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## Conservative Curriculum and Partial Pedagogy: a critique of proposals in the Cambridge Primary Review

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**ABSTRACT** This article offers a critique of proposals for curriculum reform and pedagogy in the Cambridge Primary Review. It is argued that the proposals on curriculum lack innovatory character, and if adopted, would reduce opportunities for teacher and school experimentation. The proposed national framework of domains has its provenance in centralised models developed in the 1970s and 1980s. A proposal for the inclusion of religious education in a national statutory framework is judged at best to be privileging religious institutions, and at worst to be supporting indoctrination. In respect of pedagogy the emphasis given to one version of constructivist pedagogy, dialogic teaching, is questioned. Alternative, more radical proposals, that might have been developed, are suggested.

### Introduction

The final report and recommendations from the Cambridge Review of Primary Education in England (Alexander, 2010) have been criticised by politicians and civil servants for 're-cycling' old evidence, especially about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and praised by much of the educational establishment for its independent line on the same matters. There is some substance in both judgements: much of the research on curriculum used by the Review is well established, with some of its most substantive ideas generated in the curriculum development movements, and by Her Majesty's Inspectorate, during the 1970s and 1980s; and most of the Review's proposals on a national curriculum framework directly challenge the policies pursued by English governments since 1988, its most important achievement being the convincing case for conceptualising the curriculum as a whole, and its dismantling of the argument

for perpetuating the status distinction between a narrow core of English and Mathematics (or literacy and numeracy in recent policies) and the rest of the curriculum.

The Cambridge Review has a number of strengths: it is based on research reviews; it locates curriculum and schooling within a broader frame of reference to childhood; it has a distinctively convincing section on child development and learning; it has a strong detailed treatment of policy development in England. Moreover, it re-cycles the well-established evidence into a coherent and sustained critique of the English government's intervention in curriculum and pedagogy – not too difficult to do, but a necessary and well executed objective; and it effectively promotes the evidence that national testing has distorted curriculum priorities, leading to an unduly narrow curriculum. A little-remarked virtue is that the final report was collectively authored, as a genuine collaborative enterprise replacing the conventional single authorship. These elements will ensure that the Cambridge Review contributes to our understanding of policy and theory in a permanent way. They are, and will remain, its virtues.

It might be thought, rightly in my view, that the child, not the curriculum, is at the heart of the Cambridge Review, because of the power and authority of its work on childhood and child development and learning. Yet the curriculum and pedagogy are specifically identified as among its 'main concerns'; they occupy around one third of the Review's final report, and their treatment is proclaimed as innovative and future-oriented. For the Review team, pedagogy requires 're-thinking' and the report leads 'towards a new curriculum,' but what is proposed on curriculum and pedagogy fails to live up to these ambitions, being backward-looking, cumbersome and partial.

### **Curricular Aims: re-inventing broken wheels?**

On curriculum, the Cambridge Review links 12 aims (relating to the individual, the wider world and to learning) to 8 'domains' (arts and creativity; citizenship and ethics; faith and belief; language oracy and literacy; mathematics; physical and emotional health; place and time; science and technology) and adds 10 'procedural principles' that schools and support systems need to be guided on. This complexity – a matrix for planning purposes of 12 x 8 x 10 elements, further multiplied by the number of pupils in a class – may reflect the realities of curriculum theorising, but as a planning tool for teachers to use, it is egregious. It is probably more complex and detailed than the much-derided and now abandoned, statements of attainment brought in with the original 1988 national curriculum.

The aims are, rightly, conceived as the driving force for all thinking about curriculum. However, they are very ambitious, over-arching and inevitably motherhood and apple pie – respect, reciprocity, interdependence, citizenship, empowerment, etc – what's not to like ? Nevertheless, there are two highly problematic issues.

