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THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM: AN ALTERNATIVE WAY FORWARD

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Three approaches to the primary curriculum are on offer this morning: from the government's Rose Review, the Commons Select Committee enquiry into the national curriculum, and the Cambridge Primary Review. Now justice can't be done to any of them in 15 minutes. The Cambridge Review curriculum report¹ can be downloaded from our website, as can all 31 of our interim reports. A summary of the curriculum report is available for you to collect today, together with a leaflet about the Cambridge Review as a whole.

Comparing the three reports you will find agreement as well as difference. For example, all of them accept the case for a national curriculum. The Select Committee goes for a minimal concept of curriculum entitlement – literacy and numeracy plus general guidelines on breadth and balance. In contrast, the Rose and Cambridge reports presume that if entitlement, breadth and balance are to mean anything, then the full scope of the curriculum should be specified in broad terms, for what we don't want is to return to the way things were before the 1988 Education Reform Act, when the one thing primary schools did do was teach the 3Rs but for many children access to the wider curriculum was a lottery. On the other hand, the Select Committee and the Cambridge Review share a deep concern about DCSF prescription and micro-management, and about the need to re-empower teachers as agents of curriculum thinking, design and practice. For its part, the Rose report endorses teacher flexibility but undermines that endorsement by treating the current policy framework and culture as beyond question, give or take minor tweaks.

Now I'm not going to give a blow-by-blow comparison of the three reports, though you'll find a comparison of Rose and Cambridge in Appendix 2 of the Select Committee report. But six differences between the two larger enquiries are fundamental.

First, despite the use of the word 'independent' in its title, the Rose review is not independent by any definition of that word outside the eccentric lexicography of Westminster. Rose's remit from the Secretary of State was tightly constrained in terms of what his review should and should *not* look at. Witnesses were asked to respond to a small number of closed questions about curriculum design, literacy and numeracy, foreign languages, personal development, transition and progression, and that was all. Later, many organisations with a legitimate interest in the emerging programmes of learning were denied access to them. The review was based at DCSF; it was managed by DCSF; and it was stoutly defended by DCSF not only against criticism but also against constructive alternatives such as those offered by the

¹ *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: a report from the Cambridge Primary Review. Part 1: Past and Present* and *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: a report from the Cambridge Primary Review. Part 2: The Future*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, February 2009.
www.primaryreview.org.uk

Cambridge Review – bafflingly, when one considers that such views were presented during a period of so-called ‘consultation’, and in that spirit.

The Rose review, then, is essentially a political enterprise and has been managed as such; hence the need constantly to claim its independence. In contrast, the Cambridge review is *genuinely* independent – politically, financially, intellectually and evidentially.

Second, Rose focuses on curriculum alone, while in the Cambridge Review curriculum is just one of a number of themes under investigation. This is crucial, for questions about curriculum don’t arise in a vacuum. They demand consideration, for example, of aims and values, the nature and needs of childhood, the condition of the society and world in which children are growing up, the kinds of teaching through which a paper curriculum comes alive in the classroom, how it is assessed, the professional, institutional and policy conditions which are necessary for its success, and the structure, ages and stages of the system in which it is set. The Cambridge Review has assembled evidence on all of these contingent matters, it has already issued interim reports on some of them, and this evidence informs our discussion of the curriculum.

Third, the Cambridge Review tries to be clear and honest about the problems to be fixed. Some of these problems, for example what David Bell called, when he was at Ofsted, the ‘two tier’ curriculum of the basics and the rest, have persisted unresolved since the nineteenth century. Others, like the erosion of children’s statutory curriculum entitlement by the national tests and national strategies, are more recent. But many of the problems we identify are ignored by Rose, and of course several were excluded from his remit. But if the problems are not attended to, then they will compromise the implementation of Rose’s proposals. No less fundamentally, Rose’s premise that the central challenge is ‘to help class teachers solve the “quarts into pint pots problem” ‘ must be questioned – not on the grounds that there isn’t a problem of curriculum overload and manageability, for in many schools there is, but because it presumes that the class teacher system remains inviolate. It’s as well to remember that the story of English primary education is one of surface change masking deeper immutability, and of historical habit frustrating genuine innovation.

Exacerbating many of the problems identified in the Cambridge curriculum report is the way that primary education is commonly conceived and discussed. Populists play safe with ‘read, write and add up’, being too timid or lazy to ask whether, for the 21st century, this Victorian mantra is sufficient, for of course children should be literate and numerate: nobody disputes that. Some who should know better stubbornly persist in their belief that high standards in the basics and a balanced curriculum are incompatible, when HMI, Ofsted and test evidence from our best schools has consistently shown that they are not, and indeed that the broader curriculum is essential to the meaningful development and application of the ‘basics’, quite apart from the importance and power of the arts and humanities in their own right. Meanwhile, curriculum debate is diminished by a muddled and reductive discourse in which knowledge is grossly parodied as the trading of obsolete facts when in truth knowledge properly defined is the bedrock of all education at any stage; skills are reduced from educational essential to curriculum fashion accessory through profligate over-use – personal skills, emotional skills, communication skills, life skills, information skills, creative skills and so on; and everywhere people strike melodramatic postures for or against subjects. We really must do better than that.

