David Miliband said that schools and society should tackle the ‘laddish culture’ in order to motivate boys to do well in school (DfES, 2002b).

Yet that heavy emphasis on individualisation, and the promise of support for individualised teaching, throws up problematic messages. That children are individuals is self-evident, but how far can this truism be applied in the context of other than one-to-one and small group teaching? The Strategy’s authors chose to ignore the classroom research of the 1980s, including major projects from Leicester, London, Exeter and Leeds universities, which showed the limits to fully individualised teaching in classes of 20, 25 and 30 or more children (Galton & Simon, 1980; Bennett *et al.*, 1984; Mortimore *et al.*, 1988; Alexander, 1997a). They ignored the subsequent international research, including that reviewed for Ofsted by Reynolds and Farrell (1996), which drew attention to the way teaching in many continental and Asian countries respects individuality yet structures learning tasks on the basis of what children have in common and tries as far as possible to bring all the children in a class along together, thus reducing the wide range of attainment and the long attainment ‘tail’ which has for long been such a prominent feature of English

primary classrooms. Most surprisingly, they ignored one of the central contentions of the government's own flagship Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, that treating learning as a *collective* process, notably through interactive whole class teaching, actually benefits individuals.

More fundamentally, the Strategy's account of learning—such as it is, for the document specifies *conditions* for learning but not its character or process—bypasses the shift in learning theory from what Bruner (1996) calls an 'intrapsychic' view which conceives of the child as a 'lone scientist' to a psycho-cultural account which emphasises the necessarily social and interactive character of early learning, and argues the case for intersubjectivity as essential to cultural socialisation. And, hardly surprisingly, there's no mention either of the implications for school learning of recent advances in neuroscience. Had any of this been within the strategists' consciousness they would not have confined their consideration of the importance of talk in learning to one brief and passing mention of National Curriculum English Attainment Target 1, speaking and listening (DfES, 2003a, p. 28).

The section of the report which purportedly deals with learning is also notable for the way it removes any remaining ambiguities about whether the Strategy offers freedom or constraint: 'Learning *must* be focused on individual pupils' needs and abilities.' (DfES, 2003a, p. 39). Further:

We have developed a model of intervention for children experiencing difficulties in literacy or mathematics, based on three waves:

Wave One: the effective inclusion of all pupils in a high quality, daily literacy hour and mathematics lesson (Quality First Teaching). Wave Two: small group, low-cost intervention—for example, booster classes, springboard programmes, or other programmes linked to the National Strategies. Wave Three: specific targeted intervention for pupils identified as requiring special educational needs support. (DfES, 2003a, para 4.6)

So prescription it is then, after all: obligatory individualisation, a 'three wave' model of intervention, and—though they are supposed to be non-statutory—the National Literacy Hour and Numeracy Lesson for every child in the land. Almost submerged in the mire of contradiction and confusion here, or overwhelmed by the tsunami, is one of the biggest contradictions of all: if the 'model of intervention' is for just one group of children—those experiencing learning difficulties—why is it imposed upon all the others?

Insidiously, the report seeks to legitimate or disguise its impoverished reasoning on learning by peppering this section with populist phrases like 'Every teacher knows that truly effective learning and teaching focuses [*sic*] on individual children' and 'Most schools already use assessment for learning.' (DfES, 2003a, paras 4.1, 4.2). Do they really? Not according to the Kings' assessment for learning research (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

### *Teaching*

Though the Primary Strategy's view of learning unnervingly contradicts the Literacy

and Numeracy Strategies while yet endorsing them, in the chapter on *teaching* the two Strategies are more securely in the saddle:

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies have, according to all those who have evaluated them, been strikingly successful at improving the quality of teaching and raising standards in primary schools. But we need to embed the lessons of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies more deeply... In the best schools, teachers are using their understanding of the principles behind the literacy and numeracy strategies... We want a new approach that will help more schools and teachers to... apply the principles of good learning and teaching across the whole curriculum. (DfES, 2003a, paras 3.2–3.5)

