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A Tale of Two Reviews

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ABSTRACT This article regrets that the Final Report of the Cambridge Review was greeted with such contempt by government ministers but also argues that a more detailed consideration by the Review of the proposals in the Rose Review would have helped to build a consensus for the future.

'It's disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed on many major changes in primaries.'[1] The dismissive comment of Schools Minister Vernon Coaker, on the day that the Cambridge Review was published (16 October 2008), masks the real disappointment: that ministers should refuse to enter into any dialogue or debate, but instead take up at once what the Review calls the 'discourse of derision'.

Ministers are not the only ones at fault. Just suppose that an unusually enlightened and reasonable minister had said, 'This is a substantial piece of work that will take some time to study.' He might also have added, without losing the voice of reason, 'From what we have seen of it so far, it is unlikely that we will agree with all its findings and recommendations, but it deserves to be taken seriously and we will endeavour, though it will take time, to match its closely reasoned arguments with equally closely reasoned rebuttals explaining where and why we disagree.' The headlines in some newspapers at least, would be 'Government dithers'. However, it is not the press, but senior civil servants who are most to blame for the disgraceful way in which the Review was greeted by ministers. The Review itself reveals an extraordinary picture of its relations with civil servants and government advisers: there were 'no fewer than 27 meetings with government and NDPBs (Non-Departmental Public Bodies) between October 2006 and March 2009. The tenor of these meetings was usually cordial, and in most cases the issues under discussion were constructively explored. Yet when government commented publicly on the Review it was as if the meetings had never taken place.'[2]

It is not easy to understand what the Minister meant by his dismissive remark, but perhaps he was referring to three events that took place between

the time that the Review went to press, in spring 2009, and its publication in October: the final report of the Rose Review of the primary curriculum, the report of the Group on Assessment and the White Paper announcing that the Primary Strategy would be wound down from 2011. All three developments, along with the announcement by the Conservatives that they would move tests in Year 6 to the beginning of Year 7, are referred to in an editor's postscript on pages 513 and 514; perhaps neither the Minister nor his advisers had read that far by the time that Coaker made his ill-advised comments.

In the main body of the Cambridge Review there are frequent references to the Rose Review of the curriculum, whose interim report was published in 2008, prompting the early publication of the Review's own findings and recommendations about the curriculum in time for consideration by Rose in preparing his final report. It is unfortunate that the timing of the two reviews should have prevented fuller consideration of each other's final reports. As a result, perhaps, the Cambridge Review gives too much attention to arguing against proposals in Rose's interim report when there were more important matters to disagree with in the Final Report.

Several times, in the somewhat repetitious structure of the Cambridge Review's final report, Rose is taken to task for recommending that children should enter reception classes in the September following their fourth birthday. This seems to me to be an old battle that it is simply not worth attempting to re-fight. In the mid-80s I worked as an HMI in Northamptonshire at the time when that LEA was adopting early entry to reception. There were real concerns based on the stark contrast between the staffing, facilities and curriculum in the nursery and primary sectors. Despite the best efforts of many schools and of the LEA advisers, some four-year olds were short-changed. Twenty years later, I was Ofsted's local managing inspector for Oxfordshire when they made the same move. The parameters had changed considerably: the greatly increased numbers of teaching assistants gave much better child to adult ratios; facilities within and outside reception classrooms had improved a great deal; early years settings across sectors were adopting a common curriculum which was soon to be made mandatory by the Government.

For me, it is of much greater concern that Rose's final report recommends that 'the two early learning goals for writing should be retained as valid, aspirational goals for the end of the EYFS.'[3] It seems to me that he has misunderstood the nature of the early learning goals; they are not meant to be aspirational but practical and achievable by most five year olds given the right support and experiences. The only method of demonstrating that they are valid is an empirical one: if settings can be found in which children of all backgrounds can achieve these goals without undue pressure, then they are valid for all; if they can't, they aren't. Rose's next recommendation is that the DCSF 'should offer practical examples of how this can work' [4] but actually the practical examples need to be found before deciding on validity. It is not valid to present five year olds with aspirational goals, to which all must aspire but few will achieve.

It is only the Editor's postscript that we read that 'there is much to commend in Rose'. This is a pity. An earlier discussion of what there is to commend would have helped to build a consensus for the future. For it is almost certain that primary schools will be implementing a curriculum based on Rose's recommendation for at least ten years. The Government has accepted the recommendations and they are now enshrined in a Bill; provided the Bill goes through parliament before the election, the new curriculum is on track for implementation in September 2011. There is still a lot to play for. The way in which the curriculum is implemented will depend on decisions made at local and school level, as well as on what kind of national pressure continues to be exerted on schools through tests and inspections. As schools prepare for implementation, they should be encouraged to read and consider the thoughtful comments of the Cambridge Review on the purposes and content of primary education, but they would have been further helped if there had been a clearer statement of the common ground on curriculum matters between the two reviews.

