
Evidence, Policy and the Reform of Primary Education: a cautionary tale

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ABSTRACT Here, at *FORUM's* invitation, is the text of the 2014 Godfrey Thomson Trust public lecture at the University of Edinburgh. Its backdrop is the centralisation of educational decision-making in England since 1988 and the power and patronage exercised by the Secretary of State. Taking as examples recent policies on childhood, curriculum and standards of pupil achievement, and referring to the evidence and experience of the Cambridge Primary Review, the article revisits and tests the claim that in England educational policy is now more problem than solution. While making necessary distinctions between policy as promulgated and enacted, and while showing that across a diverse canvas some policies have been better conceived and received than others, the article identifies three tendencies that all too often divide policy from truth and the prospect of effective and sustainable action: policymakers' selective use of evidence; the prior but as yet under-investigated mediation of that evidence by government officials as well as its more familiar distortion by the press; and the Manichaeian narratives of progress, its architects and its enemies to which too many policymakers remain addicted.

The 'Pestilential Calm of Despotism'?

In 2008, at the peak of the Labour government's drive for educational transformation, four prominent academics wrote to *The Independent*:

We are specialists with considerable experience of the different phases of education who have come independently to the same conclusion: that government policy is no longer the solution to the difficulties we face but our greatest problem ... It is not only the torrent of new policy that rains down on each sector, the constant changes in direction and the automatic rubbishing of any discomforting evidence ... It is also the failure of successive ministers to appreciate that reform has to be accompanied by continuity if the

stability of our educational institutions and the quality of their courses are to be preserved. (Coffield et al, 2008)

Since under Labour's coalition successors neither the torrent nor the attendant 'rubbishing' have abated, the above complaint from Professors Ball, Coffield, Scott and Taylor deserves to be revisited.

Behind their letter lay a deeper unease: the centralisation of educational decision-making and control that England has experienced since 1988. This unease is now almost universal, except perhaps among those who have benefited from ministerial patronage and preferment and the inducements and honours through which the coalition government's free school, academy and teaching school schemes have been promoted.[1] For what cannot be denied is the extent to which ministerial power has increased. In 1950, Atlee's Minister of Education, Lancastrian George Tomlinson, famously said, 'Minister knows nowt about curriculum' (Lawton, 1980). This was a statement of legal fact, not ignorance. Government provided the administrative framework; local authorities and schools decided what and how to teach. Even the inspectors stayed clear. When I started teaching in 1964 I armed myself with the curriculum handbook produced for the Ministry of Education (as the Department for Education [DfE] was then known) by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). It was entitled, cautiously, *Primary Education: suggestions for the consideration of teachers and others concerned with the work of primary schools* (Ministry of Education, 1958). Education Minister Tony Crosland, who introduced sweeping changes to other aspects of English education, nevertheless respected this compact: 'I didn't regard either myself or my officials', he said in 1967, 'as competent to interfere with the curriculum' (quoted in Kogan, 1971).

Fast forward to 2013 and Secretary of State Michael Gove. No polite 'suggestions for the consideration of teachers' in his curriculum prospectus. Here he is, laying it on the line and lobbing one of his trademark insults while he is about it: 'We have stripped out the ... piously vapid happy-talk and instead laid out the knowledge that every child is entitled to expect they be taught' (Gove, 2013a).

There's been a similar shift, in substance if not tone, in other areas of education, including pedagogy, the final frontier of professional autonomy. In 1991, echoing Crosland, Education Secretary Kenneth Clarke said: 'Questions about how to teach are not for government to determine' (quoted in Alexander et al, 1992, p. 5). Just six years Tony Blair stormed into government with the slogan 'Education, education, education' and imposed closely prescribed daily literacy and numeracy lessons on every primary school in England. These told teachers not just what to teach, but minute by minute, when and how.

Nor is the phrase 'rains down' in that letter to *The Independent* – 'the torrent of new policies that rains down' – mere hyperbole. Between 1996 and 2004 England's primary schools received 459 official documents on literacy alone (Moss, 2009). That's over one a week, even before we start counting the

many directives on numeracy and other matters in which government also believed it necessary to intervene.

Staying in the same metaphorical territory, it's generally accepted that the watershed in this process was the Thatcher government's 1987 Education Reform Bill, enacted as law in 1988. Of this the then Labour opposition education shadow Jack Straw said: 'Under the disguise of fine phrases like "parental choice" and "decentralisation", [it] will deny choice and instead centralise power and control over schools, colleges and universities in the hands of the secretary of state in a manner without parallel in the western world' (Straw, 1987). Rousing words indeed, worthy of that other Jack Straw, who, in 1381, was one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt. But in view of Labour's reforms a decade later, Straw Junior might have added, 'You ain't seen nothing yet'.

As might Michael Gove. He continued but also far exceeded what had been initiated by the Conservatives in 1987 and Labour in 1997, further weakening local authority control, greatly expanding directly funded academies along American charter school lines and encouraging parents, charities and business to set up government-funded free schools, all in the name of standards, choice and freedom. Meanwhile he tightened the government's grip on curriculum, assessment and inspection, while with local authorities in steep decline he removed the remaining checks and balances on absolute ministerial power, ensuring that nothing obstructed the line of command between his office and the schools.

It's therefore entirely pertinent to recall the warning of Chartist leader William Lovett in 1840:

While we are anxious to see a general system of education adopted, we have no doubt of the impropriety of yielding such an important duty as the education of our children to any government ... If ever knavery and hypocrisy succeed in establishing the centralising, state-moulding and knowledge-forcing scheme in England, so assuredly will the people degenerate into passive submission to injustice, and the spirit sink into the pestilential calm of despotism. (Lovett, 1840)

Strong words, but then he was writing from Warwick Gaol having been imprisoned for posting placards condemning the Birmingham police for their heavy-handed response to a peaceful demonstration. Sounds familiar? But Lovett's warning that some policies are too important for government, or that they trespass too far on individual liberties, is worth pondering; for state-moulding and knowledge-forcing are what, in some countries, education is very much about.