The first is that, overall, the aims for social and personal qualities such as empowerment, respect and other fundamentally societal values fall foul of the sociological criticism, argued almost forty years ago by Musgrove (1971, p. 13), that schools were ‘chronically underpowered’ to achieve even the strictly *educational* aims society sets for them, let alone the more difficult social and personal aims. Bernstein (1970) put the problem in a less prosaic way when he claimed that education could not compensate for society. If such an all embracing set of aims were to become nationally adopted, it would be setting up some schools, especially those in economically deprived areas, to fail. The history of Educational Priority Areas (Halsey & Sylva, 1987; Smith, 1987) offers a cautionary tale about the relative ineffectiveness of schools in helping those living in economically deprived areas develop social values set by schools. Despite the Review’s advocacy of partnerships, more recent initiatives, such as the Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities, draw upon much more inter-agency models, but have little to show so far in terms of regenerating community agency. This is not to advocate a pessimistic social determinism, but it is to note the long trail of evidence suggesting that we set realistic ambitions for schooling. As Halsey concluded (Halsey & Sylva, 1987), it is unrealistic to expect schools unaided to redress societal and economic inequalities. A harsher judgement about the USA came from Katz (1975, p. 142), who argued that for poor, especially black or brown, children, education continued to control rather than to educate.

The second problem is the puzzling inclusion of ‘Enacting dialogue’, as a separate aim, even though its values had already been covered in the preceding aims. Although ‘enacting dialogue’ hints at co-construction of knowledge through personalisation, (itself a highly problematic idea), referring to ideas by Hargreaves (2004), it reads mainly very much like special pleading for ‘dialogic teaching’. This is an elderly hobby horse with an outstandingly good pedigree – it has been around since educationalists in the English-speaking world started to interpret Vygotsky – which has recently been tweaked and given a new lease of life, by Alexander, the Cambridge Review’s director (Alexander, 2004a). However, linguistically and logically it is not an aim, but a means or method of teaching and learning, the implications of which for classroom discourse were well established by researchers such as Wells (Wells, 1986; Wells, 1999; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). It does not seem to have occurred to the Review team that to resurrect this approach as an *aim* for a mandatory national curriculum would be to give statutory force to a *teaching method*, exactly what the Cambridge Review rightly excoriates the government for doing with its literacy and numeracy strategies.

### **Domains: back to the future?**

The proposal for the term ‘domains’, (rather than the better known ‘areas of learning’), is unconvincing. It is argued that the term ‘domains’ is more appropriate because the substantive domains are ‘curriculum categories’ that

have a 'thematic and/or epistemological coherence and integrity,' while 'areas' is 'ragged round the edges.' However so are 'domains.' The domain of citizenship and ethics for example is extremely ragged, since it (they ?) is (are ?) pursued through the life of the school, and in every lesson where the child learns discipline in the sense that Durkheim meant it.

The domain of Physical and Emotional Health, is treated in perhaps the most entertainingly self-deluding manner, with the Review claiming that it needs to be seen as 'a complete re-conceptualisation' (from PE), because 'it deals with the emotions, and relationships and with the human body, its development and health together with the skills of agility, co-ordination and teamwork acquired through sport and PE...'. Had no-one on the Review team heard of *mens sana in corpore sano* ?

The argument for the distinctiveness of the domains and the associated terminological nit-picking seem forced, tedious and trivial – angels and pinheads come to mind, – and, as the Cambridge Review acknowledged, underlying it all was as much a political as an epistemological justification – the perceived need to generate a terminology that, if not novel, at least appeared different, from that of the competing Rose Review of the primary curriculum, established by the government (DCFS, 2009).

The substance of the domains, despite disavowals from Cambridge, is a retrospective celebration of the conceptions for curriculum development in the 1970s and 1980s promoted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). With the possible exceptions of faith and belief, and citizenship and ethics, the rest of the substance of the domains, though not necessarily all their combinations, would resonate fully with HMI's proposals. This might be thought to be recognition of the enduring quality of HMI thinking, but it is not easily characterised as innovatory.

As for the domain of citizenship and ethics, it is debatable and uncertain whether their purposes are best achieved through formal inclusion in a national curriculum framework, rather than developed in moral education learnt through immersion in the life of the school, including life in classrooms (Durkheim, 1961). This is not to discount the possibility of doing both, but the uncertainty arises from quite strong evidence going back to the 1978 HMI survey (DES, 1978), that primary schools are particularly effective in meeting such purposes through the ethos of school life. This genuine uncertainty was not adequately treated in the Cambridge Review, which asserted that because the aims carry a moral charge, 'it makes sense for....citizenship to be mandatory.' This it takes to mean mandatory in the curriculum. It was not made clear to whom this made sense, but the matter is much more problematic, and warrants better justification than the Cambridge Review offered.

