
BRAVO! and BUT...: reading the Cambridge Primary Review

MARY JANE DRUMMOND

ABSTRACT There is much to welcome in the Cambridge Primary Review, not least its authors' determination to stimulate discussion and debate, and their resolute view that it is more important for teachers to do their own thinking than simply obey. Equally admirable is the Review's emphasis on the need to understand our recent educational past, if we are to improve education in the future. But other sections of this substantial work are less laudable. In particular, the review of the evidence on setting, streaming and structured ability-grouping, which leads to the conclusion 'Categorise with caution', is a matter of grave concern.

The long-awaited Cambridge Primary Review, edited by Robin Alexander, comes complete with a set of instructions on how it is to be received, and in this review of the Review I shall try to comply with them, though I cannot attempt coverage of the massive whole; I have selected some passages that I welcome with open arms, and some others to which I object, either mildly or strenuously.

Readers are told that, whatever they think of the Review's conclusions, its findings are to be discussed, its arguments treated with due seriousness, its evidence given the careful study it deserves. There are to be no more sensationalising headlines which do not do the Review justice (though if you missed the ones that have already appeared, a fine selection is given in the Introduction, with more in Chapter 2; for readers with long memories, another splendid collection, on p. 23, dates back to the Leeds report of 1991 and the 'three wise men' report that followed it). The authors of the Review are certainly to be commended for their steadfastness in the face of their own amazingly bad publicity, and indeed for their considered response to it. Unlike their critics, they promise to abjure the 'three patterns of discourse which in recent years have frustrated the progress of educational thinking, policy and practice' (p. 21) – the discourses of dichotomy, derision and myth. Instead the Review 'initiates an alternative course' employing 'alternative ways of thinking

and talking about primary education'; it insists on the necessity of reclaiming 'our educational past and present, and hence our educational future.' This is a programme that I am happy to applaud, especially in view of Alexander's proven expertise in setting educational arguments firmly in their historical and political contexts.

The real business of the Review begins with a brief chapter of just such history, entitled 'Policies and legacies', where teachers from the Plowden generation will find a stirring account of how primary education has fared since they took the plunge in 1967. The story is told in four phases, as primary education passes from being largely 'unchallenged' (1967-76), to 'challenged' (1976-87), then 'regulated' (1987-97) and finally 'dominated' (1997-2009). More history appears in chapter 12, 'What is primary education for?', including a brief discussion of the elementary school legacy, the Hadow Report of 1931, a glance at Dewey and the fascinating nugget of knowledge that Nadezdha Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, was a strong advocate of Dewey's version of progressive education. This is all appetising, nourishing food for our collective sense of the past from which the current system has emerged, in turn challenged, regulated and dominated.

Another cheer is due on p. 195 for the walk-on part assigned to the great Lawrence Stenhouse, who is here remembered for his powerful advocacy of the need for teaching rooted in 'principles of procedure'. Unfortunately, his devastating critique of the objectives model (1975) is not discussed; this is regrettable, since his analysis is still entirely applicable to today's official agenda. Furthermore, the concept of 'principles of procedure' is part of Stenhouse's antidote to the dangers and limitations of teaching to objectives. Chapter 13 'Curriculum past and present' continues the theme of reminding us what we can learn from our own history, and includes a well-deserved swipe at the folly of defining the primary curriculum by working backwards from what pupils are expected to know at the end of their primary schooling. It would have been even better if the same criticism had been extended to the same fallacious approach embedded in the short-lived 'desirable outcomes' for four and five year olds, and the (alas, still extant) 'early learning goals' which replaced them in 2000, and which have now been used to generate the superfluous detail of the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage, a topic to which I will return.

