Making a difference

Derek Gillard

Education in Spite of Policy

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By any standards, Robin Alexander, Fellow of Wolfson College Cambridge and Professor of Education Emeritus at the University of Warwick, has had a remarkable career spanning almost 60 years. He has taught in schools; held senior posts at the universities of Leeds, Warwick, Cambridge and York; served on government advisory bodies and official enquiries; undertaken research around the world; and worked in development education in India and Bangladesh. He instigated and directed the Cambridge Primary Review and chaired the trust which succeeded it. He has written or edited more than 320 publications; conducted extensive research into comparative education; and promoted the purposeful use of dialogue in the classroom through 'dialogic teaching'.

In *Education in Spite of Policy* he draws on this lifetime of experience to examine the relationship between the evidence provided by educational research and the use (or misuse) made of it by politicians. He begins by explaining that his book combines conference keynotes and journal articles (some of which have appeared in *FORUM*) with shorter pieces – newspaper articles, briefings and even a blog. Together they cover the period 2006 to 2021 and the work of Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments. He hopes that readers will not be irritated by the inevitable 'variation in style and tone' (p2).

I certainly noticed differences: as you would expect, the chapters which are reprints of articles tend to be academic in tone; those which are the texts of speeches are more conversational. But I wasn't bothered by this variation, and I doubt other readers will be. It's also worth saying that, despite the fact that the chapters come from a range of different sources, the book has continuity and coherence and hangs together well. It is a very readable book. At its heart is the belief that 'education matters, policy matters, evidence matters' (p2). The problem, says Alexander, is that 'the relationship between them is rarely straightforward, especially when ideology overrules evidence or when ministers try to micromanage what is best left to teachers. And once the media join the fray the mixture becomes downright combustible' (pp2-3). The decline in integrity, he argues, has led to 'evidence-based policy' becoming 'policy-based evidence', and to the 'post-truth' phenomenon (p3). But it's not all negative:

For a public system of schooling cannot exist, let alone succeed, without a framework

> of policy, and there are many instances where government has intervened to the benefit of all concerned. Labour's London Challenge (2003-11), which raised standards in underperforming secondary schools above those of the rest of England, and whose impact is still evident, provides one striking example. (p7)

The book is in four parts. In Part 1, 'Above the parapet', Alexander reflects on the Cambridge Primary Review, which challenged government policies on the curriculum, testing and standards; and he assesses the reform narratives and strategies of successive governments. The Review noted concerns about:

> The questionable evidence on which some 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 (p34).

It urged policymakers to 'abandon the dogma that there is no alternative to SATs' and 'the naive belief that testing of itself drives up standards. It doesn't: good teaching does' (p41). And it warned that, while the government's drive to raise standards in literacy and numeracy in England's primary schools 'undoubtedly yielded positive gains', this was 'at considerable cost, educationally and professionally as well as financially' (p51).

The government's attitude to the Review, says Alexander, was initially cooperative, but ministers became 'incensed with media criticism of its policies' and reacted with a 'no-holds-barred misrepresentation of the Review's findings' (p57). The final chapter of Part 1 analyses the policy process and its impact, taking as examples government policies on childhood, curriculum and standards over the period covered by the book. It concludes with a discussion of the themes of evidence (the selective use made of it), mediation (the fact that 'policy reaches the public through the media' (p91), and narrative (each government creates its own narrative, often rewriting the past).

In Part 2, 'Curriculum convolutions', Alexander traces the development of the national curriculum from its creation in 1988 to the present day. The first version, he says, 'was unapologetically cast in the grammar/public school mould of the conventional disciplines, though it also preserved the Victorian elementary school legacy of a sharp divide between the 3Rs and the rest'. Science was added to English and maths to form the three-subject core but 'was increasingly squeezed by the Blair government's insistence that only literacy and numeracy really mattered' (p106).

When QCA (the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) began reviewing the curriculum in 1997, it was told that it 'should under no circumstances touch literacy and numeracy' (p107). Ten years later, the government went further by taking the next review of the primary curriculum away from QCA and giving it to its own review team, led by Jim Rose. Once again, 'matters like the national tests and the literacy and

numeracy strategies were explicitly excluded from the official review's remit' (p108). In the event, the incoming Coalition government scrapped Rose, and Gove announced his own national curriculum review to be conducted by an 'expert panel' led by Tim Oates. Alexander expressed a number of concerns about its proposals, particularly the decision to remove spoken English as a distinct strand of the English programmes of study. He was also concerned that 'what we have here are proposals not for a curriculum but for just three subjects' (p152), so that the visual arts, music, drama and dance received 'staggeringly cursory treatment' in the primary curriculum (p155) and fared even worse in the secondary curriculum, with Gove determined to make GCSEs more 'rigorous' by excluding creative and artistic subjects altogether. He reviews evidence in support of the place of the arts in education and debunks three myths: that the arts are 'intellectually undemanding'; that they are 'incompatible with high standards in literacy and numeracy'; and that the arts are 'not useful socially or economically' (p162).