The Cambridge Review argues with Rose but does not descend to the 'discourse of derision'. For derisive comments on the new curriculum, we must turn to that past master of the genre, Chris Woodhead who says in his agony column in the *Sunday Times*, 'This is a curriculum that puts the teaching of so-called skills before actual knowledge, that takes every opportunity to peddle politically correct fads and that amalgamates separate subjects such as geography and history into themes such as the study of chocolate in a way that can only hinder real intellectual development. It is a disaster.'[5]

Both reviews make international comparisons but neither Cambridge nor Rose draws attention to two basic differences between primary education in this country and that in most other countries. Pupils in UK primary schools progress to the next class, or the next school, at the end of the year. In many other countries a proportion do not: they are held back and have to repeat the year because they are judged (often by unmoderated teacher assessment) not to be ready for the next class or school. The Cambridge Review, arguing against increased use of setting in English primary schools, advocates that the lessons of other countries need to be heeded, 'in many of which mixed-ability classes at the primary stage are the norm.'[6] However, I would strongly contend that this particular lesson should not be heeded or emulated: the practice of repeating a year is expensive, inefficient and deeply discouraging. It is to be hoped that it is not espoused by politicians looking for a neat way of raising the proportion attaining 'the expected level' by the end of the primary school to 100 per cent by the simple expedient of not allowing pupils to progress to secondary school until they have reached it. However, while we should not copy other systems in this respect, it is important to be aware of the difference. It means that mixed-ability in this country covers a wider range than in many other countries and that, in particular, secondary schools have a more challenging task to meet the variety of needs amongst their intake.

There is a second important difference. Most other countries specify the time allocation to each subject or domain of their national curriculum. Because the English National Curriculum has never done so, when the National Strategies made an offer that few schools could refuse, the strange situation arose that literacy (narrowly defined) and numeracy (with a much broader programme) were alone given protected time allocations. The inevitable result was a skewed curriculum that no longer gave adequate time to many subjects that supposedly remained part of each pupil's entitlement. At secondary level, the problem does not arise because, even if there are no national time allocations, at school level the timetable needed for a specialist teaching force, protects all subjects taught. There are of course dangers in too rigid a specification. The Cambridge Review rightly advocates a flexible approach to timetabling, with the inclusion of focused weeks to enable some domains to be explored in depth. Provided that this option remains open, I believe policy-makers in England ought to consider carefully the advantages of following the practice of other countries in specifying broad time allocations across the curriculum, in order to protect breadth and entitlement while giving emphasis to key skills. The French Primary Curriculum between 2002 and 2008 had an interesting way of focusing on oracy and literacy: time allocations for these skills were specified but they had to be delivered from within the time allocations given to several subjects, including history, geography, science and technology as well as French language and literature.[7]

Despite appearances, the issues surrounding testing and assessment remain much more open. The report published last May recommends that 'Key Stage 2 tests in English and mathematics should remain as a key accountability measure for all primary schools' [8] but the Group hedge their bets by saying that their recommendations are only offered for the short term and that 'for the longer term, we propose that alternative methods of testing and assessment should be trialled, and that teacher assessment should be strengthened. Further decisions should be taken once evidence from these trials is available.'[9] The move to strengthen teacher assessment builds on the work of QCA (the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) as well as the Cambridge Review and the reports of the Children, Schools and Families Committee of the House of Commons. While it is very welcome, it is regrettable that Dearing's recommendation, some fifteen years ago, that teacher assessment should have equal status with test results, was so widely ignored, particularly by Ofsted.

The ending of science tests in Year 6 is not before time, though surprisingly the Cambridge Review does not draw attention to the absurdity of the results which these tests have purported to show for several years. Taken at face value, they supposedly demonstrate that nearly half of England's eleven year olds reach a standard in their scientific knowledge that is to be expected of the average 13-year-old, giving much too rosy a picture and making it difficult for many pupils to show much progress in the three years of Key Stage 3.

Without the science test at Key Stage 2, there are now four forms of national assessment of pupils between the ages of five and sixteen, all of them

different. At the age of five, the EYFS profile requires teacher assessment across a broad curriculum. At the age of seven, there is teacher assessment, but only of reading, writing, mathematics and science. At eleven, the main method of assessment is externally marked tests of an even narrower range, now consisting of English and mathematics. At sixteen, through GCSEs and other qualifications, the main method is again externally marked tests but across a broad curriculum. Such a variegated picture is bound to be inherently unstable. It is difficult to conceive of any arguments that could show why the assessment of breadth is important at five and at sixteen, but not at seven or eleven. The variations also mean that the calculation of value-added is fraught with difficulty, if comparisons are made between narrowly based results and assessments across a broad curriculum. Changes at eleven seem inevitable, though as the Cambridge Review wisely says, further 'work is now urgently needed on the development of a comprehensive and coherent framework of summative assessment that can be administered unobtrusively and with minimum disruption towards the end of the primary phase.' The danger is that, whichever government is in place next summer, quick fixes will be put in place to prevent or react to direct action by teaching unions.

The Conservative proposal, to move the assessments to Year 7 is interesting not least because a large number of secondary schools already administer Cognitive Assessment Tests to their incoming students. It is surprising that the Cambridge Review makes no mention of this practice, which has been going on for years, because it makes plain how sceptical secondary schools are of the value of the national tests and of the usefulness of the results.