In this same chapter, 200 pages into the work, the Review begins to quicken its pace a little, as its authors come close to answering one of their central questions: 'What should children learn?' The Review is adamant that here we ignore history at our peril. The most successful schools have long been, and still are, those with the broadest and richest curriculum. High standards in the so-called 'basics' go hand in hand with breadth and balance. HMI and Ofsted evidence, in reports from 1978, 1985, 1997 and 2002, is crystal clear; 'if breadth is sacrificed, so are standards' (p. 215). This is a crucial plank in the Review's argument and it is admirable that the authors are prepared to repeat the point, both earlier (p. 36) and later (p. 243) where the sub-heading reads

‘Basics and breadth: the pernicious dichotomy’. (Could there be a hint of derision here?) The Review builds on this incontrovertible evidence to argue that quality is a cross-curricular issue; the point is so important that it is italicised: ‘*a truly whole curriculum is one where the quality and seriousness of the teaching are consistently high across all its aspects*’. And quite right too; raising the number of Level 4 results in the Year 6 SATS, as headteachers are daily urged to do by their School Improvement Partners, is no substitute for a flourishing school orchestra or fertile allotment.

The last two quotations are from Chapter 14 ‘Towards a new curriculum’, which is full of good things, including a splenetic rant against the ubiquity of skills in the current official discourse, denouncing their ideological overtones and reminding me that I have been worried about the proliferation of skills for a good many years now, ever since I saw a nursery school assessment schedule with eight levels of ‘scooter skills’, back in the early 1980s. There is also a passionate defence of knowledge, apparently triggered by comments from ‘a leading primary head applauding the Rose Review’s interim report’. By chance, over the last few weeks, I have also been reading (for pleasure) Kieran Egan’s lively recommendations for the wholesale reform of education, *The Future of Education: Re-imagining Our Schools from the Ground Up* (2008), and finding in it a few interesting parallels with the Review. On knowledge, for example, Egan is as passionate as he is clear: for children to be good learners, knowledge must be made ‘meaningful, emotionally charged and imaginatively engaging. It isn’t hard to work out how to make knowledge fit those criteria’. But, Egan laments, it is seldom done.

The world ... is presented to the child as known, and, for the most part, as rather dull: interior opposite angles are congruent and a thousand other such theorems, without much sense of their human meaning or importance, can weigh down the spirit during the early years of schooling. Where the wonders of math and science should live energetically and fruitfully in students’ minds, there are, for nearly all students today, vast and empty deserts.

Our task, says Egan, is to show children:

how precious and how wonderful is the knowledge that we have, with mysterious ingenuity, carved out of the unknown. What a strange adventure! – that is the attitude that needs to be taught to children who are embarking on it. (pp. 61-2)

There is a very great deal to cheer about in Egan’s answers to the concerns that he largely shares with the authors of the Review, but his alternative scenario, rebuilding schools from scratch, is considerably more radical.

Back to the Review, which on p. 251, just about at the half-way mark, announces ‘We are now ready to move forward.’ Much of what follows – the matrix of 12 aims and eight curricular domains, along with what this all entails for teaching and learning – has been well publicised and excellently condensed

into the official summary, a booklet which has been sent to virtually everybody in the country. In my view, the most important element of these detailed proposals for 'a new curriculum' is that the aims are 'located firmly into the framework'; indeed, 'unless the aims are enacted in the curriculum we shall be left with the current dissonance of high ideals and expedient practice' (p. 262) The aims are to be acted on, in other words, not framed or laminated for display in the school lobby; they will stand or fall by what teachers do with them. Furthermore, the aims 'unashamedly reflect values and moral purposes'. At this point, the authors broaden the discussion by citing John White's argument that 'the aims on which [the curriculum] should rest should be inextricable from the kind of society which is thought desirable' (p. 200), for me, a most desirable recommendation.

Remembering the early assertion that everything in this text is to be discussed, rather than swallowed whole, I see good reason to be optimistic about the future of these aims, once they have been very thoroughly discussed by the teachers who would work with them. Not just discussed, either, but rewritten in teachers' own words and categories, so that they reflect teachers' personal experiences and priorities. Nothing less can ensure that the aims will do their work of making a new curriculum (any curriculum) intellectually coherent and morally purposeful. The Review is splendidly clear about the necessity for thoughtfulness in teachers. It insists, more than once, that teaching professionally, at one's very best, is incompatible with mere compliance. In fact, if I ever find myself re-incarnated as a primary teacher, I might well take this snappy sentence as my motto: 'Pupils will not learn to think for themselves, if their teachers are expected to do as they are told.' (p. 308)

One last bravo before I move on: in the chapter on pedagogy (of which more later) I was delighted to find what may be the only joke in the whole bulky volume – a reminder of the bad old days in the 1960s and 1970s when teachers were terrorised by their advisers' aesthetic preferences – tastefully arranged teasels in Oxfordshire, rolls of corrugated cardboard in Hertfordshire (what about triple mounting, pray?) The old ones really are the best. Who needs myth or derision when memories are made of this?