So at last we come to some *principles*. But would Simon be happy with those which are listed in the report's box headed 'The principles of learning and teaching'? It instructs us that:

Good learning and teaching should

- *Ensure that every child succeeds*: provide an inclusive education within a culture of high expectations.
- *Build on what learners already know*: structure and pace teaching so that students know what is to be learnt, how and why.
- *Make learning vivid and real*: develop understanding through enquiry, creativity, e-learning and group problem-solving.
- *Make learning an enjoyable experience*: stimulate learning through matching teaching techniques and strategies to a range of learning styles.
- *Enrich the learning experience*: build learning skills across the curriculum.
- *Promote assessment for learning*: make children partners in their learning. (DfES, 2003a, p. 29)

Does this mean anything? Precious little, I submit. We would do better to go back to Comenius in 1657, whose ideas on pedagogical structure and pace are far in advance of those in the Primary Strategy (Keatinge, 1896). If that seems obscurantist we could certainly with profit revisit more recent classic pedagogic specifications such as Lawrence Stenhouse's curricular 'principles of procedure' or Jerome Bruner's 'theory of instruction' (Stenhouse, 1975; Bruner, 1966). In contrast, most of the items above are aspirations obvious to the point of banality: of course we want every child to succeed, to build on what learners know, to make learning vivid, real and enjoyable. How many teachers, though, will read this list, experience a Eureka flash of recognition and thank DfES for a profound and novel insight of lasting practical value? The only item here which has a recognisable empirical basis is the final one, which hints at the important ideas about assessment for learning and its implications for classroom talk which have come from Paul Black and his colleagues in the London King's group (Black & Wiliam, 1999; Black *et al.*, 2002). Values are central to pedagogy but, as I argued earlier, on their own they cannot define its operational procedures.

Apart from being of dubious provenance, the Strategy's 'principles' also contain more than their fair share of non-sequiturs. What is the connection between building on what learners know, structuring and pacing teaching, and ensuring that students know what is to be learned; or between enjoyment and matching teaching techniques to learning styles? Apart from that, what *is* a 'learning style', and what indeed

is a 'learning skill'? Better to define them, for 'learning skills' in particular are liberally scattered across the entire document.

It could be argued that the virtue of so bland a specification is that it makes positive and encouraging noises about the general spirit of pedagogy while leaving teachers free to devise their own more meaningful principles of pedagogic procedure. But if principles have so little purchase on practice, what, really, is their point?

The more contentious the Strategy's claims, the more authoritatively they are expressed. The Strategy's prescription for the future character of primary teaching, quoted above, is predicated on the assertion that (my italics) 'The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies have, *according to all who have evaluated them*, been strikingly successful at improving the quality of teaching and raising standards in primary schools' (DfES, 2003a, para 3.2). That claim, I am afraid, is also open to question. If the OISE (University of Toronto) evaluation commissioned by DfES delivers qualified approval for the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies—'There is considerable evidence ... that teaching has improved substantially since the Strategies were first introduced' (Earl *et al.*, 2003, p. 3)—it also warns that 'the intended changes in teaching and learning have not yet been fully realised' (p. 8) and, more critical still for those who would use the Strategies as the template for teaching across the entire primary curriculum, it admits that 'it is difficult to draw conclusions about the effect of the Strategies on pupil learning' (p. 3).

Perhaps, in claiming a ringing research endorsement for the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies DfES wasn't referring to the official NLNS evaluation at all, but to other studies, though it did say 'according to *all* who have evaluated' the strategies, not 'some'. But I'm afraid that this 'all' looks more and more shaky. Quite apart from the ambivalence of the OISE evaluation itself and the methodological questions about that evaluation which Harvey Goldstein (2000) has raised, Margaret Brown's five-year longitudinal study of numeracy teaching and attainment has concluded pretty devastatingly that the Numeracy Strategy 'has had at most a small effect on attainment in most areas of numeracy' (Brown *et al.*, 2003a). A similar point is made by Sig Prais, whose no less devastating (though contested) critique of the methodology of the PISA survey of the educational attainment of 15 year olds shows how that study produced upward bias in English students' mathematical test scores to the extent of compromising their high ranking relative to other countries and, hence, government claims that this ranking shows the beneficial effects of government policy (Prais, 2003; Adams, 2003).

