
‘O Rose, thou art sick’,
‘O Testing, thou art malign’:
a critique of two official reports
(with apologies to William Blake)

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ABSTRACT Two official reports were published in 2009, each potentially important to the immediate and medium-term future of primary education and each (in the author’s view) potentially damaging. The conservative nature of the reports’ proposals are outlined in this article as are the opportunities missed for a fundamental reappraisal of the primary curriculum and its assessment.

When is an ‘independent review’ not an independent review? When is an ‘expert’ report not an expert report? The answer is the same to both questions: when it is a government ploy in a vain attempt to see off professional dissatisfaction.

‘The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum’ (DCSF, 2009a), hereafter referred to as the Review, was never going to be independent since it was set up by a beleaguered government; it was headed up by Jim Rose, the government’s primary ‘fixer’; it was staffed by government-paid officers; it was published by a government department in an absurdly glossy (and expensive) format; it was straitjacketed by a government-inspired brief to which it has adhered tenaciously; and it contained no direct or indirect challenge to, or questioning of, any current or past government policies. It had all the hallmarks of an ‘independent’ report from a group of MPs justifying their own expenses.

The ‘Report of the Expert Group on Assessment’ (DCSF, 2009b), hereafter referred to as the Report, was similarly misnamed and for similar reasons. Whatever the five members’ expertise it was not an expertise in assessment. Leaving aside the two (token?) headteachers, none of the other members has published anything substantial on assessment, sat on any previous

committees on assessment, undertaken any research on assessment or conducted any national assessments of children themselves. This might conceivably bring a degree of detachment to their deliberations but certainly not *expertise*. The Group's primary function was to legitimize the Government's view that the purpose of assessment is to hold individual schools accountable for their performance – the very issue at the heart of the current controversy.

Despite its appearance, its liberal sound-bites and the hype attached to it the Review is fundamentally conservative – a conservatism reinforced by the Assessment Report. Missing opportunities for introducing fundamental changes (as suggested in italics below), in the essentials listed below it leaves everything as it is:

- the notion of a 'core' to the curriculum, a problematic notion unexamined since its inception in the mid-seventies and now resurrected for twenty-first century consumption; *instead of dispensing with the notion altogether;*
- the place of literacy and numeracy trumpeted as core of the core, as if primary schools have ever considered them other than fundamental; *instead of regarding all 'areas of understanding' (DCSF, 2009a) or 'domains' (Alexander & Flutter, 2009) as equally important, though not necessarily requiring similar amounts of curriculum time;*
- the use of level descriptors based on the dubious notions that understanding can be 'leveled' and 'measured'; *instead of re-examining the philosophical basis of testing and coming to the conclusion that levelling of understanding is impossible and that understanding can only ever be judged or appreciated, never measured;*
- the cosmetic use of aims imported from another review, – aims which have not informed the drawing up of the new curriculum but simply serve to adorn or legitimize it after the event; *instead of developing aims afresh as the Cambridge Review attempts to do;*
- the development of supposedly slimmed down programmes of study which on closer examination are little different in terms of their overall 'weight' from their criticized predecessors; *instead of restricting their content to an outline of key concepts and skills;*
- the introduction of six areas of understanding – but neatly divided into subject content for two out of the three proposed primary sub-stages, and with a none too subtle advocacy of subject-based teaching wherever possible; *instead of drawing on other areas of knowledge(eg. philosophy, psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology etc) when determining the key concepts to which children should be introduced;*
- the proclamation of increased curricular flexibility based on these six areas when that flexibility has been there in theory since 1988 (where in the

Education Act the Government was proscribed from prescribing curriculum organization or teaching methods)but absent in practice because of so-called official 'guidance' and assessment; not that different from that offered in tone from the Review and the Report; *instead of making plain and re-iterating the importance of professional discretion in pedagogy and curriculum organisation;*