Yet indiscriminating opposition to centralisation is unhelpful and unrealistic. Governments are elected to govern, and even in totalitarian regimes some aspects of education are less centralised than others. Dale (1997), for example, distinguishes *funding*, *regulation* and *delivery*; while the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (1998) differentiates

organisation of instruction, personnel management, planning and structures and resources.[2] The Cambridge Primary Review grouped 19 strands of educational policy into 6 broad areas before assessing their impact: children and families; curriculum; pedagogy; assessment, standards and accountability; teachers, teacher education and workforce reform; national and local infrastructure, finance and governance (Alexander, 2010, pp. 469-470).

From these I have time for just three examples: children and childhood; curriculum; and educational standards. I might be expected also to comment on the current rumblings about free schools and academies. These are central to Michael Gove's liberationist theology and are already provoking accusations of zealotry, perjury, incompetence and financial malpractice comparable to those roused by charter schools in the USA (see, for example, Ravitch, 2013; Berliner & Glass, 2014). But the issue is too current and heated for considered assessment, and hard evidence is as yet too sparse.

About the article's stance and focus I enter an explanation and a caveat. First, I've spent much of the past few decades researching and writing about policy and practice in primary education in Britain and other countries. But I've also been a government appointee on national advisory bodies and enquiries: the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE) from 1989 to 1994; the Secretary of State's so-called 'three wise men' enquiry into primary teaching in 1991-92 (Alexander et al, 1992); the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), later abolished by Michael Gove, from 1997 to 2002. Between 2006 and 2012, as director of the independent Cambridge Primary Review, I had no fewer than 72 meetings with ministers, officials and leaders of government advisory bodies to discuss the Review's findings and implications. Even now I find myself on a government group advising on resources for the very national curriculum of which I've been so critical (Alexander, 2012b). So I comment not from a distance but having engaged with policymakers regularly and directly – sometimes successfully, sometimes not. My stance is that of both outsider and insider.

Second, complaints about 'the torrent of new policy that rains down on each sector, the constant changes in direction and the automatic rubbishing of any discomforting evidence' may challenge the way policy is created but do not necessarily prove that a policy is misguided in intention or ineffective in outcome, although if evidence counts for anything both propositions seem likely to be true. Such complaints prompt a necessary distinction between policy as promulgated, the policy process, and the way policy is enacted. In what follows I shall comment on all three dimensions and shall return to the distinction at the end. For the moment, we need to be alert to the danger of treating policy as monolithic and immutable.

Case 1: children and childhood

Following several appalling cases of child neglect and abuse which exposed a lack of coordination and liaison within and between the various local authority

services concerned with children's education and welfare, Labour launched its 2003 Every Child Matters initiative. This required local authorities to provide 'joined up' multi-agency services in education and care, and to give all children entitlement to support in respect of their health, safety, educational achievement and economic well-being. A Children's Commissioner was appointed. The remit of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) was expanded to cover children's services as well as schools. Local authority directors of education became directors of children's services. The Department for Education and Skills became the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Michael Gove renamed it the Department for Education, though he did retain a Minister for Children and Families.

Then, encompassing inequality as well as protection, the Sure Start scheme was expanded to take in the 20% of areas in England where social and economic disadvantage were most concentrated. These initiatives were followed by the 2004 Children Act, the 2006 Childcare Act, the 2007 Children's Plan and the 2007 Narrowing the Gap initiative which sought to reduce the gulf in social, educational and other outcomes between vulnerable children and the rest. Simultaneously, attempts were made to rationalise the complex mix of early years education and provision by requiring all providers, public and private, to adhere to the care and learning requirements of an Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Much of this work has been taken forward by the present government. Labour's child protection structures were retained, as, initially, was the EYFS. Narrowing the Gap was upgraded to the Pupil Premium scheme, which in 2014 provided schools with an additional £1300 for every pupil eligible for free school meals to help them raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. The cost of the Pupil Premium is substantial: £2.5 billion in 2014 (DfE, 2014).

Although questions have been raised about the implementation of some of these initiatives, their rationale has been broadly accepted. There's a consensus, then, that in addressing gross inequalities and inadequacies in protection, support and provision for young children, and in attempting to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and the rest, not only is it right and necessary for government to intervene but government is perhaps the only body with the necessary power and resources to do so effectively. This indeed was the conclusion of the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2010, pp. 508-509, paras. 144-146).

Yet even here support shades into opposition. The Cambridge Review reported unease about the tendency for the developmental goals of the EYFS to be undercut by pressure to get children reading and writing as soon as possible. This transmuted into resistance when in 2014 the government made the EYFS non-statutory, replaced it with statutory baseline assessment and reintroduced tests of seven-year-olds. And when in 2007 our Review published research evidence identifying the increasing 'scholarisation' of early childhood through formal learning backed by increasing quantities of homework (Mayall, 2010) – both of them starting at a much younger age in England than in many other

countries – we triggered widespread support. Except of course from ministers: they accused us of being more interested in play than standards. That dichotomy, as every early years expert will testify, is untenable.

What government failed to understand – and regrettably this goes for some schools too – was that young children learn at least as much outside school as within it and that some of this learning is of a kind that schools can't replicate. Researchers calculate that school effects count for only about 30% of pupil attainment (see, for example, Berliner, 2012). This statistic is rightly cited to justify interventions of a compensatory kind with families that are vulnerable, disadvantaged or marginalised. But it's also an argument for respecting children's out-of-school learning and allowing parents the same autonomy that teachers constantly demand.

For behind anxieties about the increasing intrusion of the state into children's lives there's a debate about childhood itself. Protecting young children is one thing; prescribing the character of their lives is quite another. To secure balance in this debate, here's what the Cambridge Primary Review concluded from the many written submissions it received on this subject and from its conversations with parents, teachers, community leaders and children themselves in 87 'community soundings' in regional locations ranging from Cornwall to Northumberland and Lancashire to Kent, and including conurbations like Birmingham and London (Alexander & Hargreaves, 2007):

There are legitimate concerns about the quality of children's lives, but the 'crisis' of contemporary childhood may have been overstated, and children themselves were the Review's most upbeat witnesses. The real and urgent crisis concerns those children whose lives are blighted by poverty, disadvantage, risk and discrimination, and in such matters governments are right to intervene. Meanwhile, among the many positives of modern childhood our report celebrates the evidence on just how much young children know, understand and can do, and argues for a primary education which heeds their voices and empowers them as both learners and citizens. But the report also argues that the unique character and potential of childhood should be protected from a system apparently bent on pressing children into a uniform mould at an ever-younger age. (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010, pp. 1-2)

Case 2: curriculum

In the area of curriculum, policies have proved even more contentious. The story starts in 1986 when, following ten years of ministerial muttering, Education Secretary Keith Joseph insisted there would be no national curriculum in England. One year later, as is the way with ministerial denials, a national curriculum was announced by his successor, Kenneth Baker. A year after that it was enshrined in law as the 1988 Education Reform Act.