But it's high time for the BUTs. One of my objections concerns the unfailingly positive tone of the various comments about the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and the absence of any discussion of the extraordinary anomaly of this new phase of education having statutory force for children who have not reached statutory school age. Furthermore, the provisions of the EYFS apply to *all children*, in whatever kind of setting – children in playgroups, independent schools, daycare, childminders' kitchens and gardens, in Montessori and Steiner settings – all these children are subject to the prescriptions of the EYFS, another amazing anomaly. On publication the Review attracted a good deal of attention – some supportive, some critical, some hysterical – for its recommendation (no. 29) for a 'full and open debate about the starting age for compulsory education'. But many of us in the early years community would be just as interested in a full and open examination of why all

children, regardless of setting, who have not reached statutory school age, should be subject to statutory requirements.

The length of the bibliography, and the copious footnotes to every chapter, suggest that the Review authors must have read everything, and if they haven't, the authors of the companion volume of Research Surveys must have done so. But I looked in vain for some of the alternative curricular models with which I am familiar; for example, I was disappointed to find no reference to the work of present-day early years educators in New Zealand, the source of the ground-breaking bilingual curriculum document *Te Whāriki*, which has had an impact world-wide, including in this country (Ministry of Education, 1996). Their work on assessment too is well worth attention (a key text is by Carr, 2001), based as it is on a construction of learning as narrative, rather than on the more familiar metaphors of goals, levels, targets and standards. Assessment in early years settings is carried out through the careful documentation of individual 'learning stories'; in this process, New Zealand educators reject the view that learning is discontinuous, convergent and normative, easily measured and quantified, a score, level or grade that children have, rather than something that children continuously do.

Another missing link is a consideration of the work of Nel Noddings, professor of education at the University of Stanford, California, mathematician, feminist and author of a powerful re-formulation of education as we know it: *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. Noddings can state the crux of her case more succinctly than I can paraphrase it:

In the 1992 introduction to this book, I argued against an education system that puts too much emphasis on academic achievement defined in terms of test scores and the acquisition of information. Today [2005] the case could be made even more strongly. Students spend weeks – even months – preparing for and taking tests. Many of us believe that these are weeks that should be spent exploring new ideas, discovering new interests, extending established ones, and expressing thoughts in art, drama, music and writing. In particular we believe that students should be given opportunities to learn how to care for themselves, for other human beings, for the natural and human-made worlds, and for the world of ideas. This learning to care requires significant knowledge; it defines genuine education. (2005, p. xiii)

This curriculum of care is rooted in the principle that the main aim of education is a moral one: 'to produce competent, caring, loving and lovable people'. Anticipating her critics Noddings adds: 'There is nothing mushy about caring. It is the strong resilient backbone of human life' (2005, p. 174-5). All these are ideas worth thinking about, surely.

Chapter 15, 'Re-thinking pedagogy', includes a review of the 28 research surveys commissioned by the Review team. One of these, by Peter Blatchford and colleagues (2010), reviews the available evidence on aspects of classroom

organisation, and, as a lifelong opponent of setting and streaming in all their forms, I found three of the bullet points that summarise this survey highly significant (p. 290). Watch carefully to see how the message subtly changes. In the first bullet point, schools are encouraged to 'look more deeply at their current practices regarding differentiation (especially setting and inflexible within-class grouping) and identify best practice on the basis of actual effects on pupil learning, rather than rhetoric'. Surely this should go without saying? Why ever would schools use setting if it has no effect on pupil learning? What *is* the evidence on best practice? In the next bullet point, 'Varying pupil within-class grouping for different activities' is recommended, because it 'avoids limiting the opportunities for some children.' Aha! Now it looks as if setting and ability-based practices *do* have limiting effects. And in the third bullet point, the authors finally come clean: 'However, the evidence suggests that there are no consistent effects of structured ability grouping, such as setting, on attainment, although there can be detrimental affects (sic) on social and personal outcomes for some children.' So that's all sorted then; there is no case to be made for setting.

