

Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln

Awards Ceremony in Lincoln Cathedral

Wednesday 21 July 2010, 2.30 pm

Madam Provost, Principal, Mr Subdean, honoured civic, county, university college and students' guests, fellow honorary graduates, and graduating students from Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln.

I thank the University for conferring this honour upon me, and for the kind words of the Presenting Officer, Kathleen Taylor. I am delighted to join the academic community of Bishop Grosseteste, an institution which has a very special place in the worlds of primary education and teachers' professional development.

I would like, if I may, to speak directly to those of you who are graduating today from courses of teacher training and who will be starting your teaching careers in September.

You enter the profession at a critical and exciting time. If you know anything about the Cambridge Primary Review, you'll know that alongside its findings and recommendations about children, learning, teaching, curriculum, assessment, school organisation and much else, the Review's final report traces and questions a process of increasing government intervention, especially since 1997, in what goes on in England's classrooms. The Review's evidence convincingly shows how national tests, which of course have their place, have been undertaken in such a way that they distort the broader curriculum which children need and to which they are entitled by law. National strategies have reduced the complexity of teaching, and the sheer diversity of the situations that teachers encounter, to a one-size-fits-all formula for literacy and another for numeracy – formulae which therefore fit only some. National professional performance standards have given valuable support to those teachers who need it but have boxed in the nation's most talented teachers, people whose knowledge, experience and wisdom need to be liberated if they are to give children the best of which they are capable.

But now – and this is where you come in – now we hear that all this is to change. The new government has announced the dawn of an era of professional freedom. The national strategies are on their way out. The national tests will stay but are to be reviewed. The previous government's Rose Review curriculum framework has been abandoned, and teachers are being encouraged to exercise greater professional flexibility and autonomy. Since all this is in line with the recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review, we are – shall I say – cautiously delighted.

So you enter the teaching profession at a time of great opportunity. But how will you use the freedoms you are being offered? It's already clear that many serving teachers have become so dependent on external prescription that they would actually

prefer to go on being told what to do. It's also evident that such teachers are ripe for exploitation by the less scrupulous educational consultants and publishers who are ready to make easy money out of packages with titles like 'a skills based creative curriculum' which press the right buttons but are little more than nonsense.

So what we need after the era of centralisation is teachers who take advantage of the freedoms on offer and, within an agreed national curriculum framework, make up their own minds about what and how to teach; but who do so with intelligence and discrimination, and on the basis of knowledge, evidence, principle, hard thinking and searching discussion; teachers who shape children's education in full awareness of what the best of research tells us about how children think and learn and how teachers most effectively teach; who have a deep understanding of the curriculum; who avoid slogans and quick fixes; who understand that learning is a lifelong process, and that for teachers above all – as the guardians of the learning of others – that process must never stop.

For, as we say in the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review: 'Children will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers merely do as they are told.'

But we need something else: a vision and aims for education which respond to the condition and needs of childhood, society and the wider world at a time of change and uncertainty, and of gross social inequalities - inequalities whose most immediate and tragic victims are children. And here, in this wonderful building and mindful of the particular character and status of Bishop Grosseteste University, it is appropriate to tell you that among the most illuminating conversations I've had as director of the Cambridge Primary Review have been those with Archbishop Rowan Williams and with the Church of England's Chief Education Officer and the Directors of Education for the 43 English dioceses. The conversations have been illuminating because without giving an inch on the importance of achieving the highest possible standards of education in our schools, they have raised our sights higher still, beyond the targets, tests, strategies and initiatives to the fundamental questions: what exactly is education for, and by what values should it be guided? Needless to say, these are questions that the final report of the Cambridge Review tries to answer.

So we need teachers who plan and teach on the basis of both evidence and vision. In short, we need you, the well-deserving graduates of Bishop Grosseteste University. You owe it to the children you will be teaching from September, but you also owe it to the university: for enquiry, evidence, debate and the infinite possibilities of learning are what universities are all about; and to these intellectual imperatives Bishop Grosseteste adds a generous and humane framework of values – and I don't need to remind you what they are.

I thank Bishop Grosseteste University once again for honouring me today, and I wish you every success - as its graduates and as our hope for a better educational future for Britain's children.

Robin Alexander