



... children, their world, their education

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WHERE'S THE CURRICULUM?

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Two cheers for the Select Committee's report on the national curriculum. It registers the groundswell of concern about the weight and complexity of current requirements. It notes how the drive to micro-manage everything from the centre deadens, intimidates and de-professionalises. It proposes that what is specified in the national curriculum be reduced to a 'minimum entitlement', that schools be trusted and teachers be re-empowered. It does so with admirable directness. Let's hope that DCSF, QCA and the national strategies take note.

But it offers nothing on the two most important questions of all: does the current national curriculum represent an appropriate vision of education for the 21st century? And if not, where instead should schools be heading?

It is not enough to protest, as the committee might, that they didn't want to fall into the prescription trap, since on this they are inconsistent. They want prescription to be kept to 'an absolute minimum', yet they object that the QCA secondary curriculum programmes of study 'lack clear and concise statements on what should be taught.' Similar confusion attends what 'minimum entitlement' might mean. First it is 'the learning experiences that children should have a right to access in order that they can operate as effective citizens', which sounds pretty comprehensive. Then it is just 'literacy and numeracy and ... general guidelines on breadth and balance,' which suggests that the 3Rs are all that children are entitled to, that thus armed they will become 'effective citizens', and that the rest of the curriculum doesn't matter.

Does the committee really want a return to the pre-1989 lottery of having vital subjects taught in some schools but not others, thus frustrating educational continuity and standards for families which are geographically mobile? Do they not recall what happened in 1998, when the government removed the requirement on primary schools to do more than pay lip-service to the non-core subjects (as the committee now

appears to recommend) and thus spelled their virtual disappearance from some classrooms? Have they not yet registered that standards and breadth are interdependent?

The committee complain that 'no submission made a concerted attempt at illustrating what [a basic entitlement curriculum] might look like', but ignore two such attempts with which they were presented, by the Rose and Cambridge reviews. For primary schools, the Cambridge report elaborates an entitlement framework comprising 12 core aims, 8 domains of learning, a distinct 'community' component, a 70/30 per cent apportioning of time for national and local, with only the overall framework prescribed and the rest to be developed in non-statutory form for schools to use as they themselves determine. Crucially, and unlike the Select Committee, the Cambridge report argues that children are entitled to excellence and high standards across the *whole* curriculum, not just part of it.

As to the committee's jibe that the Cambridge report offers a good analysis of the problems but no solutions, this is bizarre: apart from detailed proposals on curriculum aims, substance, structure, development and implementation which the committee appears not to have noticed, other ideas from the Cambridge review appear, almost verbatim, in the committee's own recommendations: abandoning the national strategies in their present form, supporting local ownership, re-configuring the roles of national agencies, local authorities and schools, making curriculum matters central to initial teacher training. More bizarre still, the committee's report includes as an appendix a close comparison of the Rose and Cambridge curriculum reports which says more than enough to refute its criticisms of both of them.

Robin Alexander directs the Cambridge Primary Review. The Review's report on the primary curriculum is at www.primaryreview.org.uk.