

**EXCELLENCE, ENJOYMENT AND PERSONALISED LEARNING:
A TRUE FOUNDATION FOR CHOICE?**

Robin Alexander
University of Cambridge

Edited version of keynote address given to the National Union of Teachers
National Educational Conference on 3 July 2004,
subsequently published in *Education Review*, 18 (1), autumn 2004, pp 15-33

© Robin Alexander 2004

EXCELLENCE, ENJOYMENT AND PERSONALISED LEARNING: A TRUE FOUNDATION FOR CHOICE?

Robin Alexander
University of Cambridge

Abstract: *in this keynote address to the NUT's 2004 National Education Conference, Robin Alexander looks beyond the rhetoric of two current flagship government initiatives: the Primary National Strategy and personalised learning. He uncovers ambiguous intentions and suspect evidence, and shows how the initiatives fail to address a long-standing need: a primary curriculum which is fit for the new century, which encapsulates a generous and safeguarded concept of entitlement, and which provides a proper foundation for meaningful choice at age 14. Both initiatives, too, are compromised by the unyielding grip of educational centralisation.*

Suddenly last summer ... conciliation began to replace confrontation. Where teachers could do no right, now they could do little wrong. Where only standards and targets mattered, now there was to be room for what in 1997 Estelle Morris promised but failed to deliver – *fun*. Excellence was to be coupled with enjoyment, and creativity was no longer to be sacrificed on the altar of the 3Rs. Above all, as government and opposition jostled for what used to be called the political 'centre ground' but is now well to the right of centre, we were to be given *personalisation* and *choice*: choice of health care for patients, choice of schools for parents, and choice of curriculum for pupils.

How real is this shift? What does it mean? Are personalisation and choice just a Blairite updating of Thatcherite marketisation – that doctrine which brought us so-called consumer choice in everything from public utilities to public transport but in fact heralded a decline in their quality which was matched only by the rise in the salaries of their 'fat cat' bosses? Or is a genuinely reformist transformation (I refuse to succumb to 'step change') close at hand?

We can test the new rhetoric by looking at two initiatives, one of them a year old but still unfolding, the other just starting; the first – *Excellence and Enjoyment*, or the Primary National Strategy – is aimed at Key Stages 1 and 2, while the other – 'personalised learning' – is a recipe for the entire education system. Together, these initiatives raise important questions not just about the seriousness and feasibility of the government's intentions but also about the kind of education which children need up to the age of 14 when, we are told, they will be fully equipped to make choices which will affect the rest of their lives.

I shall argue that *personalisation* and *choice* - today's buzzwords and tomorrow's inevitable election manifesto pledges – are meaningless without a generous concept of *entitlement*, and especially without a proper curricular and pedagogical *foundation* at the foundation stage and Key Stages 1, 2 and 3.

In June 2004 Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy argued that good local schools for *all*, not choice between good and poor schools, should be the government's priority, especially if schools rather than the parents do the choosing. Otherwise, as John Dunford of SHA warned, we end up with 'an even steeper hierarchy of schools' with less choice, not more, for those who for social and economic reasons already have the fewest options.¹ So too with the curriculum. Valid choice between subjects, routes or pathways at age 14 requires a minimum entitlement and consistent quality in the education which children receive up to that age. Choice and

personalisation will be illusory unless pupils know, understand and have sufficient prior experience of what they are choosing between.

So I shall argue that the new or not-so-new doctrine of personalisation and choice raises very old questions about the scope and direction of the curriculum, and about the values by which it is informed; questions which may indeed be old but which have been sidestepped by successive governments for decades, not least in the last national curriculum review, in 1997-8. On that occasion the QCA, the agency responsible for the review, was told by the government to do nothing which might deflect schools' attention from the literacy and numeracy targets and to change as little as possible.

I shall also suggest that though personalisation requires a minimum level of entitlement, and therefore national consistency, it is incompatible with the extreme centralisation to which English education has been subjected in recent years.