In his chapter on 'Curriculum capacity and leadership', Alexander notes that the Cambridge Primary Review had identified a 'long-standing failure to resolve the mismatch between the curriculum to be taught, the focus of teacher training and the staffing of primary schools' (p175). Gove accepted the need for a review, which was conducted jointly by the Department for Education and the Cambridge Primary Review, but then declined to publish its report. His successor, Nicky Morgan, refused to revisit the matter.

In Part 3, 'Speaking but not listening', the author returns to one of his lifelong concerns: the importance of spoken language in the classroom. He explains that:

> Over the past 25 years I have developed a theory and practice of what I call 'dialogic teaching', a pedagogy that prioritises oracy but also goes beyond its conventional definition. For although the quality of the student's talk must always be our central concern, classroom dynamics make such talk inescapably dependent upon that of the teacher, and in particular on whether the teacher limits the student's opportunities to giving required answers to closed questions – the traditional teaching default of 'recitation' – or opens up the student's talking and thinking through 'extending' moves and structured discussion. 'Oracy' focuses on the pupil; dialogic teaching attends to the talk of all parties. (p196)

In his evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Oracy in 2019, he noted that England's first national curriculum had made 'speaking and listening' a formal requirement. However, 'the backlash was not long in coming' (p200), and in the current National Curriculum Framework Document 'eighty-one pages … are devoted to reading and writing during the primary years. Spoken language has just two' (p203).

In contrast, Alexander describes in detail the Cambridge Primary Review Trust/ University of York Dialogic Teaching Project, which was commissioned by the Education

Endowment Foundation. It piloted and implemented a large-scale programme designed to 'energise classroom talk and thereby enhance students' engagement, thinking, learning and attainment in contexts of social and educational disadvantage' (p210). The programme was subjected to independent randomised control trial, with strikingly positive results.

In the pivotal chapter, 'Dialogic pedagogy in a post-truth world', he builds on this work to propose ways that well-founded classroom discussion and argumentation can help children cope with a world characterised by:

> The raucous free-for-all of social media, the ascendancy of ephemeral and anonymous online content over the verifiable and attributable knowledge of book and laboratory, the mischievous anarchy of fake news, the reduction of judgemental nuance to the binary 'like'/'dislike', the trolling and abuse that for many people have replaced discussion and debate; and the sense not so much that truth claims are open to question, as of course they always should be, as that for many in the public and political spheres truth is no longer a standard to which they feel morally obliged to aspire. (pp 262-3)

Children, he says, 'must certainly acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for coping in a digital world', but he is unhappy about the notion of 'bolting digital literacy onto a curriculum that in other respects remains untouched' (p265). He warns that 'democracy is fragile' and that self-styled 'strong' leaders 'fan the flames of division and intolerance, marginalise dissenting voices, debase language and argument, and treat truth with contempt' (pp276-7). Education, he argues, is not immune from these tendencies, and he concludes: 'The deeper problem is epistemological. It touches on the efforts of teachers to help students to acquire, understand and interrogate knowledge, to search for truth on the basis of reasoning, argument and evidence. This quest, at the heart of what education is about, is now subverted by those in Westminster who should be its ultimate guardians' (p278).

In Part 4, 'Education for all', Alexander investigates governments' misuse of international comparisons, and ends with an assessment of the UN's mission to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all the world's children. He is concerned that 'world class' has come to mean 'world beating', and argues that a world-class education should be one which engenders 'the capacity to *understand, engage with* and indeed *sustain* the world' and which targets policies and resources to 'reduce the gap between those at the league tables' upper and lower ends' (p314).

He notes that Britain's policymakers hold Finland in high regard, yet fail to acknowledge that what makes the Finnish system so successful is its 'genuinely comprehensive school system' and its lack of national tests, league tables, draconian inspection system or national teaching strategies: 'none of the so-called "levers" of

systemic reform in which the British government has invested so much' (p315). Similarly, policymakers regard the education systems of Shanghai, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore as having something to teach us. 'That is both sensible and responsible', he says, but 'It's how policymakers study education elsewhere and how they translate into policy what they discover that's the problem', as is their 'naive belief that raising test scores in literacy and numeracy will elevate a country's economic performance' (p320). The danger of placing so much reliance on test scores, he warns, is that 'the curriculum narrows to what is tested … and the larger questions of purpose and value, which in democratic societies ought to be central to educational debate, are neglected' (p337).