Initial resistance to this paradigm of Lovett's 'centralising, state-moulding and knowledge-forcing scheme' was eventually replaced by acceptance that its content was benign rather than threatening – though there was an awful lot of it – and that it had secured children's entitlement to the broad basic education that in too many primary schools they had not previously received. Thus, ten years earlier, HMI had found that whether children encountered science, history, geography or music in their primary schools depended largely on what their teachers felt inclined to teach (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1978).

The exceptions were literacy and numeracy, which have been constants in English primary schools since 'payment by results' in the 1860s, together usually occupying about half of each day. 'Do literacy and numeracy in the morning when the children are fresh' was the stock advice to new teachers, signalling that art, music and other trivia should be 'done' in the afternoon when the freshness has worn off. Despite this, the refrain from the political and media right has always been the claimed neglect of literacy and numeracy rather than the actual neglect of the arts and humanities. Hence, in the list of education policy milestones in the third chapter of our final report you will find 'Back to basics' in 1969, 'Back to basics again' in 1992, and 'Back to basics yet again' in 1998 (Alexander, 2010, pp. 40-43). The reference to 1969 refers to the now infamous Black Papers, 1992 to John Major's pre-election diatribe against progressive education and 1998 to Labour's literacy and numeracy strategies.

These earlier 'back to basics' flurries seem almost muted by comparison with events since Michael Gove launched the latest national curriculum review in 2011. Actually, this episode starts in 2007, under Labour. That was the point at which, having welcomed the Cambridge Primary Review when it was launched a year earlier, ministers became uneasy about the first of its interim reports and the anti-government spin the media attached to them. According to Mick Waters, the then head of curriculum at the QCA, ministers saw which way the media wind was blowing and, aware that we were about to publish proposals on the primary curriculum, launched a pre-emptive strike in the form of their own primary curriculum review, commissioned from former primary chief inspector Jim Rose.[3] He and I had been colleagues since the 1980s so this was frustrating to both of us and we attempted to pool our ideas. But ministers wanted none of this, and presented the two reviews as implacably opposed, as of course did the press.

The Rose curriculum report was published in 2009 (Rose, 2009) and Labour immediately set in train the legislative process leading to its implementation. But they were too late. The Conservatives didn't like Rose, it fell victim to the pre-election legislative 'wash-up' when Parliament decides which bills to push through and which to dump, and one of the first acts of Michael Gove as incoming Secretary of State was to order a new national curriculum review with a very different remit. Primary schools, which had started preparing to implement Rose and were broadly in sympathy with its proposals, were not at all pleased.

The Rose report was unacceptable to Gove partly because he judged it to be tainted by 1960s progressivism (which it wasn't) but more simply because it was Labour's creation. For another constant in education policymaking in England is the lack of incrementalism in highly contested areas like curriculum and the refusal to respect and build on earlier achievements. Each new government rejects as a matter of course what has gone before and, in what is now a predictable display of ministerial machismo, replaces it with a 'tough new' initiative designed to bring schools back to the path from which they have strayed. In Gove's case, the neglected path was 'essential knowledge' in the 'basics' – as if Labour's daily literacy and numeracy lessons were about something else. Tough perhaps, but hardly new.

What Gove also did was to maximise the prospects for securing a national curriculum true to his personal beliefs by abolishing the QCA, the body statutorily responsible for curriculum and assessment, and taking the entire process in-house at the Department for Education. He set up an 'expert panel' with a compliant chair but then rejected its report (DfE, 2011) because the panel's other members were off message (Pollard, 2012). The message in question came from two sources: first, E.D. Hirsch's (1987) critique of the knowledge deficit in the USA and his cataloguing of the 'core knowledge' that every American child should acquire; second, from a belief that the way to raise standards was to emulate the prescribed curricula of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) high performers like Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan (Oates, 2010) – though, significantly, not Finland, for Finland's PISA success was the product of a system that ideologically was as far removed as possible from the American regimes of performativity and marketisation which Gove intended to emulate (Sahlberg, 2011).

The Gove curriculum review was more than usually selective in its use of evidence about both what was wrong with the existing national curriculum and what might be done to improve it. Thus, for example, instead of reducing the corrosive split between the core and non-core subjects, which had long been criticised by the inspectorate as well as by the Cambridge Review (Alexander, 2010, pp. 241-245), the government deepened it still further. This 'two-tier' curriculum (as former chief inspector David Bell called it [Ofsted, 2004]) not only undermined breadth, balance, quality and opportunities for learning transfer between subjects. It was also counter-productive, for inspection evidence had consistently shown that the primary schools whose pupils performed best in the national tests at age 11 were those that provided a broad, rich and well-managed curriculum aiming for high standards in all subjects, not just in the basics (DES, 1978; Ofsted, 1997, 2002a). This finding was too counter-intuitive or inconvenient for the Coalition government, just as it had been for Labour. Yet as far back as 1985 a Thatcher government White Paper had criticised the 'mistaken belief ... that a concentration on basic skills is of itself enough to improve achievement in literacy and numeracy' (DES, 1985), so

in this matter recent governments have moved decisively backwards, failing even to heed the advice of their political kith and kin.

Then there's the perplexing case of spoken language in the new national curriculum, and here the story takes a more personal turn.