But, looking ahead to Chapter 19, 'Structures and transitions', I found that the Review returns to the subject under the heading 'Setting and streaming versus mixed ability', and outlines submissions to the Review that reveal 'a sharp division' on the pros and cons of setting (p. 377). The Review goes on to cite six studies all showing (different) damaging effects of setting. For example, in a study of 12 primary schools, Kutnick et al (2006) showed that 'those using setted classes rarely achieved results higher than the local authority or national average. The setted schools' value-added scores, a measure of how much they helped children to progress, were negative in comparison to the positive scores of the non-set schools.' So the issue *is* well and truly sorted.

But look! the very next sub-heading, on the very same page, reads 'Categorise with caution', and purports to 'unpack the issues within setting and streaming', concluding, pusillaniously, 'such devices [i.e. setting and streaming] need to be used with due caution.' After all this prevarication, it was no surprise to find, in the concluding chapter of 'Conclusions and recommendations' *no* recommendation on the subject – an absurd omission, given the weight of the evidence cited in the Review itself.

My concern about the use of setting, streaming and ability-focused practices has its roots, not just in my own experiences as a classroom teacher and headteacher over many years, but also in a recent research project of which I was a member. So here I must declare an interest and confess to a deep disappointment. My colleagues Susan Hart, the late lamented Donald McIntyre and I together made a submission to the Primary Review team, a three hour face-to-face meeting at which we gave an account of the research we have published in the award-winning book *Learning without Limits* (Hart et al, 2004). The rationale for our research, which took the form of an empirical study of nine teachers' classroom practice was that, despite decades of research demonstrating the damage that can be done – to children, teachers and

curriculum – by ability labelling and other practices derived from false assumptions about IQ and fixed ability, there was still no credible, articulated alternative to ability-based pedagogy. Through our analysis of the practice of the project teachers, who steadfastly maintained an optimistic view of human educability, and belief in the capacity of every child to learn, we developed a practical, principled, pedagogical model, an alternative to the ability-based model promoted in successive government initiatives. We stressed that our alternative model, and its resolutely anti-determinist approach, is not concerned with mixed ability teaching, but something much more radical. The thrust of our submission to the Review team was that the time was long overdue for teachers to dispense with the superfluous constructs of so called ‘ability’ and to adopt an alternative mind-set that emphasises the educability of all children. We see our work as an attempt to contribute to the construction of an alternative improvement agenda for English schooling today – which is, in fact, much the same task as one of those the Primary Review team had set themselves.

So I freely admit, and I hope not just out of wounded pride, or damaged *amour-propre*, that I find the treatment of these issues in the Review bitterly disappointing. I chiefly regret the failure of the Review to take account of our contribution to the development of pedagogy. *Learning without Limits* is indeed cited, but to our surprise, two of the references to it appear in the chapter on children with special needs – which was not our focus. I also regret that our own literature review of the damaging effects of ability-focussed practices has left no impression on the Review’s remarks on setting, streaming and other grouping practices.

In the throes of this disappointment, I was greatly cheered by reading Clyde Chitty’s editorial for this number of *FORUM*, in which he invokes Brian Simon’s life-long rejection of determinist and fatalist thinking. The authors of *Learning without Limits* (which we dedicated to Brian Simon) may not have been given a voice in the pages of the Primary Review, but it is a comfort to appear in this journal in such good company.

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Correspondence: Mary Jane Drummond, 53 Maids Causeway, Cambridge CB5 8DE, United Kingdom (maryjdrummond@yahoo.co.uk).