Other studies—by Janet Moyles, Linda Hargreaves, Frank Hardman, David Skidmore and indeed myself—have looked closely at the pupil-teacher interaction on which a large part of the success of the strategies is intended and claimed to rest, and have found that while teaching methods, patterns of classroom organisation and the handling of time, space and resources have changed considerably in literacy and numeracy lessons, practice below the structural surface has changed rather less. Pupil-teacher interaction is still dominated by closed questions, brief answers which teachers do not build upon, phatic praise rather than diagnostic feedback, and an emphasis on recalling information rather than on speculating and problem-solving.

(Alexander, 2000, pp. 474–490; English *et al.*, 2002; Skidmore, 2002; Hardman *et al.*, 2003; Moyles *et al.*, 2003).

These findings confirm those from earlier research, including my own CICADA study, which compared pupil–teacher discourse before and after the arrival of the National Curriculum, and Maurice Galton’s ORACLE follow-up project (Alexander *et al.*, 1996; Galton *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy directors themselves have acknowledged this: the absence of change at those deeper levels of classroom discourse which can impact so powerfully on children’s learning is the main reason why they and QCA have commissioned materials from myself and colleagues in Barking and Dagenham LEA to support ‘teaching through dialogue’ (QCA/DfES, 2003a). It is why QCA has at last turned its attention to that neglected attainment target En1, Speaking and Listening (QCA, 2003; QCA/DfES, 2003b). And it is why LEAs such as Barking and Dagenham and North Yorkshire have launched major programmes to transform classroom talk and hence, they hope, lift tested literacy standards off the ‘plateau’ on which, in 2001, they stalled (Alexander, 2003b). No mention of any of this, of course, in the Primary Strategy: there, speaking and listening rate just one brief mention, as I have noted.

In fact, against the Strategy’s confident claim that every evaluation of NLNS has endorsed its success in transforming teaching and raising standards, it’s hard to find even *one* study that actually provides such an endorsement. Perhaps the Primary Strategy’s authors had in mind the annual Ofsted Literacy and Numeracy Strategy evaluations. These are certainly very positive, though they are not so much evaluations as checks on compliance with the teaching changes—whole class teaching, three-part lessons, plenaries, the use of big books, writing frames and approved assessment materials, and so on—which the strategies require. (Ofsted, 2002a, 2002b). Consider, for example, Ofsted’s finger-wagging ‘not all teachers are using the strategy’s assessment materials ... some do not know about them’ (Ofsted, 2002b, para 93). However, such renegades apart, schools are indeed toeing the line:

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were centrally conceived and directed, and our data suggest that schools have generally been inclined to acquiesce to, and approve of, such direction. Such compliance bodes well for implementing the Strategies. (Earl *et al.*, 2001, p. xii)

But compliance with something believed to be admirable does not guarantee that it is. And a culture of compliance reinforces policies and practices, good or bad, but cannot *test* them. As if to underline this fatal flaw, the Ofsted evaluation of the first four years of the Literacy Strategy heads its list of ‘improvements’ produced by the NLS with ‘widespread use of the NLS framework for teaching.’ (Ofsted, 2002a, para 149). Compliance is ultimately tautologous.

In similar vein, though it is claimed that the Literacy Strategy is firmly based on national and international evidence, DfES took the extraordinary step, *after* the Strategy had been implemented, of commissioning an academic, Roger Beard of Leeds University, to discover what that evidence might be (Beard, 1998).