The last chapter of the book is the text of the author's keynote speech at the 2014 Oslo conference launching the UNESCO 2013-14 Education for All global monitoring report on progress towards UN Millennium Development Goal 2, 'Achieve universal primary education by 2015'. He describes the report as 'impressive in the scale of its evidence, the progress it documents, the warnings it issues, and the humanity of its endeavour' (p342) and approves of its view that quality and equity are inseparable: 'Quality for some is not education for all' (p343). But he does have some concerns, notably the absence of pedagogy. He suggests that this is partly because 'when the availability and competence of teachers is a major challenge … it makes sense to focus on teachers rather than teaching' (p351). He hopes that UNESCO and its advisers will 'make much more inclusive use of the abundant evidence on pedagogy that is now available in order to exert maximum impact on quality where it matters: in the classroom' (p358).

Given its title, it is unsurprising that the tone of the book is often one of disappointment, disillusion, frustration, and occasionally – and understandably – anger. In a chapter headed 'What works and what matters', for example, Alexander notes that, despite the concerns expressed by parents, teachers, community leaders and the children themselves, the Cameron and May governments displayed a lack of commitment to education for sustainable development (and to sustainable development itself) and he despairs that: 'The nationalism, xenophobia and racism unleashed by Brexit dealt a body blow to the idea that learning and citizenship in our interdependent and fragile world must be global rather than merely national; and all over Europe right-wing nationalist leaders, emboldened first by Brexit and then by Trump, have been following suit' (p70).

Of Gove's 2013 revision of the national curriculum, he comments: 'The government invited but largely ignored the advice of its "expert group" and thousands of equally expert submissions, bent the international evidence to suit its purposes, and proposed what it had decided before its review was launched' (p72).

And, he argues, the situation now is 'even worse than it was then':

> The new national curriculum is considerably less enlightened than the one it replaced and indeed being no longer national it's hard to understand why it's there at all; national assessment remains contentious and is now even more confused and confusing than it was; and most government forays into pedagogy are naive, ill-founded and doctrinaire. In these matters, then, I submit … that policy remains the problem rather than the solution. (p76)

A constant feature of education policymaking in England, he suggests, 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 Michael 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. (p 85)

In 2011, Alexander tried to persuade ministers of the importance of 'the link between cognitively-challenging classroom talk and effective teaching'. Gove agreed to hold a 'high level seminar of ministers, officials and researchers to consider its implications for the new national curriculum' (p86). This took place in February 2012. But 'the minister just didn't get it' and dismissed such talk as 'idle chatter in class' (p87).

If all this sounds depressing (which it is), Alexander includes some nice touches of humour to lighten the tone. He describes Michael Gove's revision of the national curriculum (which had 'aims' added as an afterthought) as 'the Mrs Beeton recipe for curriculum planning: first catch your curriculum, then garnish with aims' (p111).

In Chapter 13, 'True grit', he notes that: 'These days, few education secretaries of state are content to do a good job, deeming it more important to leave an indelible mark in the name of "reform". To this lamppost tendency Nicky Morgan appears not to be immune': she described her wheeze to hold a competition to reward the teaching of 'grit and resilience' as a 'landmark step for our education system' (p167). Alexander comments: 'If we add together all the landmark steps announced by recent education ministers we'll have a veritable staircase. Does it, I wonder, lead up or down?' (p171). And of McKinsey's 2007 report 'How the best-performing school systems come out on top', he says: 'It is difficult not to be influenced by the report's physical format, though I shall try. It's so large that one has to stand up to read it – an act of enforced deference which I somewhat resent. Its cover is solidly constructed of cardboard of the same robust grade as is used for eco-coffins' (p310).

In an email to me (3 March 2022), Robin Alexander wrote that: 'The book isn't explicitly valedictory, but now that I'm in my 80s I suspect that it will be my last'. He went on:

> It's depressing that the policy-making conditions and problems I identify have outlasted the cases I use to illustrate them, and because governments tend to restart history when they assume office these will no doubt persist. On the other hand such continuities support the book's claims to contemporary relevance as well as historical interest. And with the spectres of Trump and Putin looming over all of us, and truth everywhere in retreat (including Westminster), chapter 18 ('Dialogic pedagogy in a post-truth world') seems if anything even more relevant in 2022 than when it first appeared three years ago.

He is right. The issues raised in the book are as relevant today as they were at the time – if not more so. And while much of the book consists of accounts of the disappointments and frustrations the author suffered in his encounters with politicians, it is by no means a negative book.

Indeed, I found it inspirational because, along with the disappointments and frustrations, there is another feature which shines through every page: the author's passionate concern for the world's children and their education. It is, above all, the record of a man who has devoted his life, whatever the difficulties, to making a difference.

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