



# Foundation Stage principles could be extended through the infant years

Diane Hofkins

The Government's announcement that former chief primary HMI Sir Jim Rose would be heading up a review of the 5-11 curriculum looked like a last-minute addition to the Children's Plan. No-one seemed to be expecting it; in fact, everyone thought the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority would be reviewing primary in the wake of its key stage 3 revisions.

Now, in a letter setting out his expectations and timetable, Ed Balls has assured Sir Jim that he will be "closely supported by the QCA who will take the leading role in providing the evidence required for the review and who will manage the associated consultations". They must be chewing the carpet, especially since their function as exams regulator has just been hived off. What's left? Neither qualifications, curriculum nor authority, it appears.

Meanwhile, no mention at all is made of the serious, extensive and costly independent two-year review of primary education and children in all their many aspects being funded by Esmee Fairbairn and led by Robin Alexander at Cambridge University.

More wide-ranging and with a much more open brief than Sir Jim's review, its interim findings (intended to spark debate) have been dismissed or wilfully misinterpreted by the DCSF.

It is possible to conclude that ministers have brought in the trusty Sir Jim to ward off this threat, but also to hope that the fair-minded and knowledgeable former HMI will view Alexander's work in a more positive light.

So what is Rose being asked to do?

- Prune the programmes of study
- Ensure the 3Rs are emphasised
- Give personal skills equal weight (sort of)
- Retain a broad curriculum
- Fit in foreign languages
- Think about reframing the structure of key stage 1
- Consider the difficulties of summer-born children
- Worry about transitions
- Help schools narrow the gaps
- Deliver an interim report by 31

October this year and revised programmes of study at the end of March 2009.

Aspects of this brief are surprisingly radical. It opens the possibility of extending the foundation stage principles through the infant years, and potentially even higher.

The idea of building the primary curriculum on six broad areas of experience, with more play-based learning, appeals to many teachers and heads. Quite a few schools have extended the approach into Y1, and Wales is developing its whole 4-7 curriculum this way. But only a tiny number have attempted it straight through Year 6.

The six areas of experience are:

- Personal, social and emotional development
- Communication, language and literacy
- Mathematical development
- Knowledge and understanding of the world
- Physical development
- Creative development

What it means is a much more integrated curriculum, and more teaching through topics. This will be condemned as "trendy" in the right-wing press, and so will have to be overshadowed or carefully worded in the final report. Or just left in educational jargon.

Balls' letter says: "I would welcome your advice on whether, in order to provide greater continuity from the Early Years Foundation Stage [the combined curriculum for 0 to 5-year-olds], pupils' interests might be better served by studying fewer subjects during primary education, particularly in key stage 1." (So far so clear).

Then it obfuscates for the uninitiated (including the Minister?): "You will also want to consider whether some aspects of the EYFS should be extended into the primary curriculum. This might include, for example, placing emphasis on the full range of areas of learning and development

contained in the EYFS, including social and emotional areas of development, and widening the curriculum opportunities for child initiated and play-based activity."

So we are left with some contradictions. Balls wants a "root and branch" review, but also says the content of the existing programmes of study should be reviewed, "reducing prescription where possible". This does not seem "root and branch" enough. The last thing we need is another 1994 Dearing Review. At that time, readers will recall, Sir Ron valiantly hacked and pruned the overgrown branches of the primary curriculum, attempting to clear 20 per cent of time, but found it couldn't be done without destroying the tree.

The national curriculum, now nearly 20 years old, was drawn up, subject by subject, by teams of experts, each devoted to their own discipline. Most would not have recognised a six-year-old, and certainly had never taught one. If I were you I wouldn't start from here.

Where he has truly moved on, though, is in his emphasis on personal development, and a recognition that "personal, social and emotional capabilities are closely related to educational attainment".

When he raises tough questions, the phrasing is worrying. "Your review should consider when and how in primary education children should be introduced to the key ideas and practice of ... the creative arts; the humanities; PE and sport – as a preparation for further learning at the secondary stage."

In other words, at what age should children be introduced to what subjects? Do history and geography, or design and technology, mean much in reality at KS1? I don't know. But please, please Mr Balls, don't think of PE and the arts as "preparation for secondary". Children live in the present, and anyway, how could "personal, social and emotional capabilities" develop without them?

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