### *Curriculum*

And so to the Strategy's pronouncements on the primary curriculum. Twenty years ago I suggested that one of the abiding legacies of the elementary education system was that we had not one primary curriculum but two, the 'basics' and the rest. That is to say, a high status, protected and heavily assessed 3Rs 'Curriculum I' which was justified by reference to utilitarian values, and a low priority, unassessed, vulnerable and even dispensable 'Curriculum II' of the arts and humanities which was justified by high-sounding but ultimately empty notions of a 'rounded' or 'balanced' education (Alexander, 1984). The National Curriculum simply translated the Curriculum I/II divide into the vocabulary and attendant values of 'core' and 'other foundation' subjects, and over the ensuing years successive governments ensured that the whole became more and more difficult to handle by avoiding the radical re-assessment of the Victorian formula of 'basics plus trimmings' which a twenty-first century curriculum required and simply bolting on more and more—science, ICT, design and technology, citizenship, PSHE, a modern foreign language—all the time insisting that the time for Curriculum I—at least 50 % of the week—was sacrosanct so the ever-expanding range of other subjects were forced to compete, and settle, for less and less.

The depressing logic of this situation is now all too clear. At the start of the last National Curriculum review, in 1997, I argued that we had a chance to tackle this problem and subject the primary curriculum to a principled review based on fundamental questions about the kind of world we now inhabit, the much-changed character of this country's economic and social life, and the consequent needs and rights of children, now and as adults (Alexander, 1997b). Instead, the Government insisted that there should be minimal change to the curriculum because nothing must deflect teachers' attention from the 2002 literacy and numeracy targets. In January 1998, the Government underlined that message by removing primary schools' obligation to teach the specified content of the non-core subjects. Since then, as Ofsted reports and indeed the OISE NLNS evaluation have shown, many schools have all but given up on the original 1988 National Curriculum notion of children's absolute entitlement to a genuinely broad curriculum in which the arts and humanities are treated with no less seriousness—even if with rather less time—than literacy and numeracy (Ofsted, 2002a, 2002c, 2003a; Earl *et al.*, 2003).

The Primary Strategy does nothing to alleviate the problem. True, it talks of 'children's entitlement to a rich, broad and balanced set of learning experiences' (DfES 2003a, para 3.1), but by ring-fencing the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies it ensures that the listed Curriculum II initiatives—creativity, the languages strategy, the PE and sport strategy, music—though separately admirable, will in conjunction have a hard time of it. Especially so, since the Primary Strategy proposes at one and the same time to 'widen the scope and range of the curriculum', and to 'reduce the curriculum to make it more manageable' (DfES, 2002a, pp. 1–3). From so elementary a logistical contradiction there can be scant grounds for hope.

The problem manifests itself in logistical terms certainly, but fundamentally it's one of *values*. In a Primary Strategy called 'Excellence and enjoyment' it is made

very clear that the 3Rs provide the excellence and the rest delivers the enjoyment: Curriculum I and II yet again. Elsewhere ‘standards’ are opposed to ‘enrichment’, even to curriculum itself.

The division is firmly institutionalised, too. In 1997, as a founding Board member of QCA, I asked the then Minister of State Estelle Morris why the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were run by the Department and the rest of the curriculum by QCA, when the new body had been set up expressly to bring coherence to the hitherto fragmented worlds of curriculum, assessment and qualifications. ‘Ah but Minister’ one of her aides smoothly interjected, ‘literacy and numeracy aren’t curriculum, they’re *standards*, and standards are the Department’s responsibility, not QCA’s.’ Literacy is standards, not curriculum: ponder, for a moment, this brutal dismissal of the civilizing ideals of universal literacy and of the efforts of the many who have fought for them.