Blair's 'vision of transformation'

Let us start with the big picture, or the government's overall 'vision of transformation', as set out by the Prime Minister at the NAHT conference on 1st May 2004:

- 5 year olds should start school ready to learn.²
- 11 year olds should be up to standard in the basics and engaging in a broad curriculum beyond.
- 14 year olds should have the knowledge and skills to make effective choices about their future learning and careers.
- 16 year olds should be qualified to go on to 6th form or modern apprenticeships, and then to higher education or skilled employment.
- Lifelong learning – adults keeping skills updated and acquiring new qualifications as needed – should be the norm not the exception.³

By way of early warning, we can immediately see problems in this prospectus. Thus:

- Can a nationwide universal system of pre-school education *really* cater for the personal needs of every child, let alone every child's parents? And who defines these needs?
- What is the difference between 'up to standard' in one area of learning and 'engaging in' another. Is the latter a bit like the government's infamous invitation to primary schools to 'have regard to' the non-core subjects in January 1998, which was understandably taken to mean 'pay them lip service'? Does 'engaging in' mean, in effect, *not* 'up to standard', and indeed that nobody bothers to set standards by which the quality of engagement in the wider curriculum can be judged?
- What knowledge and skills do 14 year olds need in order to make 'effective choices' about their learning and careers? Is getting 'up to standard' in the basics and 'engaging in' some other subjects enough?
- Is lifelong learning really, or only, about updating skills and formal qualifications? What about broadening one's cultural, social and political horizons? What about meeting new people, developing new interests, consolidating old interests, taking on new responsibilities,

modifying attitudes or fighting new causes? Are not these, equally, what lifelong learning is about?

The Blair 'vision of transformation' begs plenty of questions then, and that particular speech failed to answer any of them. But we might also care to note the way it ended. 'For years', said the Prime Minister, 'education was a *social cause*. Today it is an *economic imperative*.' Well yes, of course: but why can't it be both? Unfortunately, Blair's definition of lifelong learning as acquiring marketable skills and formal qualifications confirms the impression that in the brave new world of personalisation and choice the economic imperative is all that matters. Under Old Labour, at least, social and economic goals were never treated as mutually exclusive.

'Excellence and enjoyment': the Primary Strategy

So to our first initiative, the Primary National Strategy, which was set out in *Excellence and Enjoyment* on 20 May 2003.⁴ I don't intend to do a detailed critique – I have already published one⁵ – but I do need mention three problems of the primary strategy which bear on the viability of the government's new commitment to personalised learning. I call these the problem of *intent*, the problem of *evidence*, and the problem of *curriculum*.

1. The problem of intent – does the strategy offer freedom or does it demand compliance?

Excellence and Enjoyment variously calls itself (paras 8.14-8.17) a 'vision', the 'starting point for a dialogue', a 'blueprint' and a 'project'. It can't be both a blueprint (which is planned in advance, fixed and implemented exactly as it stands) and the start of a dialogue (which is presumably open-ended). So which is it? A dialogue about a blueprint? Another 'consultation' on something which has already been decided?

Elsewhere, *Excellence and Enjoyment* seems to support the dialogic claim:

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 ... (paras 2.4 and 2.8)

But hold on, what's this? On 5 February, at the conference for Primary Strategy leaders, Michael Barber – Blair's head of delivery, so you can't get more authoritative than that – provided this iron rule of thumb:

Is enough time devoted to literacy and numeracy in every class? *If it's less than 50% then it's not enough.*

And for good measure he added:

The dedicated hours every day [i.e. the minimum of 50%] are crucial but not enough. Extended writing ... needs additional time.⁶

So that's clear then: 50% plus a further unspecified amount (5%? 10%?) for extended writing. Thus schools may 'take control of their curriculum and be innovative', but only for 40% of the

time, and only of those parts that the government considers unimportant or optional. Not what I'd call taking control.

2. *The problem of evidence – how secure are the strategy's claims and prescriptions?*

The Primary Strategy defines an 'excellent school leader' as someone who is 'systematic and rigorous in using evidence to inform the development of teaching'. That being so, we can confidently expect *Excellence and Enjoyment* to be no less rigorous in its own use of evidence.

Let's test this by reference to one of the main planks in the strategy's platform. *Excellence and Enjoyment* argues:

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. (paras 3.2-3.5)

We might quibble that if the government wants the literacy and numeracy strategies to provide the model for the rest of the curriculum then the approach is hardly new. However my concern is with the none-too-subtle way that NLNS is equated with 'principles of good learning and teaching' and the evidence on which this elision is based. Here's the answer:

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. (Para 3.2)

This sweeping claim, I'm afraid, cannot be sustained. Thus, the much-cited OISE evaluation of NLNS, the one the government itself commissioned, was at best equivocal:

There is considerable evidence ... that *teaching* has improved substantially since the Strategies were first introduced ... [but] the intended changes in teaching and learning have not yet been fully realised ... [and] it is difficult to draw conclusions about the effect of the Strategies on pupil *learning*.⁷

Note that distinction: teaching has undoubtedly changed, and OISE says it has improved, but the evidence on *learning* is less clear.