The long-standing evidence on the formative relationship between spoken language, cognition and learning, especially in the early and primary years, is widely accepted, as is the more recent evidence on the link between cognitively challenging classroom talk and effective teaching (Alexander, 2008). In 2011, I contributed to an international conference in Pittsburgh under the auspices of the American Educational Research Association which reviewed this evidence and concluded that we now have a critical mass of data showing not only that such talk advances children's engagement, learning and understanding, but that it also raises their test scores in literacy, numeracy and science.[4] The Pittsburgh conference coincided with the launch of the current government's national curriculum review, which was in part impelled by concern about standards, so I took the matter straight to Michael Gove and proposed a high level seminar of ministers, officials and researchers to consider its implications for the new national curriculum. He agreed, and the seminar took place in February 2012, with keynotes from myself (Alexander, 2012a) and, by videolink from Pittsburgh, Lauren Resnick, a leading US researcher in this field.

At the seminar the case for raising and sharpening the profile of what at that time was called 'speaking and listening' was rehearsed and accepted. But afterwards, a minister who must remain nameless told me: 'I understand the arguments and evidence, but I daren't raise the profile of spoken language in the new national curriculum because it will distract teachers from their task of raising standards in literacy. And it will encourage idle chatter in class'.

'Idle chatter in class': the phrase is redolent of an era when children were seen but not heard, and lofty schoolmasterly disdain dismissed as inconsequential any talk other than closed answers to closed questions. In the subsequent drafts of the new national curriculum, and notwithstanding the weight of evidence with which ministers had been presented, spoken language was given an even lower profile than previously.

Clearly, the minister just didn't get it. What others fully understood was that talk is an essential concomitant of learning to read and write, not a distraction from it, so literacy and oracy must go hand in hand. Self-evidently, talk is also vital in its own right. Further, the kind of classroom talk we were advocating is anything but 'idle'. It is purposeful, focused, structured, extended and above all cognitively challenging. But the minister stuck to his guns, and it was only after sustained pressure over the next 12 months that the government at last agreed to include a programme of study for spoken language in the final draft of its new national curriculum. However, though I count this a victory [5], the published requirements remain too brief and generalised, so the fallout of misguided ministerial intervention in this vital matter will be with us for some time.

Here, then, we have a three-way tussle between peer-reviewed evidence, political ideology and personal prejudice, and evidence as always is the loser, so this episode really does raise the question of whether curriculum is one of those areas where policy is the problem rather than the solution. All the more so when, in September 2013, the government presented the final version of England's new national curriculum (DfE, 2013b), with its deeper than ever divide between 'the basics' and the rest, its cursory treatment of the arts and humanities and its abbreviated inclusion of spoken language [6], and did so under the banner of 'the best that has been thought and said'. [7] The phrase (Arnold, 1869) was not attributed: perhaps it was hoped that an ignorant populace would credit it to the Secretary of State himself. The lack of attribution was perhaps just as well because Matthew Arnold wouldn't only have turned in his grave; I like to think that he would have leapt out, renamed his essay 'Culture, anarchy, plagiarism and hubris', and hit the Secretary of State over the head with it.

Case 3: standards

My third example, educational standards, is the catch-22 of centralisation. The more policymakers micromanage, the more they risk blame when things go wrong, and the more they then strive to deflect the blame back onto those who, having lost their autonomy, are no longer culpable. Thus it was with the Blair government's standards drive, and thus it may prove to be for the present government, which cites the need to raise standards to justify policies on the national curriculum, assessment, inspection, free schools, academies, teaching schools and much else. National tests are high stakes for teachers but for centralising governments they are no less so.

Labour's standards initiatives included: national literacy and numeracy strategies with prescribed daily literacy and numeracy lessons; the extension of the previous government's test regime to include targets for the percentage of 11-year-olds who must achieve given levels; the publication of school and local authority test results and league tables; beefed-up inspections resulting in the naming and shaming of underperforming schools; competencies and standards for teachers' initial training and continuing development; ring-fenced funding for relevant continuing professional development (CPD); and the appointment of local authority school improvement partners charged with checking schools' measured outcomes and ensuring compliance with the national strategies.

This was the stick, and a fearsome one it was too. Small wonder that one of the Cambridge Review's research teams concluded that together these initiatives amounted to a 'state theory of learning' (Balarin & Lauder, 2010) – a post-Soviet echo of William Lovett's 'state-moulding and knowledge-forcing scheme'. Without doubt, thousands of teachers, as predicted by Lovett, sank into 'passive submission'. The carrot was a substantial increase in school funding, teacher pay and staff appointments: 35,000 additional primary teachers and 172,000 teaching assistants appointed between 1997 and 2009.

As is well known, David Blunkett, Labour's first Secretary of State, promised to resign if the government's 2002 targets for literacy and numeracy standards were not met. They weren't, but Blunkett moved to another ministry and his successor resigned instead. Labour then commissioned an evaluation of its literacy and numeracy strategies from the University of Toronto (Earl et al, 2003a, 2003b). This offered a decidedly mixed conclusion, though that didn't stop the government from claiming that the strategies were an unqualified success. Then came the Cambridge Primary Review. Mindful of the heat of this particular potato we commissioned no fewer than six independent reviews of national and international evidence on primary school standards from teams at Bath, Bristol, Durham, Cambridge and Manchester Metropolitan universities and the National Foundation for Educational Research (Balarin & Lauder, 2010; Cunningham & Raymont, 2010; Harlen, 2010; Tymms & Merrell, 2010; Whetton et al, 2010; Wyse et al, 2010).[8]

Then began the war of words. We published our six interim reports, together with briefings and press releases, in two instalments. As might be expected, our research teams exposed the complexity of the data and the difficulty of making hard and fast judgements, especially about trends over time. We identified evidence of initial success but also problems. Acting on the well-known journalistic maxim 'First simplify, then exaggerate'[9], the press ignored the positives in our reports and amplified the negatives with baleful headlines like: 'Primary tests blasted by experts'; 'Too much testing harms primary school pupils'; 'Literacy drive has almost no impact'; 'Millions wasted on teaching reading'; 'An oppressive system that is failing our children'; 'School system test-obsessed'; 'England's children among the most tested'; 'Our children are tested to destruction'; 'Primary pupils let down by Labour'; 'Primary schools have got worse'; 'A shattering failure for our masters'.[10]

Labour's response was bullish: 'There have never been so many outstanding primary schools'; 'The government does not accept that children are over-tested'; 'There have been unambiguous rises in results using standardised tests'; 'Primary standards are at their highest ever levels. This is not opinion: it is fact'.[11] Then Labour went for the jugular: 'These reports use tunnel vision to look at education'; 'Professor Alexander is entitled to his opinions but once again we fundamentally disagree with his views, as will parents across the country'.[12] (*His* views? These were the considered conclusions of six independent research teams.) 'I am not going to apologise', said the Secretary of State, 'for what parents want even if these researchers – on the basis of old research – don't like it'.[13]

In truth, our reviews of the evidence on standards led to something that neither politicians nor sub-editors can readily handle: a mixed message. The findings were both positive and negative. This was inevitable, because we tracked trends over time and uncovered methodological problems such as shifting test criteria and inconsistent data as well as the collateral curriculum damage [14] and increases in pupil and teacher stress that the press reported.