The evidence about teaching citizenship formally through the curriculum, for example in the core programmes of social studies in America, stretches back nearly forty years, and is shown to be less than impressive as an effective method of developing citizenship and its associated values. (See Lawton et al, 1969, pp. 9-19; Lawton, 1983, pp. 54-55). More recent initiatives, however,

especially those of Ross (2007, 2008), who holds a Jean Monnet *ad personam* chair, offer a promise of less nationalistic, more systematic concept-based programmes, with the development of cross-national, human rights approaches, using enactive learning, ie., ‘the involvement of young people in establishing rights in their own schools and societies’. (Ross, 2008, p. 109). These do not provide teaching of programmes of study in a curriculum, so much as learning through participation in organisations.

The most illogical and least convincingly argued case is the inclusion of ‘faith and belief’ as one of the domains that, it is proposed, will form part of the statutory framework. The Cambridge Review received the evidence presented to it, some arguing for a secular curriculum, others, usually from religious lobby groups, arguing the value of inculcating faith in young children. However, the Review finally recommended including religious education in the mandatory curriculum on the grounds that religion had a fundamental place in society’s history culture and language.

We take the view that religion is so fundamental to this country’s history culture and language as well as to the daily lives of many of its inhabitants that it must remain within the curriculum, even though some Review witnesses argued that it should be removed on the grounds that England is a predominantly secular society or that religious belief is for the family rather than the school.

There are three points to make here. First, the Review distinguishes between teaching about religions and teaching to inculcate religious belief, but lumps these two incompatible purposes together into the one domain. Teaching about religions should surely find a place in the time and place (i.e. history and geography) domain, whereas inculcating religious belief could not. Second, the Review does not grant the arguments of the witnesses against including religious education the courtesy of a fair or adequate – or even any – response. It simply noted and ignored them, presumably because it had no good basis for rebutting them. As to the privileging rationalisation that religion has a fundamental place in history culture and language, one obvious riposte is: so has racism, so has sexually deviant behaviour and so has marbles, but that is not a reason for including them in the primary curriculum. A more reasoned position, articulated elsewhere in the Review, is that the test for including or excluding material should be whether it contributes to achieving the aims of the curriculum. There is an obvious sense in which inculcating religious belief fails this test. Indeed it could be argued that it runs entirely counter to the Review’s aims concerning ‘Empowerment’, ‘Autonomy’ and ‘Encouraging Respect and Reciprocity.’

Simultaneously, the Review team acknowledged that denominational schools see their mission as the *advancement* of particular beliefs, apparently seeing no reason for objecting to this purpose. The advancement of religious beliefs – the term the Review uses – is a euphemism for indoctrination. Yet nowhere did the Review face up to established arguments from philosophers of

education (e.g. Hirst & Peters, 1970; Snook, 1972) that the concepts, aims and methods of education and those of indoctrination are incompatible.

The Cambridge Review's argument for the mandatory status of religious education is therefore constructing a case for the continuation of the widespread, (though not universal, and usually not very effective), attempts to indoctrinate young children into religious belief, particularly but not exclusively in denominational schools. In doing so, far from imagining a new curriculum, it reverts to the Victorian values and purposes, which it rightly criticise in respect of other curriculum aspects – undue emphasis on the elementary basics, obedience and deference. Again, this is hardly innovatory, certainly not future-oriented, and far too deferential to the privilege exercised since 1944 in publicly funded education by the churches. Perhaps that explains the Review's opening paragraph – a startling quotation, (drawing on St Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 13, verse 13), from the Archbishop of Canterbury, asserting that education is about faith hope and charity – and the Review's reverential adoption of the Archbishop's conception as a 'manifesto'.

### **Syllabus by Committee?**

The mechanisms proposed for establishing the curriculum lack sufficient detail to enable a full evaluation to occur. However at face value they look old-fashioned, bureaucratic and unrealistic, and hark back to the mechanisms used in designing the 1988 national curriculum.

The Cambridge Review proposed, without justification, national and community responsibility for the curriculum at a 70/30 time allocation split respectively, in which a national curriculum framework would be statutory, and programmes of study, whether national or local, would be non-statutory. This split is not novel, being identical to that proposed by civil servants for the original 1988 curriculum.