In his Policy Network Paper, Andrew Adonis confirms this revealing perception: ‘the raising of literacy and numeracy standards ... is now a *self-contained* mission in its own right’ (Adonis, 2001, p. 9)—and elsewhere in the system the continuing Curriculum I/II gulf, and the sense that all that really matters at the primary stage is literacy and numeracy ‘standards’, plus perhaps the ‘modernising’ subjects of science and ICT, is strongly reinforced. Thus TTA requires newly qualified teachers to ‘know and understand the curriculum for each of the National Curriculum core subjects, and the frameworks, methods and expectations set out in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies’, but merely to ‘have sufficient understanding of a range of work’ (whatever that means) in the rest, including history *or* geography but—bizarrely—not both (DfES/TTA, 2002, p. 7). Ofsted full primary teacher training inspections concentrate on ‘English, mathematics and, when at all possible, science’ but sample the rest on the basis of what happens to be available, while the short inspections don’t even require that (Ofsted, 2002d, pp. 23, 84). The new Ofsted school inspection framework, which takes effect from September 2003, is no less casual in its approach to Curriculum II: English, mathematics, science and ICT *must* be inspected, and in depth, but for the rest the requirement is simply, in Ofsted’s words ‘work seen in other subjects.’ (Ofsted, 2003b, p. 8).

There’s little evidence, then, that the newfound commitment to breadth and balance in the primary curriculum is serious. Were it so, teacher training and inspection requirements would reinforce rather than undermine it, and the entire curriculum enterprise would be co-ordinated by a single agency, rather than be split between QCA and DfES. (If, that is, it is really necessary for the curriculum to be centrally controlled as well as prescribed—but that’s another story.)

But all is not lost, for in 2002 Ofsted discovered a link between breadth, balance and standards, and it is chiefly this that has fuelled the change in the government’s curriculum rhetoric: this, and the need to be seen to respond positively to the increasing pressure from the arts and sports lobbies. Ofsted found that of the 3,508 primary schools inspected in 2000–1, just 206, or under 6 %, achieved both high test scores in English and mathematics *and* consistently excellent teaching and learning across the full range of the National Curriculum. They argued, commendably, that contrary to popular opinion the National Curriculum *is* manageable, and, crucially,

that it was the breadth and richness of the curriculum which helped secure the quality of teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy in these schools, and—conversely—that the wider curriculum gave children and teachers a meaningful context in which to apply, reinforce and extend ‘the basics’ (Ofsted, 2002c).

But of course we knew this already. The famous 1978 HMI survey of primary schools, of which—as of so many other key pieces of historical evidence—the Primary Strategists seem unaware, reported that the schools which performed best in the basics invariably did so in the context of a broad curriculum encompassing work in the arts and humanities which was well planned and taught (DES, 1978). Then, in 1996, the Conservative government asked Ofsted to examine the relationship between the 1996 KS2 SAT results and curriculum breadth, posing the particular question ‘Had schools which did well in the 1996 tests done so at the expense of curriculum breadth and diversity?’

The answer was a resounding ‘No’, and this time Ofsted showed that the earlier basics-breadth correlation held across *all* primary schools:

Schools which did well in the tests also provided a broad and balanced curriculum ... Schools awarded a high grade for curriculum balance and breadth score well in the tests and those awarded lower grades score less well. This trend persists across all schools analysed, regardless of their context. (Ofsted/DfEE, 1997, paras 2 and 7)

The report’s publication coincided with the arrival of New Labour, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and the attendant targets for 2002: 75% of 11 year olds to reach Level 4 in mathematics, 80% in English. Like the 1978 HMI primary survey the 1997 Ofsted report confirmed what commonsense dictated: you cannot successfully teach literacy and numeracy in a curriculum vacuum. But New Labour were convinced that the rest of the curriculum was a distraction from the targets (and, possibly, a threat to the position of the Secretary of State, who had said that he would resign if the targets were not met). The government ignored the Ofsted report and pushed ahead with its decision to free schools from the obligation to teach the programmes of study of the non-core subjects. Ofsted did not press the point. The report was not publicised. It was an example of burying bad news of which Jo Moore would have been proud. Except that the news was good—or, to be precise, good educationally but bad politically. (For a detailed account of this episode, see my evidence to the 1998 Commons Education Committee enquiry into the work of Ofsted: House of Commons, 1999, pp. 144–154.) With that recent history in mind, with the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies firmly in place, and with a continuing commitment to targets, albeit managed differently, who can possibly believe the Primary Strategy’s avowed commitment to ‘a rich, broad and balanced set of learning experiences?’ (DfES, 2003a, para 3.1).