Then there are the other studies. For example, after detailed analysis of the national tests results from 1997 to 2002, coupled with work in schools, Margaret Brown's massive longitudinal study of the numeracy strategy concluded that:

The NNS had a positive but small effect on numeracy standards, but ... there are many schools, children and areas of mathematics for whom the effect has been negligible or negative ... The NNS has been an expensive programme of systemic reform, costing more than £400 million over the first five years and untold hours of teachers' time. Yet, in spite of politicians' claims, there is little evidence that it has been an 'undisputed success' as judged by a rise in attainment.⁸

But even the OISE claim about the strategies' impact on teaching are open to question. Thus, the recent Newcastle study, one of several which have looked at the impact of the literacy and numeracy strategies on the quality of teaching, concludes:

Traditional patterns of whole class teaching have not been dramatically transformed by the strategies ... in the whole class section of literacy and numeracy lessons, teachers spent the majority of time either explaining or using highly structured question and answer sequences. Far from encouraging and extending pupil contributions to promote higher levels of interaction and cognitive engagement, most of the questions were of a low cognitive level designed to funnel pupils' responses towards a required answer.⁹

And of course, if that's what's happening then it's no surprise if test results have levelled out, for we know that *the quality of learning is closely related to the cognitive level of the talk through which learning is mediated*. Another reading of the evidence, then - taking the full range of the evidence, rather than being selective - is that the strategies produced initial pedagogical changes and learning gains, but have stalled because the government and its advisers put too much faith in an untested model and paid too little attention to decades of international research evidence about the true conditions for effective teaching and learning.

I don't want to undermine the hard work that primary teachers have put into transforming literacy and numeracy teaching over the past few years, nor to deny the real gains which are clearly evident in many schools and classrooms. But we do need to understand that the national evidence is a good deal less conclusive, and certainly less consistent across schools, than the government claims, and in particular it calls seriously into question the government's insistence (a) that the strategies should continue to provide the model for literacy and numeracy teaching, unchanged and unchallenged, and (b) that they should go even further, and provide the template for the rest of the curriculum.

The findings about the quality of classroom interaction from the research studies of Smith, Hardman, Skidmore, Moyles, Hargreaves, Galton and myself, incidentally, are one reason why I have been working over the past three years with various LEAs and indeed the strategy leaders themselves, to develop what I call 'dialogic teaching'. But that's another story.¹⁰

The other problem of evidence in *Excellence and Enjoyment* is that when you need it, it isn't there. The Primary Strategy, as we've seen, tells schools to 'apply the principles of good learning and teaching across the curriculum'. What are these principles? Here they are, on page 29:

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.

Where does this come from? The only one of these statements with a recognisable evidential basis is the last, which draws on the King's College research on assessment for learning¹¹ – which DfES has now appropriated but transmuted into something rather different from the intentions of its original authors. The other 'principles', lacking evidence, are merely statements of belief. Indeed, they are so obvious and banal as to be hardly worth printing. What teacher does *not* want to ensure that every child succeeds, build on what learners know, make learning vivid, real and enjoyable, and so on? Do we need a 'strategy', highly-paid strategy directors and

teams, LEA strategy leaders, conferences, training programmes and expensive professional support packages for that?

In fact, because the strategy's reference to applying the principles of good learning and teaching comes in the context of its claim that the literacy and numeracy standards have been an outstanding success, it is clear that the *real* principles DfES has in mind are that literacy lessons should have four parts, numeracy lessons three, and that both should end with whole-class interactive plenaries. As someone who has spent years researching teaching and learning in both the UK and internationally, I know of no evidence which justifies imposing this model on 20,000 primary schools. Further, as I first noted in 1996 when it was heralded as the new standards panacea, interactive whole class teaching misses the point if it merely produces traditional whole class teaching dominated by the 'recitation script' of closed or recall questions, 'correct' answer-spotting by pupils, and minimal feedback.¹² Regrettably, as the Smith and Hardman research cited earlier shows, that is exactly what is happening in many classrooms as a result of the strategies' endorsement of this approach. What makes the difference, of course, is enhancing the capacity of classroom interaction to engage pupils cognitively in *all* organisational settings, not merely doing more whole class teaching.

