

Watching white paint dry - first reactions on reading the executive summary of the Bew Report

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Make no mistake. This so-called "independent" report is a whitewash. It is not a good read; it doesn't illuminate the assessment issue; it does not entertain but it does infuriate. It offers no fundamentally new insights; proposes no fundamental changes; and offers no prospect of relief from a testing regime that many, both children and teachers, find oppressive and miseducative.

As the Cambridge Review argued, what is needed is a fundamental review of the accountability system in primary education but this has never been on this government's (or its predecessor's) agenda. Given its initial terms of reference and the "packed" nature of its membership (involving no assessment specialists) the review committee's report is entirely predictable. Following on from the so-called "expert" report on assessment from the previous administration it offers "more of the same", albeit with some slight variations. It tinkers at the edges but never gets to the heart of the assessment issue.

The key to the report's thinking is contained in its very first recommendation:

"There should be only three main uses of the data from Key Stage 2 statutory assessment:

- holding schools accountable for the standards of attainment and progress made by their pupils and groups of pupils;
- informing parents and secondary schools about the performance of individual pupils;
- enabling benchmarking between schools, as well as monitoring performance locally and nationally".

This makes a number of highly questionable assumptions. It assumes that schools are the major determinants of individual children's performance rather than factors beyond school's control – a debateable proposition. It assumes that statutory assessment in just three subjects gives a valid picture of schools' "standards" – also highly debateable.

It assumes that parents need information about the performance of their children – true – but favours publicly available league tables rather than face-to-face, confidential information their child's teacher – debateable again. Tellingly that first recommendation makes no mention of "fostering children's learning" as one of the main uses of statutory assessment.

In an apparently liberal recommendation the report advocates that a wider range of data – including new progress and attainment measures, and rolling averages "should be taken into account to give a lesser arbitrary and fairer picture of a school's performance". But that data rests essentially on the same series of tests and the same conceptualisation of progress in terms of levels which have promoted so much concern in the first place.

The report claims to help to reduce teaching to the test. Yet the reading and mathematics tests remain unaltered; and there is still to be a "secretarial" test of spelling, grammar, punctuation and vocabulary – eminently suited to excessive test preparation. No relief in sight then from a test-dominated year 6 experience for hard-pressed pupils.

There is a welcome recommendation that "the statutory assessment system should include both external testing and teacher assessment" – but on an equal footing? Very doubtful, given the experience of an identical but abortive recommendation from Dearing over a decade ago. One of the few "silver linings" in the assessment "cloud" is the belated realisation that the assessment of children's "creative" writing can only validly be undertaken by teachers. But even here will that assessment be given equal, or preferably greater, prominence in published data compared with the test assessment of secretarial skills? The omens are not good, particularly given the expense likely to be involved in external moderation of that element of teacher assessment.

The review was originally set up to placate teachers' professional associations and has been successful in this thus far. But now that it's been published and its true colours are apparent the report needs to be vigorously contested by those associations and by all others concerned with promoting a liberal approach to primary education before its "white" paint" dries and hardens!

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