Do we still need to argue that education is meaningless without the arts and humanities, and without a more generous concept of the teaching of English than basic reading and writing competence alone, or—as persuasively argued by Rowan Williams (2000)—a more coherent approach to moral education? The demeaning reduction of these to ‘enjoyment’ and ‘enrichment’, and the readiness of the

Government to sacrifice them on the altar of ‘standards’ (as opposed to standards) signals that they remain insecure.

There are two further failures on the Primary Strategy’s curriculum front. The first and most obvious is the total absence of real vision about the future of the primary curriculum, a deficiency for which the report’s heavy reiteration of the word ‘vision’ provides no more than a tattered figleaf. Nor does the current version of the National Curriculum offer very much more. Its published goals (DfEE/QCA, 1999, pp. 11–12) are an extraordinary ragbag of values which if they were deliverable would secure a nation of men and women at once dynamic, entrepreneurial, athletic, ruthless, successful, rich, multi-skilled, possessed of encyclopaedic knowledge, humane, compassionate, modest, religious, tolerant, cultured, ascetic—and thoroughly confused about their identity. They are what you get if you handle the demands of large numbers of interest groups by adding each one to a lengthening list without attempting to establish whether they are compatible. (For a comparative critique of the 1999 National Curriculum aims in an international context, see Alexander, 2000, pp. 125–126, 155–158.)

The second failure is to come to terms with the managerial implications of a broad and complex curriculum. The Primary Strategy has a chapter entitled ‘Workforce reform’ which essentially seeks to sell the Government’s policy on classroom assistants (DfES, 2003a, chapter 7). The more necessary workforce reform was argued in the 1986 Select Committee report on primary education which said that the demands of a modern curriculum could not reasonably be met by schools staffed on the basis of one generalist class teacher per class. The Committee secured the agreement of the then Secretary of State, Keith Joseph, for 15,000 extra teachers to inject curriculum flexibility into England’s 20,000 primary schools (House of Commons, 1986). The agreement was not implemented. The so-called ‘three wise men’ report of 1992 took this argument forward, commending a broader repertoire of teaching roles in primary schools ranging from generalists through consultants and semi-specialists to specialists, to enable the full curriculum to be adequately managed and taught, and insisted that to allow schools the necessary staffing flexibility the long-established primary-secondary funding differential must be challenged (Alexander *et al.*, 1992, paras 139–150). That idea didn’t get far, partly because it had resource implications which the Commons Education Committee investigated but which the then government passed smartly to the LEAs (House of Commons, 1994a, 1994b); partly because many primary teachers—wrongly—saw it as a threat to the class teacher system; and partly because secondary heads, in turn, thought that the money would be taken from them. Then during the 1980s and 1990s there were numerous attempts to find ways of maximising the impact of teachers’ specialist subject strengths, within a framework of roles variously called ‘curriculum co-ordinator’, ‘consultant’, ‘adviser’, ‘subject leader’ and ‘curriculum manager’.

The Primary Strategy’s chapter ‘Leadership in primary schools’ talks about leadership in highly generalised terms, focusing on heads and the novelties of ‘consultant leaders’ and a ‘leading practice’ programme, but in a way which is utterly divorced from the day-to-day demands of the curriculum. Again, of all the

debates about curriculum management of the past 20 years, including major national enquiries, it seems utterly unaware. (For an account of these, see Alexander, 1998b, pp. 6–13.)