Dare I say it: this last point was made all of fourteen years ago in the previous government's so-called 'three wise men' enquiry on primary education, one of many sources of hard evidence which the authors of the Primary Strategy ignored.¹³

Further, because it uses dogma in place of evidence, the strategy misses the evidence about teaching and learning which *really* matters. For example, we know from psychological and neuroscientific evidence that language, and especially spoken language, plays an absolutely vital part in human development and learning, especially during the first 10 or so years of life. We also know from international comparative research that we can learn much from other countries about ways of improving the quality and cognitive power of classroom talk.¹⁴ Yet in *Excellence and Enjoyment* speaking and listening receive just one brief mention. The supposedly expert authors of the primary strategy were apparently unaware that this crucial evidence about the conditions for effective teaching and learning existed. And in their ignorance they were prepared to dish up banal 'principles' of 'good learning and teaching' instead.

However, when I and others criticised DfES for this glaring omission they hastily jumped to plug the gap, and elevated speaking and listening to the status of top priority in the primary strategy training programme. Fine, and good that they accepted their mistake, but how much faith can we have in a strategy, vision, blueprint or project which prefers the knee-jerk change after the event to carefully reviewing the evidence before it?

3. *The problem of curriculum – breadth and balance at last, or the 'basics' and little else?*

Perhaps the biggest claim the government has made for the Primary Strategy is that it ushers in a new era of curriculum breadth and balance, of enrichment and creativity. I'm afraid that the only thing rich about this its bare-faced cheek, for it was this government that prevented the 1997-8 National Curriculum review from securing breadth and balance at Key Stages 1 and 2, arguing that only literacy and numeracy mattered; it was this government that in January 1998 told schools that they need no longer teach the programmes of study in the non-core subjects; and it was this government that ignored the Ofsted study of 1997 which found that the schools which performed best in the KS2 SATs were those which were also most successful in planning and sustaining a broad and balanced curriculum, and that the schools which thought that the way to raise standards in the basics was to concentrate on the basics alone were wrong.¹⁵ This finding was confirmed in the Ofsted *Successful Primary Schools* study of 2002,¹⁶ though in fact both of the Ofsted studies only repeated what we had known since the famous HMI survey of

1978, which convincingly showed that there is a necessary relationship between breadth, balance and standards.¹⁷ You can't teach the basics, let alone secure high standards of literacy and numeracy, in a curriculum vacuum.

So, far from ushering in a long-awaited era of what the strategy calls 'children's entitlement to a rich, broad and balanced set of learning experiences' the government is merely giving back what it took away. And it is doing so having ignored for the past seven years the evidence of inspections and surveys going back a quarter of a century.

But again, beware the forked tongue, for we've heard Downing Street's insistence on the 50+% minimum for literacy and numeracy, which constrain breadth, balance and enrichment at the outset. But there's an even more fundamental problem: by constantly juxtaposing 'excellence' and 'enjoyment' in the way it does, or by contrasting 'standards' and 'engagement' as in Tony Blair's NAHT speech, it's clear that at best the government has in mind just that two-tier curriculum which I first identified in a book published 20 years ago.¹⁸ In this perception, which goes back to the Victorian elementary schools, the 3Rs provide the excellence and standards while the rest of the curriculum supposedly offers enrichment and breadth. The possibility that educational quality might be about providing excellence and high standards across the *entire* curriculum isn't entertained.

If you consider my criticisms unfair, ponder this anecdote. In January 1998, I and three others went to see the then Minister of State (Estelle Morris) to plead with her not to make the non-core subjects optional at KS1 and 2, as she was at that time being urged to do by HMCI, and to take a more holistic approach to the curriculum. We also argued that holism and coherence would be difficult for as long as one part of the curriculum – literacy and numeracy – was directed from DfES itself, while the rest was delegated to QCA. At that point a senior official leant across and prompted, with consummate Sir Humphrey smoothness, 'Ah but Minister, literacy and numeracy are *standards*, not curriculum. QCA is indeed responsible for the curriculum, but we at the Department are responsible for standards.' So it's official, then: literacy and numeracy aren't part of the curriculum. And by the same token, the notion of standards presumably has no place outside the context of literacy and numeracy. The old duality lives, then: the basics and the rest, excellence and enjoyment, standards and engagement, Curriculum I and Curriculum II.

There will be no progress on achieving a curriculum which is genuinely broad, balanced, rich, diverse and of consistently high quality across the board for as long as this mindset remains dominant in government. None of this, I must emphasise, detracts from the fundamental importance of literacy and numeracy, especially literacy, for I am interested in one curriculum, not two, and reject the opposition of 'basics' and 'non-basics'.