Whether the announcement of the winding down of the National Primary Strategy was a direct or indirect result of the views already expressed by the Cambridge Review, we may never know. Certainly, the Review makes a strong case against the literacy component of the strategy on the grounds of distorting the English curriculum, though, in common with many of the Review's witnesses, I regard the numeracy component in a much more favourable light. For me, one of the most damning indictments of the literacy component is that it has had a negative effect on the quality of writing. I am far from convinced that an early introduction to the analysis of writing styles helps young children to express their own ideas in writing, and the squeezing of other subjects, like history, geography and science, have limited the time and opportunity to write for different purposes in a variety of styles. The issue is raised in the Cambridge Review [10] but I would like to have read a bit more about attainments in writing, which, even measured narrowly by test results, have been disappointing at Key Stage 2 where they have consistently lagged well behind reading, even though at Key Stage 3 results for writing have been above those for reading.[11]

The Review states that the strategies have cost £2 billion and has ambitious plans for how this money can be better used in the future. The other source of extra funding, a reallocation of resources from secondary to primary, seems eminently sensible and has been recommended many times in the past.

Sadly, however, the opportunity to make this adjustment may have just recently been missed. The time to adjust the balance is when overall spending on education is rising; to increase the primary share at a time when spending is stable or falling, would mean cuts in secondary resources. The graph on page 467 shows clearly that overall spending increased from 1998, but that the gap between primary and secondary, which had been narrowing, became wider once more. Incidentally, this graph is all too rare in the Review's final report; I would have found more figures, more tables and more graphs helpful in illustrating the evidence that lies behind many of the Review's conclusions.

Plowden recommended that there should be regular reviews of primary education at intervals of around ten years. There was indeed an HMI survey in the 70s some ten years after Plowden. By the mid-1980s, HMI had gathered enough material for a follow-up survey through a programme of inspections of schools selected as part of a stratified, random sample. I did not understand at the time, and I understand even less now, why this survey, thoughtfully and creatively led by Don Denegri, a primary Staff Inspector, was never published. The principle of regular reviews or surveys seems a good one. I would suggest, however, that a further review in ten years time should not be of primary education in *England* but of primary education in *the UK*. There are now four largely separate educational systems and not enough attention is given to ways of learning from each other. In particular, in ten year's time, the decision of the Welsh Assembly to develop a foundation phase for three to seven year olds, will give interesting evidence about the benefits or otherwise of delaying the start of formal education.

The issues that surface in the Review have a wider significance than just for primary education. As I was driving up the M1 in the December rain, I heard an item on the radio news: 'The target-driven approach prevents people from using their professional judgements.' The 'people' to whom the item referred were not teachers but police officers. That is not to say that targets are in themselves a bad thing. They can start out as being an effective way to get service providers to re-focus. But if they are around for too long, and are given too much prominence, they become counter-productive. The Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families put it well when they said: 'We believe that the system is now out of balance in the sense that the drive to meet government-set targets has too often become the goal, rather than the means to the end of providing the best possible education for all chidren.'[12]

It is perhaps no accident that the first epigraph, on page 13 of the Review, is a lengthy quote from Rowan Williams, for few have paid more dearly, in an era of sound-bites, for a principled refusal to over-simplify. In that quote he argues for 'a generous awareness that there are different ways of making sense, different sorts of questions to ask about the world we're in, and insofar as those questions are pursued with integrity and seriousness they should be heard seriously and charitably.'[13] The Cambridge Review has undoubtedly pursued its wide-ranging questions with integrity and seriousness and, however

dismissively it was greeted by ministers, it will be heard charitably by many for several years to come, and deserves to be studied seriously.

Notes

[1] Cambridge Primary Review: why the government rejects it. www.guardian.co.uk. 16 October 2009

[2] Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review, 2009, p. 479.

[3] Final report of Rose Review of Primary Curriculum, 2009, Recommendation 11(i).

[4] Ibid, Recommendation 11(ii).

[5] Chris Woodhead, *Sunday Times*, 6 December 2009.

[6] Cambridge Review, pp. 378-379.

[7] For details see http://www.inca.org.uk/1379.html

[8] Report of the Expert Group on Assessment, DCSF, 2009, Recommendation 7(a).

[9] Ibid, p. 5, paragraph 13.

[10] Cambridge Review, p. 240: 'the NLS increasingly concentrated on the teaching of reading with the inevitable result that the quality of children's writing suffered.'

[11] Results for 2008 given at http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway have the following figures at Key Stage 2: level 4 and above, 86% in reading, 67% in writing; level 5 and above: 48% in reading, 20 % in writing. By contrast, at Key Stage 3 the figures are level 5 and above, 69% in reading, 77% in writing; level 6 and above, 33% in reading, 36% in writing.

[12] House of Commons *Testing and Assessment: conclusions and recommendations of third report of session 2007-8,* paragraph 7

[13] Rowan Williams (2008) Faith, Reason and Quality Assurance: having faith in academic life, lecture given at the University of Cambridge, 21 February.

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