We also refuted (Alexander, 2010, pp. 473-474) a number of the claims by which the government defended its standards policy: testing of itself drives up standards; parents support testing; tests are the only way to hold schools to account; the pursuit of standards in 'the basics' is incompatible with a broad and balanced curriculum; literacy and numeracy test scores are valid proxies for standards across the entire curriculum; and – the most transparently unprovable claim of all – England has the highest standards ever. Ever? Since when? 1997? 1066? And who was present at the big bang to start measuring?

And so the slanging match over standards goes on, generating ever more heat than light. Before the 2010 election Labour cited PISA to prove the success of its drive to raise standards in England's schools. After the 2010 election the new government used PISA 2009 to show that far from rising, student performance had 'plummeted' under Labour from 12th to 23rd in the world, and Michael Gove's doom-laden verdict to Parliament barely concealed his political delight: 'Literacy, down; numeracy, down; science, down: fail, fail, fail' (Gove, 2011). However, after re-analysing the data John Jerrim (2011) of London University's Institute of Education concluded that PISA 2009 neither justified such alarmist claims nor provided a safe basis for the sweeping changes which, in the name of standards, Gove's government introduced.

Meanwhile, others have questioned PISA's validity and reliability and the way it has been elevated into a measure of the performance not just of samples of 15-year-olds in limited aspects of their learning, which it is, but of entire education systems (see, for example, Alexander, 2012c; Meyer & Benavot, 2013). An increasing number of governments have succumbed to PISA panic in a scramble to cherry-pick the policies of those jurisdictions that for the moment occupy the winners' podium. Never mind differences in history, culture, demography and politics: if Singapore's 15-year-olds score higher in maths than England's they must have superior policies and we should copy them. If Shanghai's students outperform England's in PISA, let's invite their teachers over to show ours how it's done. (These are real cases.)

As thus conceived, the PISA-fuelled global educational race is in danger of spiralling out of control. It certainly prompts bizarre policy responses. In presenting the 2012 draft of England's revised national curriculum, the Secretary of State said, 'We must ensure that our children master the essential core knowledge which *other nations* pass on to their pupils' (Gove, 2012, emphasis added). Other nations? Granted globalisation and the absolute imperative of an international outlook, this is a pretty rum definition of 'the best that has been thought and said'. And if, as Denis Lawton argues (1983), curriculum is a selection from culture, the Singapore mathematics syllabus is an odd place for England's cultural selection to start.

Recurrent Themes: evidence, mediation and narrative

Childhood, curriculum and standards: three policy cases from the many more I could have provided. I want next to cross cut these cases with three themes

relating to the policy process as a whole. They are *evidence*, *mediation* and *narrative*. After considering these I shall add one more dimension – the relationship between policy as prescribed and enacted and the challenge of judging impact – before offering a verdict on the quoted claim about educational policy in England with which I started.

Theme 1: evidence

Evidence-informed policy, the wags tell us, is really policy-informed evidence, because governments first devise their policies then look around for evidence to justify them, ignoring what doesn't fit. On the strength of the Cambridge Primary Review's experience I can confirm that the relationship between evidence and policy is frequently, shall we say, uneasy. If not as brutally cynical as 'policy-informed evidence' implies, the process is certainly selective. Three kinds of selectivity seem to be at work: *electoral*, *ideological* and *methodological*.

Electoral selectivity is illustrated by the Labour government's blunt rejection of any evidence that challenged the efficacy of its standards drive because to acknowledge such evidence would have been, for a government committed to 'education, education, education', political suicide. Similarly, ministers' suspicion of spoken language, the educational power of which is amply demonstrated in research, in part reflected the fear that it would compromise the government's 'back to basics' pitch on reading, writing and school discipline.

Ideological selectivity is illustrated by the Coalition government's refusal to accommodate well-regarded evidence on the true problems of the primary curriculum – problems such as the backwash into entitlement, quality and standards of the two-tier curriculum and the distortions produced by high-stakes testing – because these conflict with ministerial preference for a narrow spectrum of supposedly essential and largely propositional knowledge. For that reason, against the evidence that standards and breadth are interdependent, governments continue to insist that literacy and numeracy must override all else.

Methodological selectivity is marked by government preference for what the US National Research Council (NRC) called 'type 1' and 'type 2' educational research, that is large-scale quantitative studies and McKinsey-style extrapolations from these for the purposes of identifying cause, effect and solution. Conspicuously absent from this evidential bank are 'type 3' studies that engage with teaching and learning to the depth that improving them requires (NRC, 2003). So the top-down character of policy is reinforced by evidence which is as detached from school and classroom realities as are the policymakers themselves, and this detachment inflates ministerial perception of what interventions dreamed up in Westminster can achieve in classrooms. School improvement is then reduced to tautological banalities such as 'The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers', 'The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction' and 'High performance requires every child to succeed', all of which are from Michael Barber, Labour's one-time chief adviser on standards (Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

Theme 2: mediation

Policy reaches the public through the media, over which policymakers exercise as much control as they can through the apparatus of communication strategies, press officers, leak, spin, briefings on and off the record, attributed interviews, unattributed quotes and so on. The relationship is one of mutual dependence and is fraught with risks on both sides.

Those such as academics who seek to convey evidence to policymakers are similarly circumscribed. They can write journal articles that few people read, or they can engage directly, entering the same arena as the policymakers themselves. Knowing how much hung on successful media exposure for an enquiry that government had initially welcomed but hadn't commissioned, the Cambridge Primary Review recruited an experienced director of communications. Each report was accompanied by a four-page briefing plus a one-page press release, so it was available in full, in summary and as highlights. Each publication event was preceded by a press conference, telephone briefings of key journalists and, where possible, strategically placed articles or interviews by Review members.

