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BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Robin Alexander considers the future of the primary curriculum in the light of the DfES Five Year Strategy

‘The world is changing ... We cannot stand still ... We have a vision for the future.’ Thus, strangely combining non-sequitur with hints of ministerial incontinence, the recently-unveiled DfES Five Year Strategy.

The problem with the government’s serial modernisers is that they prefer myth to history and have the slimmest of purchases on the future to which their modernising efforts are supposedly directed. So when DfES claims its Five Year Strategy will ‘address our historic weaknesses’ and ‘give the children and learners who are our future what they deserve’, we take notice dutifully but without much hope.

Alas, once again the past is reduced to sweeping claims about the rotten state of England and English education before Blair - so expedient for the Downing Street Delivery Unit - and apart from the usual mention of flexible employment skills the future remains a serene blank. Instead, DfES offers primary children and parents ‘the best in the basics of reading, writing and maths ... better teaching and more personalised support for every child ... a richer curriculum, with an entitlement to PE and sport, foreign language teaching from age 7 and the chance to learn a musical instrument ... a closer relationship between parents and schools ... Extended Schools with 8-6 wrap-around childcare ... healthy and environmentally sustainable schools ... a robust approach to failure.’

History invites us to ask just how big a deal this is. After all, the 3Rs have always been with us, primary teachers have for decades aspired to personalisation, and instrumental tuition and sport were commonplace until LEAs were forced to cut back on peripatetic services and sell off playing fields. And in offering a ‘richer’ curriculum the government is merely giving back in 2005 what it took away in 1998 when it told primary schools to concentrate on the literacy and numeracy targets and forget about the rest of the curriculum. Enrichment? Barefaced cheek, more like.

History also tells us that notwithstanding their physical transformation and the ludicrous language of modernisation – ‘tough’, ‘new’, ‘robust’, ‘step change’, ‘delivery’, ‘leading edge’, ‘world class’, ‘one-stop shop’, and now ‘choice’, ‘personalisation’, ‘wraparound’ and, heaven help us, ‘Wave 3 intervention’ and ‘roll-out of the Pupil Achievement Tracker’ – primary schools retain, firmly embedded in their structure and consciousness, at least four influential legacies of the nineteenth century.

These are: ages and stages (5-7/7-11); the generalist class teacher system; the two-tier curriculum (the inviolate ‘basics’ and the vulnerable residue, now reconstituted as ‘excellence and enjoyment’); and a view of those ‘basics’ as reading, writing and number but nothing else: not talking, arguing, questioning, relating or creating; not exploring time, place, society and the natural world; not citizenship; not even ICT or science. Being deemed inessential in

the 19th century they were bolted on in the 20th only to be periodically unbolted in the interests of targets or ‘manageability’.

Meanwhile, our children grow up in a diverse but divided nation whose citizens exhibit growing disenchantment with the authors of Five Year Strategies. Beyond are the uncertainties of globalisation and the unspeakable tragedies of Dafur, Iraq and Banda Aceh. Accelerating towards us may be the ultimate catastrophe of global warming. Where, in relation to scenarios such as these, is the government’s educational vision? No consideration of educational futures makes sense unless alongside the upbeat economic analysis such harsher realities are also confronted, and unless those legacies of the past which continue to confine our vision for primary education are also challenged.

The primary curriculum is the nettle we have most persistently failed to grasp. To create the 2000 revision of the National Curriculum the competing claims of countless interest groups were tossed into the pot in the hope that they would produce a coherent statement of educational values and purposes. They didn’t. Now there’s another ingredient: personalisation and choice. By age 14, DfES tells us, pupils will be in a position to choose those subjects, pathways, careers and indeed lives which they find most relevant and worthwhile.

Will they? To choose validly is to understand what one is choosing from. That requires a curriculum which is not only broad but in which every subject is given if not equal time then equal seriousness of professional commitment and skill: choosing to drop a subject which lacks the teachers’ insight and passion, the learner’s engagement or sufficient time to make an impact is no choice at all.

So it’s not just history, social change and the fragile state of our world which command a rethink of the primary curriculum and the expertise needed to teach it; it’s now a necessary consequence of the government’s own modernisation drive. Genuine modernisation and choice ought at last to spell the demise of the two-tier curriculum and the narrow account of the basics we inherited from the Victorians. Literacy and numeracy will always remain fundamental but they can no longer stand alone, and instead of a small number of core subjects we need a more generously-conceived core curriculum. This will include the essence of what is required not just for valid choice at age 14, but for empowering a generation which will stand a chance of securing a more optimistic global vision than the one which currently confronts us, thus giving *their* children the future they deserve.

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