The Cambridge Review also proposed that curriculum decision making in respect of the national framework and programmes of study should be handed over to 'independent' expert panels. Again this is what happened in the development of original 1988 curriculum, with the consequence, according to Graham (1990), who was in charge of its development and implementation, that each subject panel was full of 'zealots' pressing the case for their own subject to have as much time as possible, be spelled out in great detail, and to be mandatory. The national framework became over-bureaucratic and overwhelmingly detailed. It is difficult to see how the proposed eight national panels of experts in curriculum areas would operate differently now and it is unrealistic to assume that current or future governments would abandon their taste for interference and control by allowing genuine independence on a national statutory curriculum framework, supported from public funds.

However, the Cambridge Review *added* to that mechanism a proposal that there should be community responsibility to develop locally flavoured programmes of study for 30% of the whole curriculum time. What is proposed

is a process of local committees (Community Curriculum Partnerships), mimicking the national committees, and convened by a local authority, comprising secondary primary and early years teachers, domain experts and community representatives, with presumably eight domain-specific sub-committees. They would be required to consult children's views. Yet the programmes produced in this way would be non-statutory, so schools could ignore the outcomes of the process, rendering it actually bureaucratic and potentially impotent. Surprisingly, given the importance attached to the community element, the Cambridge Review leaves this cumbersome process uncostered.

The underlying idea of community responsibility, superficially democratic, hinges on a romanticised and bourgeois conception of 'community' which the Review assumes to be collective, cohesive and mutually supportive. This may be true of some of the middle class communities in Cambridge, but in many urban contexts, the catchment areas of schools are riven by conflict, some of it racially motivated, some of it religiously biased, some of it class based, and by competition. In these areas, the Review's proposal is a recipe for increasing not only bureaucracy, but also strife. To curriculum complexity the Review added political naivete.

The astonishing outcome of all this curriculum committee work, were it to be taken seriously by a school, would be that its teachers, head and governors would have no decision-making at all on curriculum (in the sense of the statutory framework and the non-statutory programmes of study), 100% of which would have been prescribed by agencies external to it, either nationally or locally. This is hardly a ringing endorsement of professional judgement, so fulsomely praised elsewhere in the Review.

### **Pedagogy: an exercise in academic partiality ?**

The Cambridge Review's treatment of pedagogy is also problematic, but in a different and more disturbing way from that of curriculum. The main difficulty is the extensive and uncritical referencing to the work of its director, Alexander.

The chapter on Pedagogy includes a thought-provoking definition of pedagogy as 'the act of teaching together with its attendant discourse...' Somewhat coyly, this is introduced by the phrase, 'it does not seem presumptuous to use the definition of pedagogy which originated within this Review's team.' Actually the definition did not originate within the Review's team. It comes from a paper by Alexander (2004b), published a couple of years before the Review team was established.

This definition is followed by a strong and convincing attack on an easy target viz., the imposition of a state theory of learning, though the Review team did not note that this criticism was also made of its much admired Plowden Report, as promoting a 'semi-official ideology' (Davies & Bernstein, 1969; Dearden, 1978).

The significant part of the chapter explores the value of synoptic frameworks for conceptualising pedagogy, drawing upon three models. The first is a double framework used by Alexander in his cross-cultural studies. It does not conclude with a critical evaluation of the model. The second is a set of 10 principles commissioned from the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme of nearly 70 individual projects. These principles are applauded, not because of their intrinsic value as ideas but because they 'chime with so much that the Review has found...'. The ESRC principles are then critically evaluated: 'this list is ...less a framework than a post hoc rationalisation based on a number of disparate projects, whose selection and funding themselves were based on non-pedagogical criteria.' The third is a genuinely radical re-conceptualisation by Hargreaves (2004) of personalising learning, in which the co-construction of educational knowledge by teachers and pupils is a central feature. This echoes Leadbeater's (2003) general theory of deep personalisation in public services and is the only genuinely innovative model referred to. This model too gains the Cambridge Review team's approval, not for its intrinsic value as an innovative theorisation being applied experimentally in real schools, but because it can be expropriated by the Review. 'Once again we find resonance with what the Cambridge Review has found and said.'

The main conclusion from this theorising about pedagogy is that, despite the Review's claim not to be nominating a best buy, interaction of the kind recommended in 'dialogic teaching' is the 'single point where a great deal of research converges'.