Personalised learning

This is all by way of prelude to our consideration of the theme of personalisation and choice which is now being applied to the full range of public services and is intended to carry the government into and triumphantly through the next general election.

Big idea it may be, but as yet it remains opaque, despite its many airings. One such came in David Miliband's speech at the DfES/Demos/OECD conference on 18 May 2004. He started by saying what personalised learning is *not*:

- A return to child-centred theories.
- About letting pupils learn on their own.
- About abandoning the national curriculum.
- A license to let pupils coast at their own pace¹⁹

Note the swipe at child-centredness to placate the right-wingers and the derogatory equating of learning at one's own pace with 'coasting'. It's hard to take seriously an account of personalised learning which opens by dismissing the obvious truth that children don't all learn at the same rate or in the same way. Or one which descends to the level of a tabloid parody of 1970s educational thinking (the period of Miliband's own school education, and he didn't do too badly out of it).

After this dispiriting start Miliband went on to say what personalised learning *is*:

- An educational aspiration reflecting moral purpose, excellence and equity.
- An educational strategy providing a focus for school improvement.
- An approach to teaching and learning using ICT and groups.
- A system of education that sees children as social beings with needs which extend beyond the classroom.
- Neither a new policy nor a new initiative, but a commitment to making best practice universal.²⁰

Not much there to hang onto, either. Let's try the next bit. Miliband then filled out his 'vision' by setting out five 'components' of personalised learning:

- *Assessment for learning*: using data and dialogue to know students' strengths and weaknesses and diagnose individual needs [engaging pupils in their learning through shared objectives and feedback].
- *Teaching and learning strategies* which develop each learner's competence and confidence by building on individual needs [teaching, learning and ICT strategies that build on the learner's experience, knowledge and multiple intelligences].
- *Curriculum choice* which engages and respects students [choice which balances entitlement and personal relevance]:
(Overall) Giving every student curriculum choice, breadth of study, personal relevance and clear pathways through the system.
(Primary) High standards in the basics allied to opportunities for enrichment and creativity.
(14-19) Giving learners significant vocational and academic curriculum choice .
- A radical approach to *school organisation*, with workforce reform as the key [using grouping and learning mentors to enhance learning, focusing on creating an empowering culture and ethos].
- *Support for schools from the local community* [tackling barriers to learning with the community; positioning school at centre of the community].²¹

This gives us a bit more to work with. However:

- Assessment for learning, as defined here, misuses an important idea, grounded in research from Paul Black and his colleagues, by reducing it to target-setting and data-gathering, when its real concern is with classroom process.
- As in the Primary Strategy, the recipe for effective teaching and learning is banal and pretty well meaningless. If not that then in the earlier version it simply picks up a couple

of popular nostrums – ICT and multiple intelligences – while ignoring the real insights from research, inspection and experience of ‘what works’.

- On curriculum choice Miliband confirms the old primary curriculum dichotomy that I’ve just criticised. Furthermore he contradicts himself: first he says that *every* student will have curriculum choice, then he restricts that choice to the 14-19 group. Unless he means by ‘opportunities for enrichment and creativity’ at the primary stage that children will have choice outside the basics. Or possibly that teachers will have the choice whether to to develop children’s creativity. And as for KS3, he doesn’t even mention it. What a muddle.
- The current approach to workforce reform is equated with ‘a radical approach to school organisation’. But there are other kinds of workforce reform which some of us have been arguing for (relating, for example, to primary schools’ capacity to deliver the whole curriculum, with the necessary expertise and without the pressure of time which makes that delivery so difficult to achieve).

The curricular foundations for personalised learning

This takes us to the heart of the matter: the kind of curriculum, and the kinds of teaching, which translate personalised learning from political rhetoric into something which is viable as everyday classroom practice. In exploring this we need to confront two fundamental truths which so far no government seems capable of understanding.