Meanwhile, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the erosion of curriculum breadth over the past few years has been a consequence of a persistent refusal by successive governments to grasp the managerial and resource implications of a curriculum which has outgrown the elementary model of ‘basics plus trimmings’ for which the Victorian class teacher system was just about adequate. The government’s 1998 decision to make the non-core subjects effectively optional, and the sad fate of these subjects in many schools since the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies began to bite, suggest that the curriculum has been used as the safety-valve, as a way of side-stepping the true ‘workforce reform’ which primary schools needed. Judged in strictly educational terms, the 1998 decision looks at best ill-informed and at worst—since government was warned of its likely consequences—cynical. The doctrine of ‘cheap but efficient’, one century on, has resolved the growing mismatch between educational task and professional resources by trimming the education rather than re-assessing the resources. This nettle the Primary Strategy has, in its turn, failed to grasp. Teaching assistants may be useful, but in the context of children’s statutory curriculum entitlement they are no substitute for a staffing policy which provides each primary school with a team of professionals who between them have the range and depth of subject knowledge to do full justice to every aspect of the curriculum for every child, and the flexibility to deploy such knowledge as required.

## **Conclusion**

In as far as it offers perspectives on learning, teaching, curriculum, assessment and school management—all of them major themes from my first two domains of pedagogical discourse—and links these to the pursuit of national educational goals, the 2003 Primary Strategy certainly qualifies as a pedagogical statement. Given its belief that it can harness enjoyable means to achieve excellent ends, it is properly ambitious. Because it comes from Government it must be taken seriously.

Between May and November 2003, and again from January 2004, DfES organised conferences for primary heads, teachers and ‘consultant leaders’ at which ministers and officials, ostensibly in consultative mode, will discuss how the Primary Strategy and its ‘vision’ are to be taken forward. In rather different mode, the published job specification of the man charged with overseeing this process, the newly-appointed Primary Strategy Director, pins him not to the Strategy’s hope of a curriculum enshrining excellence, enjoyment, breadth and balance, but to the narrower objective of embedding the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, meeting the national targets for English and Mathematics and ensuring continuity with the KS3 Strategy (DfES, 2002c). This task has been subcontracted as a commercial operation to CfBT whose job it is, in DfEE’s words, to ‘deliver the Strategy’.

This more instrumental remit rather undermines the rhetoric of consultation and freedom which is being used to sell the Strategy to teachers, especially when what

is to be ‘delivered’ is so fundamentally deficient. About all but the narrowest range of evidence concerning the impact of recent policies on primary education the Primary Strategy displays amiable ignorance, and such evidence as it does cite—for example that relating to the impact of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies—it is not above bending to suit its larger political purposes. As for the wider evidence and debate about children, learning, teaching, curriculum and culture—in which, I have suggested, even a minimal pedagogy should be grounded—a few insouciant platitudes masquerading as ‘principles’ are as close as we get. These, secondary school colleagues may care to note, have been replicated in a policy for the entire school system, not just primary schools (DfES, 2003b).

The Primary Strategy manifests a lamentable detachment from questions of identity, culture and history (my vital third domain of pedagogical discourse), a studied ignorance about the state of education before 1997, and a crude instrumentalism of purpose which is in no way disguised by the rhetoric of ‘enjoyment’ and ‘enrichment’. The Strategy is ambiguous to the point of dishonesty about the Government’s true intentions towards primary education. It fails to observe that most essential condition for the growth of knowledge and understanding and the improvement of the human condition, by which researchers in all disciplines are bound absolutely—*cumulation*, knowing what has gone before, learning from it, evaluating it, building on it. By ignoring this condition, the Strategy not only ensures that much of what it offers is open to challenge; it also perpetuates rather than resolves some of the most deeply-seated problems of English primary education, notably in the areas of curriculum and curriculum management. It also subverts its own avowed intentions, for such a stance is deeply at odds with what education should be about.