A fourth major difference between Cambridge and Rose relates to what primary education is for. Before starting work on the curriculum we analysed our extensive evidence on aims and values, for we believed that a curriculum cannot be devised without prior clarity about the educational purposes that it should serve. In contrast, Rose proposed his curriculum framework and then looked around for a suitable set of aims. His review found them, a shade too conveniently perhaps, in the form of the existing QCA aims for secondary education, and

decided that these should apply to primary as well. This is very much the English way - or perhaps the Mrs Beeton way: first catch your curriculum, then liberally garnish it with aims. It ensures, of course, that aims have little purchase on practice.

The Cambridge report accepts Rose's argument for an overarching set of aims for the whole of schooling, but it also argues from its evidence that the development and learning of young children have distinct imperatives which require aims which are more closely tailored to the primary phase, especially in the early years. Incidentally, the final Rose report claims that there is little difference between the QCA and Cambridge aims. There is overlap, certainly, but there are significant differences too. It's essential to read the detailed descriptions in our report, not just the labels.

The final difference between Cambridge and Rose concerns the actual proposals on curriculum content and implementation. Our approach is explained in volume 2 of the Cambridge report and is summarised on pages 2-4 of the briefing document. Its features include the following:

- The curriculum is conceived as a matrix of these 12 educational aims and 8 domains of knowledge, skill, enquiry and disposition, with the aims locked into the framework from the outset and informing the selection and balance of content, the way it is taught and the wider life of the school.
- The current notion of a core curriculum of a few protected subjects is replaced by an entitlement curriculum containing all 8 domains, on the principle that all the domains are essential to young children's education and although teaching time will of course be differentially allocated all must be taught to the highest possible standards. We reject as wholly unacceptable the notion that for those subjects accorded less time the quality of teaching doesn't matter.
- It follows that we define 'standards' more, not less, rigorously, than at present: as the pursuit of excellence across the full curriculum, not just in the 3Rs. This, obviously, has implications for assessment, and indeed for teacher training and staff deployment.
- The heart of the curriculum, both in its own right and because it underpins all the other domains, is the re-configured domain of language, oracy and literacy, which also incorporates ICT and a modern foreign language. We are pleased to see the government at last responding to what some of us have been arguing for years about the developmental, cognitive and pedagogical importance of high quality classroom talk. Mentioned only once in the Primary Strategy's 2003 launch document, it is now pervasive, though I still find the official label 'speaking and listening' somewhat underpowered. But let's hope it isn't just another fad.
- As with the aims, the domains can be properly understood only by reading their detailed descriptions in our curriculum report. There you will find that several domains with familiar names are reconceptualised, and the literacy and numeracy components of the primary national strategy are re-integrated with the curriculum rather than – as at present – handled separately as part of the government's standards agenda. Once that re-integration happens, the primary strategy becomes redundant, with considerable savings to the taxpayer.
- We leave it to schools to determine whether some or all of the domains should be taught separately, and how relations between the domains should be explored.
- In planning and implementation the proposed curriculum has three segments:

- a nationally-determined framework for the curriculum as a whole and for each domain, which is statutory;
 - nationally proposed programmes of study, which are non-statutory;
 - a locally-determined community curriculum, which is also non-statutory and may amount to up to 30% of the whole (the precise percentage is less important than the principle).
- The emphasis on *community* in our proposed aims for primary education, and our advocacy of a protected local or community curriculum alongside what is nationally prescribed, are not just about making room for teacher autonomy and flexibility, important though these are. They are more fundamentally a response to what we were told, as we travelled round the country talking to teachers, children, parents, local authorities, community workers, religious leaders, police and many others, about the loss of community, the decline in mutuality and the disenfranchising of local voice. They are a response to this nation's exceptional cultural diversity. And, topically, they offer an chance to reverse the tide of central control and revitalise England's tarnished and flagging democracy. The community component provides an opportunity to ensure that the curriculum really does respond to circumstances, needs and opportunities which are local as well as national.
- This formula, we believe, balances *entitlement*, *national purpose*, *community empowerment* and *professional flexibility*.
- Finally, in the curriculum report, and in more detail in our forthcoming final report on the Cambridge Review as a whole, we discuss the changes which are necessary for securing the success of this kind of curriculum, including the role of DCSF and the non-departmental public bodies, local capacity-building, teacher training, CPD, school staffing, teacher deployment and pedagogy.

ELEMENTS IN A NEW PRIMARY CURRICULUM

As proposed by
the Cambridge Primary Review

AIMS	DOMAINS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> well-being engagement empowerment autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> arts and creativity citizenship and ethics faith and belief
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> encouraging respect and reciprocity promoting interdependence and sustainability empowering local, national and global citizenship celebrating culture and community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> language, oracy and literacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense fostering skills exciting the imagination enacting dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mathematics physical and emotional health place and time science and technology