- the use of clichés such as the importance of inculcating a love of learning and of fostering challenging innovative teaching but in a climate where both are inhibited by a testing regime, whose implications are ingenuously ignored by the Review; *instead of cutting out the clichés and 'folksy' elements and recognizing the deleterious consequences of previous government policies;*

- the grudging support for a mixed-economy of subject teaching with a little cross-curricular work – a policy which many schools had already adopted prior to the Review; *instead of recognizing the impossibility of teaching every key concept or skill exclusively through any one approach (be it subject-based or theme-based);*

- the failure to address the disproportionate amount of curriculum time taken up by numeracy and literacy (which it reinforces rather than challenges); *instead of recognizing that literacy in all its forms (linguistic, mathematical, scientific, humanistic) needs to be developed and extended throughout primary and secondary education and that therefore English and mathematics do not need to dominate the primary curriculum to the extent they currently do;*

- the failure to challenge that 'elephant in the curriculum' – national testing (which it obediently but disingenuously avoids as required by its political masters); *instead of calling for a radical re-examination of the national testing regime.*

It can be argued that the much-trumpeted changes listed below are similarly cosmetic:

- the relegation of science – *instead of recognizing scientific literacy as just as important as other literacies;*

- the promotion of ICT as 'an essential for learning and life', *instead of recognizing that this is uncontentious and already recognized by those working in primary schools;*

- the introduction of a modern foreign language, *instead of not just recommending it but also recognizing the very real logistical difficulties in implementing this on the scale and with the rigour it needs;*

- the official recognition given to personal development, *instead of recognizing this as a long-established strength of English primary education.*

The *Review* does have some valuable recommendations, in particular its recognition of the importance of oracy and its belated recognition of the need for the periodic wholesale review of the curriculum at regular intervals rather than the current illogical arrangement whereby the foundation and Key Stage 3 curricula have been reviewed prior to consideration of that obtaining in Key Stages 1 and 2. But basically it is conservative and fails to provide the kind of fundamental review needed for the long-term development of primary education.

That conservatism is reinforced by the assessment Report. Here again, the fundamentals of assessment in primary schools, including testing, remain unchallenged and unchanged:

- the continuation of national tests in English and mathematics for the foreseeable future; *instead* of recommending their immediate abolition on educational grounds and on the grounds that they represent a form of child abuse;
- the lack of trust in teacher assessments; *instead* of acknowledging that these have not proved any more unreliable, and in some ways, have been more valid, than national test results
- the lack of any definite commitment to the introduction of teacher assessments at a later date; *instead* of setting out a firm date for their use as a replacement for testing;
- the belief that test results in just two subjects provide a reliable means of holding primary schools publicly accountable for their performance; *instead* of acknowledging their unbelievably partial picture of what primary schools are trying to achieve;
- the commitment to test preparation not just confirmed but strengthened by the risible proposal to move national testing from May to June to give yet more time to English and mathematics (and by implication their test preparation); *instead* of removing the necessity for test preparation per se;
- - the continuation of the piloting of single-level tests despite problems over their validity; *instead* of recognising the impossibility of producing valid tests directed at philosophically dubious 'levels';
- the inevitable backwash effect on narrowing the curriculum and straight-jacketing teachers if single level tests were ever to be introduced in the current climate of accountability; *instead* of acknowledging the educationally deleterious effects of such testing.

However, the publication of these two purportedly 'independent' 'expert' reports so close together may yet prove to be major miscalculation on the part of the DCSF. The Department may well have scored a spectacular own goal – giving the lie to so many of its claims. The Review (itself ingenuously silent about the implications of testing) and the assessment *Report* (which intensifies rather than alleviates the malign effects of testing) will reinforce professional perceptions that 'experts' have been brought in yet again to give the Government of the day what it wants, not what it needs, to hear. They may well

see the liberal-sounding Review as inconsistent at best or hypocritical at worst when compared with the hard-line assessment Report. Taken together, these two publications may further disengage many thousands of primary teachers and harden their attitudes towards the so-called experts and their political masters.

References

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