In one sense the strategy was highly successful: on five of the ten occasions between 2007 and 2009 when the Review published its reports, independent media analysis showed that it was top United Kingdom (UK) news story overall.[15] What we couldn't control, of course, was the nature of that media coverage. In this, it was the sub-editors rather than reporters who most ruthlessly enacted that maxim 'first simplify, then exaggerate'. Broadsheet reports that were perceptive and balanced were frequently undermined by their headlines.

Yet it was to the headlines, not the accompanying pieces and certainly not the Cambridge Review reports themselves, that ministers felt obliged to respond. In our archive we have a record of all media coverage of the Review and all published government responses. There is a clear and direct relation between them. Government responded not to what we reported but to what the media said we had reported. When the media attacked the government, the government attacked us.

But there is another level of mediation, and it is rarely discussed. Behind the scenes, ministers who were too busy to read our reports and briefings relied on their officials and advisers to relay and explain their contents. Such government mediators were as adept at spinning to their ministers as their press officers were at spinning to the media. In 2008, *Guardian* journalist Jenni Russell lifted the lid on this hidden layer of research mediation:

Since 2003, every education secretary and minister has been distinguished by an almost wilful determination to ignore the mass of research that does not suit their agenda. Politically, that is the easiest choice. They are encouraged in this by their senior civil servants, whose careers have been built around delivering a particular agenda, and who have nothing to gain by seeing it change

course. What is truly alarming is that ministers rarely even glimpse the reports they dismiss. Last year I mentioned a particularly critical Ofsted report to one minister. 'Oh, my people tell me there's nothing new in that,' he said, breezily. In fact, it had a great deal that was new and important, and the individuals who put thousands of man-hours into preparing it were probably writing it for an audience of three – of which the minister who never read it was the most important one. It seems that the Cambridge Primary Review is meeting the same fate. This extensive, diligent review of published evidence and new research was dismissed in 10 seconds by another minister in a private conversation: 'My people say it's rehashed.' Publicly, the Department for Children, Schools and Families has written off the latest reports as 'recycled, partial and out-of-date'. (Russell, 2008)

The role of senior civil servants and advisers, and the extent to which they mediate incoming evidence in order to protect their backs, is certainly worthy of investigation, because such mediation compromises not only evidence, but also the very policy process these people are employed to serve. As it happens, it also flouts the UK Civil Service Code:

You must:

- provide information and advice, including advice to ministers, on the basis of the evidence, and accurately present the options and facts
- take due account of expert and professional advice.

You must not:

- ignore inconvenient facts or relevant considerations when providing advice or making decisions
 - be influenced by the prospect of personal gain
- (Civil Service [UK], 2010).

There's a footnote to this. Just before the 2010 general election I had a meeting with the then Secretary of State and the Schools Minister about the need to give more serious consideration to the implications of our final report for post-election government policy. This time the ministers didn't get there first, for the ministers both had their own well-thumbed copies of our report. Brandishing his copy the Secretary of State said, 'I've read this now. It's rather good. There's a great deal here that we can use'. A few weeks later he was out of government. His officials kept their jobs.

Theme 3: narrative

Evidence and policy require narratives. Evidence has to be interpreted, and politicians need to offer a simple and convincing tale if they are to persuade

people not just to vote for them but also to accept the pain that policy can cause. Margaret Thatcher was rather good at that.

Each of the headed paragraphs in the briefing on the Cambridge Primary Review final report tells its own story: 'Primary schools: how well are they doing?'; 'What is primary education for?'; 'A world fit to grow up in'; 'Standards: beyond the rhetoric'; 'Children's needs: equalising provision in an unequal society'; 'The curriculum: not there yet'; 'Assessment: reform, not tinkering'; 'A pedagogy of evidence and principle, not prescription'; 'Expertise for entitlement: re-thinking school staffing'; 'From novice to expert: reforming teacher education'; 'Decentralising control, redirecting funds, raising standards'; and even 'Policy: solution or problem' (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010). Our problem was that for each of these stories the government had written its own, and the versions didn't necessarily agree. Indeed it's frequently the case that evidential and political narratives find themselves in conflict, for seeking truth and retaining power are rather different pursuits. So I want to end by mentioning two of the most persistent and problematic narratives in the world of primary education policy in England.

First, there's the narrative of *progress*. This is essential to political survival. Although Labour were foolishly profligate with their 'best ever' claims, progress also needs a baseline, for policymakers must tell convincing stories not just about what they have achieved, but also about how bad things were when they arrived. Hence George Orwell (1946/2006): 'Who controls the past controls the future'. So the Coalition government habitually talked up 'the economic mess we inherited from Labour' but rarely mentioned the bankers and speculators who were the true culprits. And here's Labour's own narrative of what it found in 1997 and what by 2007 it had achieved. The storytellers are Downing Street director of policy delivery Michael Barber and Schools Minister Andrew Adonis, as they then were.

Until the mid-1980s what happened in schools and classrooms was left almost entirely to teachers to decide ... but, through no fault of their own the profession was uninformed ... Under Thatcher, the system moved from uninformed professional judgement to uninformed prescription. 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 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. (Barber, 2001, pp. 13-14)

Anyone teaching before 1997 would be understandably offended by Barber's charge that their professional judgements were uninformed, but his claim that pre-Labour autonomy equated with ignorance allows him to assert that

government needed to step smartly in and take control. Adonis (2007) picks up the tale, peppering it with claims that, again, the evidence doesn't support:

We know that in the post-war period improvements in reading were static. It was precisely this analysis that led us in 1997 to seek a step-change in literacy through the introduction of the national strategies and daily literacy hour, an emphasis on phonics, and training for every teacher in literacy. This has worked. In recent years there have been unambiguous rises in results ... We make no apologies for policies which are delivering the highest standards ever.

There they go again: 'the highest standards ever'. But then along comes cheery Michael Gove (2011). New story, new voice:

Literacy, down; numeracy, down; science, down: fail, fail, fail.