First, as I’ve already shown, the primary school curriculum in England is, and from its inception nearly always has been, not one curriculum but two: the high-priority basics and the low-priority trimmings. This is not how many teachers want it to be, but it is how circumstances and deeply entrenched public and political attitudes have compelled it to be. The polarisation was reinforced in the first National Curriculum’s sharp distinction between – ‘core’ and ‘other foundation’ subjects, though there at least there was a clear commitment to entitlement across the full range of subjects; in the national curriculum test regime (in a climate of maximum exposure of test outcomes schools inevitably concentrate on what is to be tested); in the Dearing National Curriculum manageability review of 1993 in which Dearing managed to echo the Newcastle Commission of 1861 (Dearing 1993: ‘The principal task of the teacher at KS1 is to ensure that pupils master the basic skills of reading, writing and number.’ Newcastle Commission 1861: ‘The duty of a state in public education is to ensure the greatest possible quantity of reading, writing and arithmetic for the greatest number.’); in the 1997-8 NC review (‘literacy and numeracy are standards not curriculum’) and the government’s decision to get primary schools to concentrate on the basics at the expense of the rest; in Ofsted inspection requirements; and in the TTA/Ofsted teacher training requirements.²²

Second, I have argued, and HMI and/or Ofsted have in three separate studies convincingly demonstrated, that there is a necessary relationship between standards in the basics and the rest, and that the wider curriculum isn’t just an optional extra. Breadth and balance is not just a curriculum issue, nor even just an entitlement issue, but also – and fundamentally - a *standards* one. Standards aren’t, as that DfES official told the minister, literacy and numeracy alone, they are the whole curriculum. That’s an empirical statement, not an ideological one. By failing to understand this, governments of all complexions have not only compromised entitlement, but they have also compromised their own standards agenda, thus shooting themselves, spectacularly and repeatedly, in the foot.

Here then, are some alternative principles for personalised learning. They can be set alongside the five offered by David Miliband, but only if Miliband’s third principle is modified.

- ***A curricular foundation for choice.*** KS1/2/3 education must provide a proper *curricular* foundation for subsequent educational choice. Without that foundation, meaningful and informed choice is impossible. At KS1, 2 and 3, therefore: (i) curriculum breadth is essential; (ii) all aspects of the curriculum deemed necessary to this foundation must be accorded if not equal time then certainly equal seriousness and professional commitment and skill. The old - and still-current - CI/CII formula of 'basics plus trimmings' must be abandoned, for it denies entitlement and thus reduces choice.
- ***An intellectual foundation for choice.*** Going beyond the primary strategy's woolly 'principles of learning and teaching', personalisation demands that teaching must, generically, provide a proper *intellectual* foundation for making and expressing choice. Whatever else it achieves, teaching should develop pupils' abilities to attend and listen; to discriminate, compare and evaluate; to reason, argue and justify.
- ***Professional expertise for choice.*** Every school (and especially every primary school, for it's here that the issue of subject expertise is most problematic) should contain sufficient depth and breadth of professional expertise for its teachers to be able to recognise and foster a wide range of individual pupil interests, talents and capacities. (What one does not oneself understand one may neither value nor be able to recognise in others, let alone nurture and develop).
- ***Balancing personal and collective need.*** At the same time, the curriculum, and teaching, should strike a just balance between personalisation and the pursuit of common goals and common values, and between the development of individual and collective identity. This principle is important in two contexts: the classroom and the wider society. In the classroom we need to understand that children are indeed individuals but they also have much in common. The Piagetian idea of the child as 'lone scientist' has given way to the Vygotskian view that learning is fundamentally a social and interactive process.²³ So there is a teaching principle here, grounded in the kind of research evidence that the Primary Strategy has ignored. But also, for our society's - and the world's - future we need to understand the consequences, especially in Britain and the USA, of rampant individualism, materialism and self-gratification (or personalisation in its more extreme form) and the consequent loss of the nurturing of the senses of collective identity and responsibility and of interdependence which give individuals a sense of who they are and where they belong and which are also necessary for social cohesion and human survival. Individuals have needs, certainly, but so do groups, communities and societies. A curriculum needs to be responsive to them all. This is something many other cultures, especially the more holistic and less egocentric cultures of Asia, understand clearly.
- ***Rethinking the primary curriculum.*** With these first four conditions in mind the primary curriculum should be radically reviewed with an eye to identifying a more appropriate and generous curriculum core and an expanded concept of 'basics'.

Rethinking the primary curriculum

Let's pursue the last principle, for it is my central contention that the possibilities for choice and genuine personalisation at KS4 depend critically on the quality and range of the curriculum up to that point. So I would argue that after the disappointment of the first national curriculum and Dearing, and the downright dereliction of duty of the 1997-8 national curriculum review when this government instructed QCA to change as little as possible, next time we should be prepared to be more radical. Thus, to revive a proposal which I made in 1997-8²⁴ but stood no chance then because it was off message (though it gained wide support among educators), we need to move:

- From curriculum renewal by increasingly unmanageable 'bolt-on' accretion (science, D & T, ICT, MFL, PSHE, citizenship) to renewal by radical re-assessment of the whole.
- From the 3Rs concept of 'basics' to one which acknowledges the primacy of literacy yet also reflects a fresh analysis of what is 'basic' to individual empowerment and to social and economic progress in the 21st century.
- From a view of talk as about 'communication skills' and 'the development of confidence' to a recognition of the neuroscientific and psychological evidence of its unique status as a *sine qua non* for all learning, especially during the first 10-12 years of life.
- From a small number of *core subjects* to a more broadly-conceived *core curriculum* which draws on a wider spectrum of knowledge, understanding and skill.
- From a concept of KS1/2 curriculum conceived mainly as preparation for KS3/4 to one which also addresses the learning and developmental needs and imperatives of early and middle childhood.
- And at the primary stage from a staffing model which was originally designed and financed to deliver a minimal curriculum as cheaply as possible, to one which is commensurate with the professional demands of genuine curriculum breadth and balance.

Conclusion

What, then, do these two initiatives add up to? The Primary Strategy as published is riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions, displays a cavalier attitude to evidence, and papers over a struggle between the timid liberalisers in DfES and the control freaks in Downing Street. The accounts of personalised learning so far published raise, I have suggested, important questions about the extent of personalisation and choice which is possible or indeed desirable, and about the curricular basis at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 which is necessary for choice at age 14 to be genuine and informed.

I do acknowledge, though, that the Primary Strategy as it is now evolving is in some respects different from the published specification. In criticising the kneejerk elevation of speaking and listening from afterthought to priority I am not objecting to the elevation as such - far from it - but to the fact that the strategy's authors displayed such culpable ignorance of the true pedagogical conditions for educational excellence while expecting the nation's teachers unquestioningly to comply on the basis of who produced the document rather than what it said.

For members of this and other teaching unions, these initiatives therefore raise a further question: what do they tell us about how the government views the nation's teachers? Here, again, the signs are not encouraging. Probe the teacher-friendly language of documents like *Excellence and Enjoyment* and you find this much harsher judgement from Downing Street - first voiced in 2001 and since then recycled at various conferences in the UK in indeed in those several countries whose governments still subscribe to the antiquated view that their opposite numbers in London are interested in truth rather than myth or spin:

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 [i.e. after the 1988 Education Reform Act and the

introduction of the national curriculum and national testing at 7, 11 and 14], the system moved from *uninformed professional judgement* to *uninformed prescription*.²⁵

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. 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.²⁶

This, of course, is as distorted and politically partisan an account of recent educational history as one is likely to find. Quite apart from its disparaging view of the competence of anyone teaching before 1997, its claim that before that date there was an absence of information on which teachers and the system could draw is patently absurd: remember HMI inspection reports and national surveys; national enquiries like Plowden, Newsom, Bullock, Cockcroft, Warnock and Gulbenkian; the regular test programmes of NFER, LEAs and the APU and, from 1988 to 1997, the SATs; the evidence from public examinations, which were no less rigorously managed then than they are now; not to mention schools’ and teachers’ own knowledge, experience and information systems and of course the evidence from independent research.

It suits the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit to claim that teachers, governments and the system as a whole were uninformed until the arrival of Tony Blair not just for the obvious reason that it makes claims about what Blair has ‘delivered’ all the more impressive. More insidiously for the education professions, by dismissing the entire information base of education up to 1997, Downing Street is in effect saying that the only valid educational intelligence is what the government defines as such. ‘Informed professional judgement’, then, means not the autonomy ostensibly offered by *Excellence and Enjoyment*, but *compliance* with the educational prescriptions of DfES: the strategies, the prescriptions, the pathologies, the graphs of educational standards which government interprets one way but expert independent analysts view rather differently, the rhetoric, and the officially-sanctioned and published versions of ‘best practice’ and ‘what works’.

Thus whenever we probe what seems like a relaxation at DfES of the familiar macho educational rhetoric of basics, standards, targets, underperforming schools, tough new initiatives, step changes and all the rest, we come up against the reality of Downing Street holding unswervingly to the view that at the primary stage the 3Rs are all that matters, and far from being offered freedom to exercise professional judgement in the vital areas of curriculum and pedagogy, teachers must continue to do as they are told.

For all these reasons, then, I suggest that meaningful personalisation and choice in education are not only intrinsically problematic – and I have tried to show how and why, and the kind of foundation at the primary and indeed lower secondary stages on which choice at age 14 depends – but they are also incompatible with the degree of centralisation and tight political control to which the public education system of England is now subject.