Yet it is very difficult to detect significant differences in the Alexander version from other constructivist work. Alexander's version emphasises five characteristics:

*Collectivity*: teachers and children address learning tasks together whether as a group or a class

*Reciprocity*: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints

*Cumulation*: teachers and children build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry

*Support*: children articulate their ideas freely without fear of embarrassment or 'wrong' answers and they help each other to reach common understanding

*Purposefulness*: the dialogue is planned and transacted with specific learning outcomes clearly in view

If we take one example only, that of Wells & Chang-Wells (1992) based in Canadian schools, we can see how it overlaps with Alexander's dialogic teaching, though it is expressed in simpler and more natural language. They described (p. 8) their approach as comprising five elements:

- learning is active, manifested in opportunities for learners to set their own goals, plan and carry out the activities necessary to



- evaluate the consequences, and present their work to an audience of peers;
- the recognition of the social nature of learning, manifested in the encouragement of collaboration between learners in all aspects of their work and in the guidance and assistance provided by the teacher through conferences with individuals and groups while tasks are in progress as well as when they have been completed;
  - the recognition of the affective foundation of thinking and learning manifested in the positive value accorded to empathy, curiosity, caring and risk taking;
  - the recognition of the holistic nature of learning manifested in the spontaneous integration of information and strategies from the domains of language, science, social studies and mathematics in the interest of action that is purposeful and meaningful;
  - the recognition of the central role of language both as the medium through which learning takes place and as a means of collaboration and integration, manifested in the encouragement of learners' purposeful use of linguistic resources, both spoken and written, as tools for thinking, cooperating and communicating in relation to the tasks they undertake.

This is not to argue against the adoption of dialogic teaching, which, as with other constructivist methods, has considerable virtue as a method for engaging pupil voice.

### **Conclusion**

It will be seen from the above that I think that an opportunity has been missed to develop more radical and more progressive policy proposals. Four obvious areas are: curriculum control, pedagogy outside the school, teacher effectiveness research, and pedagogy and cultural reproduction.

#### *On Curriculum Control*

There was an opportunity to develop the case for schools or clusters of schools to develop their own aims and their own programmes, in order to give greater authenticity, variation and experiment in the curriculum. The experience of the nationally imposed curriculum has hardly been an outstanding success story in primary schools, and the system needs freeing up and re-professionalising. Proposing a statutory national framework and developing programmes of study nationally and locally by agencies external to the school shuts off this more radical option.

*On Pedagogy Outside the School*

The definition of pedagogy used by the Review is very interesting, emphasising the importance of principled decision making by teachers. However the contemporary developments in learning outside the school, require exploration of a wider conception of pedagogy, including the relationship, if any, of learning outside, to learning inside, the school. The Review goes some way to opening up this idea, citing the TLRP evidence that much of a child's learning goes on outside the school. But the definition finally proposed, largely restricts the concept to the classroom.

*On Pedagogy and Teacher Effectiveness Research*

The Review team did not integrate research from teacher effectiveness research into its proposals, in places mistakenly referring to it as *school* effectiveness research, thereby ignoring one of the most fruitful fields of scientific attempts to assess teaching methods. Such research, which the Cambridge Review acknowledged to be 'vast' and 'durable', was nonetheless dismissed in one page as 'simply a statistical calculation of the gain in output over input.' It did not discuss or seem to be aware of the recent developments in the field, notably the interactive models developed by Creemers & Kyriakides (2007).

*On Cultural Reproduction and Pedagogy*

There appears to have been a reluctance to investigate the extent to which dialogic teaching might be socially or culturally biased, and the extent to which, it would tend to confer advantage on children from homes with high cultural and linguistic capital. The research based frameworks for critiquing pedagogies, especially those relying heavily on talk, have existed for a long time. (e.g. Bernstein, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Apple, 1982). The question left hovering in the air, unexplored by the Review team, is whether dialogic teaching would reinforce existing forms of cultural reproduction, have no effect, or contribute to reducing them. This is critical to a proper evaluation of pedagogy, and it must be a matter of regret that the question was not raised by the Review, and that all the three above named authors, the leading theorists on this topic, do not appear in the index, despite the Review's extensive treatment of social disadvantage.

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