In all these matters, as in the wider spectrum of public policy in recent years, that ‘destruction of the past’ which so concerned Eric Hobsbawm in his assessment of contemporary British consciousness (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 3), seems to be a conscious political act rather than an unfortunate casualty of laudable political ambition. For, as I have illustrated, this ‘Strategy’ is caught in the Downing Street web of instinctive spin—not just of the policy of the moment but of history itself.

More obviously, the Primary Strategy is badly written, poorly argued and deeply patronising in its assumption that teachers will be seduced by Ladybird language, pretty pictures, offers of freedom and enjoyment, and populist appeals to their common sense. There is no case, no argument, some fragments of a strategy, but certainly no vision. Meanwhile, 150 local authorities have dutifully appointed their primary strategy directors. If they value their Ofsted inspection ratings they cannot do otherwise.

And what, a quarter of a century on, of Simon’s ‘Why no pedagogy?’ Pedagogical research has progressed considerably since then, and in the cumulative body of scholarship and evidence about children, learning, teaching and culture which the Primary Strategy has chosen to ignore, not to mention the collective experience of the teachers it claims to respect, I would submit that we have had for some time both an ample basis for a coherent and principled pedagogy and a viable alternative to the pseudo-pedagogy of the Primary Strategy.

Government though, listening only to those who are on its payroll or who speak its language, believes it knows better. Under our now highly centralised and interventive education system those who have the greatest power to prescribe pedagogy seem to display the poorest understanding of it, and the discourse becomes mired in the habitual bombast, mendacity and spin of policyspeak. The pedagogy of principle has yet to be rescued from the pedagogy of pragmatism and compliance.

*Postscript: what price evidence-based policy and practice?*

This article started as an open lecture in the Cambridge University Faculty of Education 2002–2003 Research Lecture series and in that form, especially following somewhat sensationalising press coverage (for example, Ward, 2003) it was widely disseminated. Among the resulting responses, three are particularly relevant to the case I have tried to make.

First, my charges about the Strategy's cavalier approach to evidence have provoked from the DfES Standards and Effectiveness Unit a counter-claim that *Excellence and enjoyment* is 'based on the latest evaluation and research evidence', and that the national literacy and numeracy strategies 'were based firmly on research evidence ... which is one of the main reasons why ... they have been successful in raising standards and improving the quality of teaching and learning' (Hopkins, 2003). Yet, second, Margaret Brown's most recent analysis of the evidential basis of the national numeracy strategy casts further doubt on the sustainability of such claims (Brown *et al.*, 2003b). Third, DfES has hastily sought to plug some of the more obvious gaps in the Strategy's prospectus of pedagogical reform, notably in respect of the role and quality of classroom talk. As we have seen, the Strategy mentions talk but once, and very briefly (DfES, 2003a, para 3.3). However—perhaps stung by criticism on this score—DfES now claims that the improvement of talk is central to the Strategy. It has not only written 'speaking and listening' prominently into its Strategy training materials for the autumn and spring terms of 2003–2004 (for example, DfES, 2003c, DfES/QCA, 2003) but in so doing has made unattributed use of material published elsewhere, notably on dialogic teaching.

This kind of reactive or opportunistic appropriation not only smacks of control freakery but also calls further into question the government's much-vaunted principle of 'evidence-based' policy and practice, which surely implies a process which is much more considered and critical. In truth, if DfES seems ambivalent about where it stands on this matter, Downing Street is not. David Hopkins' endorsement of the research connection, cited above, contrasts with the dismissive claim of Tony Wright, Blairite Chair of the Commons Public Administration Committee that 'the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy were both undisputed successes which produced extraordinary results without the involvement of academics, and if they had waited for academics to produce this policy it would have taken four years' (Quoted in Brown *et al.*, 2003b, p. 655). In the same way that the Barber/Adonis Downing Street line on professional development invalidates the

teacher-friendly rhetoric emanating from DfES, so the outright rejection of academic research by prime-ministerial appointee Wright undermines the department's avowed respect for evidence. Such developments confirm the continuing hegemony of the culture of pragmatism and compliance.

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