Notes and references

- ¹ Both comments reported in *The Guardian*, 30 June 2004.
- ² I'm sure no irony was intended, but this phrase is lifted straight from one of the USA's least successful pieces of recent educational legislation, the 1994 *Educate America Act*.
- ³ Quoted from the press version of the Prime Minister's speech to the NAHT conference, 1 May 2004.
- ⁴ DfES (1993) *Excellence and enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools*, London: DfES.
- ⁵ Alexander, R.J. (2004) 'Still no pedagogy? Principle, pragmatism and compliance in primary education, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 34(1), pp 7-33.
- ⁶ 'Courage and the lost art of bicycle maintenance', speech by Michael Barber to the Primary Strategy Consultant Leaders' Conference, 5 February 2004.
- ⁷ Earl, L., Watson, N., Levin, B., Leithwood, K., Fullan, M. (2003) *Watching and Learning 3: final report on the external evaluation of England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies*, University of Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- ⁸ Brown, M. *et al* (2003) 'The role of research in the National Numeracy Strategy', *British Educational Research Journal* 29(5) pp 655 and 686.
- ⁹ Smith, F., Hardman, F. *et al* (2004) 'Interactive whole class teaching in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies', *British Educational Research Journal* 30(3) p 408.
- ¹⁰ Alexander, R.J. (2004) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk*, York: Dialogos.
- ¹¹ Black, P. *et al* (2002) *Working Inside the Black Box: assessment for learning in the classroom*, London: King's College School of Education.
- ¹² Alexander, R.J. (1996) *Other Primary Schools and Ours: hazards of international comparison*, Warwick: University of Warwick Centre for Research in Elementary and Primary Education.
- ¹³ Alexander, R.J., Rose, J., Woodhead, C. (1992) *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools*, London, DES, paras 105, 125, and 138.
- ¹⁴ Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford UK and Malden USA: Blackwell; Cazden, C.B. (2001) *Classroom Discourse: the language of teaching and learning* (second edition), Portsmouth NH: Heinemann; Nystrand, M. with Gamoran, A., Kachur, R. and Prendergast, C. (1997) *Opening Dialogue: understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom*, New York: Teachers College Press.
- ¹⁵ Ofsted/DfEE (1997) *National Curriculum Assessment Results and the Wider Curriculum at Key Stage 2: some evidence from the Ofsted database*, London: Ofsted.
- ¹⁶ Ofsted (2002) *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools*, London: Ofsted.
- ¹⁷ DES (1978) *Primary Education in England: a survey by HM inspectors of schools*, London: HMSO.
- ¹⁸ Alexander, R.J. (1984) *Primary Teaching*, London: Cassell, chapter 3.
- ¹⁹ Miliband, D. (2004) 'Choice and voice in personalised learning', speech to the DfES/Demos/OECD conference on *Personalising Education: the future of public sector reform*, London, 18 May, pp 3-4.
- ²⁰ This more positive definition comes from Miliband, D. (2004) 'The rationale for and definition of personalised learning', *Human Scale Education News*, Spring, p 2.
- ²¹ Miliband, D. (2004) 'Choice and voice....' (see note 17) pp 4-6. The versions within brackets come from the *Human Scale Education News* article, also cited above.

-
- ²² Ofsted (2003) *Inspecting Schools: framework for inspecting schools, effective from September 2003*, London: Ofsted; Ofsted (2002) *Handbook for the inspection of initial teacher training*, London: Ofsted.
- ²³ Bruner, J.S. and Haste, H.E. (ed) *Making Sense: the child's construction of the world*, London: Routledge.
- ²⁴ Alexander, R.J. (1997) 'Basics, cores and choices: modernising the primary curriculum', paper presented at the SCAA National Curriculum Review Conference; reprinted, revised in J.Soler, A.Craft, H.Burgess (ed) *Teacher Development: exploring our own practice*, London: Paul Chapman, 2001, pp 26-40.
- ²⁵ Barber, M. (2001), *Large-Scale Education Reform in England: a work in progress*, paper for the Managing Education Reform Conference, Moscow, 29-30 October. The paper was also presented, with small modifications, to the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston 47th Economic Conference, 19-21 June 2002, and the Technology Colleges Trust *Vision 2020* Second International Conference, October/November/December (in which form it is available on the internet). Its central diagram, showing the relationship between professional knowledge, prescription and autonomy, has also been used in a number of presentations by Barber's Downing Street and DfES associates.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*