The other recurrent narrative in English primary education, the habitual spur and accompaniment to 'back to basics', abandons all pretence at either rationality or veracity. It's the fable of an actual or planned takeover of English primary schools by left-wing, child-centred progressives. Named by some as 'the educational establishment', and by Toby Young (2014) as 'the blob', this motley gang is set on undermining the standards for which right-thinking and right-leaning ministers, newspapers and think tanks have so strenuously fought.

This McCarthyite nonsense has been around since soon after the 1967 Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education [CACE], 1967) [15] on which such follies are mostly blamed, even though during Plowden's most influential decade, the 1970s, the inspectorate reported that only 5% of primary schools exhibited 'exploratory' Plowdenite characteristics and chalk and talk were the norm in three quarters of them (DES, 1978). Hence, from one typically nasty bout of progressive-bashing in the early 1990s, 'Look on your works, Lady Plowden, and despair', 'The education of millions of children has been blighted in the name of an anarchic ideology', 'Children spend more time with paint pots than mastering the three Rs', 'Happiness but little learning', 'Trendies in class who harm pupils', and much more, some of it barely repeatable.[17]

But repeat it we must, for in 2014 this narrative was alive and kicking; and it was nurtured by no less than England's Secretary of State for Education.[18] Those who during a period of invited consultation and feedback proposed an alternative national curriculum vision to his were denounced as 'enemies of promise' and 'Marxists hell-bent on destroying our schools' (Gove, 2013b); while early childhood experts who raised legitimate questions about the kind of early years experience that will help children to thrive educationally were accused of 'bleating bogus pop-psychology', dumbing down and lowering expectations (2013c).[19]

It is narratives such as these that are the real enemies of promise, for they imprison political thinking and action within the same stock of endlessly repeated myths and reinvented wheels. So while the research narrative layers

evidence upon evidence and takes our understanding forward, the political narrative pulls us back. Back to basics, back to basics again, back to basics yet again. Meanwhile, ministerial minds see to it that the evidence is ambushed and disposed of.

Towards a Verdict: from prescription to enactment

If we now return to my initial question of whether in English primary education policy has become the problem rather than the solution, the answer may seem clear enough. If important evidence is ignored, distorted or traduced – whether from fear of tabloid headlines, the self-serving interventions of ministerial officials, because it is politically inconvenient or for other reasons – then the quality of policy as promulgated must suffer; and if the sheer quantity of initiatives generates policy fatigue, fear or resistance, then their effectiveness is likely to be diminished. These conditions have obtained in two of the three cases I have exemplified (curriculum and standards) and in others that I could have cited, while in the third example (childhood) acquiescence and support tipped into unease and even hostility when government appeared to be trespassing too far into children's formative development and their lives outside school.

Yet it will also be clear that we are discussing policies in the plural rather than policy as a monolithic entity, so the final verdict is likely to be mixed. Having weighed its evidence on the period up to 2009 the Cambridge Primary Review offered this assessment:

It would ... be wrong to infer that government intervention is never justified. Since 1997, funding for primary education has increased massively. The policy prospectus has included ambitious initiatives relating to children and families, early childhood, curriculum, pedagogy, standards and accountability, teachers and workforce reform, and national and local infrastructure. In the policy balance sheet the case for a national curriculum is generally accepted; the government's childhood agenda is warmly applauded; its obligation to step in to protect vulnerable children is understood; the move to integrated services for education and care ... is welcomed. However, opinion is divided on workforce reform and the national strategies, and such division escalates into deep and widespread hostility when we move into the remainder of the government's 'standards' agenda – national targets, testing, performance tables and the current practices of external inspection (as opposed to the principle, which is generally supported). However, we emphasise that the debate is not about the pursuit of standards as such ... but about the way they have been defined and measured, and the strategies through which government has attempted to improve them ... The issue is not *whether* children should be assessed or schools should be

accountable, but *how*. (Alexander, 2010, pp. 500 and 508-510, emphases added)

Of course, the popularity of a policy – the main focus of the reactions summarised here – does not necessarily prove it to be right, any more than a policy constructed with an eye for electoral gain is right. In the empirically and professionally contested area of educational standards, for instance, no political party can afford to appear soft in a public arena dominated by those tabloid headlines I’ve illustrated, so offending teachers and ignoring researchers may be the safer course, however contemptible we may judge such political calculations to be.

Further, though governments themselves talk of ‘implementation’, that word is misleadingly clinical because policies are enacted, sometimes untidily, rather than implemented as they stand, and enactment entails varying interpretations and practical responses (Ball, 1990). The current government has naively judged that lifting features from Singapore’s prescribed maths curriculum will raise standards when Singapore’s own evidence – and common sense – show that it’s the *enacted* curriculum that makes the difference (Hogan et al, 2012). In approaching a verdict on the UK government’s curriculum policies we must not make the same mistake, for a paper curriculum has limited meaning or force until it is given life by what teachers decide and pupils experience in the classroom; and between government directive and that experience are stages of translation, transposition and transformation by advisers, publishers, head teachers and teachers before the final enactment, so what is intended and prescribed by Westminster and experienced by children in schools even only a couple of miles away can be very different Alexander, 2001, pp. 552-553). As I noted at the launch of the Cambridge Primary Review’s successor, the Cambridge Primary Review Trust:

Those who judge the Cambridge Review by the number of its recommendations that have been adopted exactly as they stand, or who presume that policy is the sole determinant of what schools do in areas to which policy applies, don’t understand how either policy or classroom practice work or the complex array of factors to which each is subject. And policies have little meaning until they are enacted by schools, and to enact is to domesticate, reinvent or even subvert as well as comply. Domestication – adapting generalised policy to unique school circumstances – is perhaps the most common response. (Alexander, 2014, p. 158)

In relation to the particular case of curriculum reform, then, the key is pedagogy. That’s why pedagogy has always been understood to be the final frontier of professional autonomy and it’s why Labour’s literacy and numeracy strategies marked the tipping point in the process of educational centralisation initiated by the 1988 Education Reform Act. The architects of those strategies knew exactly what they were doing when they judged that it was only by

taking control of pedagogy that they would achieve their goal of raising literacy and numeracy standards. Others saw the strategies as an egregious and dangerous intrusion by the state into a domain where in a democracy the state has no business. Hence the properly understood overtones of a 'state theory of learning'.

So in this matter, much hangs on the extent of prescription and control. The Labour government's literacy and numeracy strategies were specified in the greatest possible detail, leaving little room for manoeuvre. They were then tightly policed through tests, inspection and local authority school improvement partners. In this case the line between prescription and enactment was short and direct, so both credit and culpability rested with government and political credibility dictated that evidential challenges of the kind offered by the Cambridge Primary Review must be neutralised by whatever means possible, fair or foul.

In this case, too, the impact of the standards drive could be fairly judged by the very tests of student attainment through which compliance was secured, not merely on the basis of teacher and parental response. Interestingly, the other tool for securing compliance, Ofsted inspections, offered a more positive judgement on the literacy and numeracy strategies than the tests, which suggests either an interesting comparison of subjective and objective evaluation or that Ofsted was not as independent as it claimed (Ofsted, 2002b, 2002c; Alexander, 2004). The Ofsted reports on the strategies also appeared to presume that compliance and outcome were synonymous – 'Not all teachers are using the strategies' assessment materials ... some do not know about them' (Ofsted, 2002c, para. 9.3.) – as if the policy as promulgated was beyond reproach and the only obstacle to their success was the tiresome tendency of some teachers not to do as they are told.

Yet Ofsted's finger-wagging reminds us that even in such extreme cases of policy enforcement teachers are not wholly powerless and this indeed is one the most important messages that the Cambridge Primary Review has attempted to convey to a profession which has long complained of prescription but in which compliance is not always unwilling and which historically has tended towards dependency. For every teacher that saw in the Cambridge Primary Review a passport to liberation there were at least as many others that spoke of their need for 'permission' to do other than treat official directives as non-negotiable and at least as many others again who were frankly more comfortable being told what to do and how to think. The centralisation of curriculum, pedagogy and standards in English primary education may be a classic case of Gramscian hegemony, a relationship between rulers and ruled that moves beyond the polarities of domination and subordination to degrees of consent.[20]

These qualifications about the variegated and reflexive nature of the policy process, even in centralised regimes, are important. However, for as long as evidence counts for so little, political narratives peddle fiction rather than fact, and considered critique is met by ministerial abuse, the balance of judgement may tend to support the four eminent academics with whose letter to

The Independent I started. Moreover, their concerns are consistent with the findings of the Rowntree Foundation Power enquiry into the condition of British democracy, whose disturbing final report was published in 2006 (Joseph Rowntree Trust, 2006). What we are dealing with here, therefore, are conditions in British political life that reach well beyond policy specifics like the national curriculum:

The questionable evidence on which key educational policies have been based; the disenfranchising of local voice; the rise of unelected and unaccountable groups taking key decisions behind closed doors; the empty rituals of ‘consultation’; the authoritarian mindset; and the use of myth and derision to underwrite exaggerated accounts of progress and discredit alternative views. (Alexander, 2010, p. 481)

By the same token, such conditions transcend personalities, offering little comfort to those who hoped that the July 2014 ministerial reshuffle and Gove’s replacement as Education Secretary by Nicky Morgan might represent something more substantial than a cosmetic adjustment of tone. And so, as political leaders rehearse those stock pre-election postures, narratives and myths for which no rehearsal is necessary since we’ve heard them all before, all *we* can do is repeat a truth no less familiar:

Deep and lasting improvements in England’s education system will be secured only when, in their discourse and their handling of evidence, policymakers exemplify the educated mind rather than demean it, and practise the best that has been thought and said rather than preach it.[21] (Alexander, 2014, p. 164)

Notes

- [1] After the announcement of the 2014 New Year Honours, Warwick Mansell (2014a) noted that six of the seven new school dames and knights were or had been heads or sponsors of academies, while only one of them was working in the mainstream sector; and a further 17 people from academies gained other honours, compared with 15 from non-academy schools. Yet at that time only one in six of England’s 21,000 state-funded schools were academies. Mansell (2014b) subsequently reported that the government had earmarked Primary Academy Chain Development Grants from public funds to encourage schools to convert to academies.
- [2] For discussion of centralisation and decentralisation in an international context, see ‘Primary Education and the State’ in Alexander (2001, pp. 154-172).
- [3] Waters’ testimony is quoted in Bangs et al (2010, p. 157).
- [4] Papers arising from this conference are in Resnick et al (2015).
- [5] Shaun Austin’s Freedom of Information request to the DfE has revealed the influence of this author’s 2012 DfE paper in persuading the government to change its mind (DfE, 2013a).

- [6] For a critique of the Coalition government's approach to the national curriculum, see Alexander, 2012b.
- [7] 'The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said' (DfE, 2013b, p. 6, para. 3.1).
- [8] Tymms and Merrell, Whetton et al and Wyse et al re-evaluated the test data; the other three examined the test and inspection processes and other aspects of the standards drive.
- [9] Attributed to a 1950s editor of *The Economist*.
- [10] These headlines are referenced in Alexander (2011). Most are also in the Cambridge Primary Review media archive:
[http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/media/media archive 2007.php](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/media/media_archive_2007.php)
- [11] See note 10.
- [12] Ed Hawkesworth, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) press officer, attributed DCSF press briefing in response to Cambridge Primary Review interim reports 5/3, 7/1, 8/1 and 8/2, November 23, 2007.
- [13] Ed Balls (Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families), 2008.
- [14] This educational application of a phrase previously used by US four-star generals to explain away civilian casualties is from Berliner and Nichols (2007).
- [15] Analysis undertaken for Richard Margrave, CPR Director of Communications, 2006-10.
- [16] For an account of gap between Plowden as published and as demonised, see Alexander (2009).
- [17] These headlines were prompted by the 'three wise men' report of 1992, though they bore little relation to what it said. For an account of this episode and sourcing of the headlines in question, see Alexander (1997, pp. 216-265).
- [18] In the July 2014 ministerial reshuffle Gove was replaced as Secretary of State for Education by Nicky Morgan. See this article's penultimate paragraph.
- [19] For discussion of this episode see Alexander (2014).
- [20] The exercise of power in the development of public education in England is explored in Green (1990) and Alexander (2001, chaps. 6 and 7).
- [21] From a keynote lecture at the launch of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust in September 2013.

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