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## What's the Point? Select Committee Ponders the Meaning of Education

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**ABSTRACT** In November 2015 the House of Commons Education Committee launched an enquiry into the purpose and quality of education in England. Among the written submissions was one from this author on behalf of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust. At the request of *FORUM* an edited version appears in the journal. The submission's centrepiece was the statement of educational aims from the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, a statement on which the author and Michael Armstrong worked together and which Michael frequently quoted.

### Introduction

When in November 2015 the House of Commons Education Committee announced an enquiry into the purpose and quality of education in England, many educators responded with incredulity. I blogged at the time: 'You ask about educational purposes now? After three decades of so-called reforms? Are you telling us that these have all been, in the strict sense of the word, pointless?' (Alexander, 2016a). Though the Committee's enquiry seemed yet again to put the policy cart before the educational horse, a more measured response was called for. After all, select committees exist to call government to account and some do so very effectively, so it is conceivable that my objection about the absence of a defensible educational – as opposed to political – rationale for three decades of non-stop structural and curricular change may have been in the Education Committee's mind too. Indeed, in launching the enquiry the Committee's chair said, 'Approaching this basic question of the purpose of education will pave the way for the Committee to examine whether our curriculum, qualifications, assessment and accountability systems really are fit for purpose' (Carmichael, 2015).

Constructing the required statement of purposes was straightforward, for this very exercise had been at the heart of the Cambridge Primary Review. Its remit opened thus:

With respect to public provision in England, the Review will seek to identify the purposes which the primary phase of education should serve, the values which it should espouse, the curriculum and learning environment which it should provide, and the conditions which are necessary in order to ensure both that these are of the highest and most consistent quality possible, and that they address the needs of children and society over the coming decades.  
(Alexander, 2010, p. 15)

The Review then gathered oral and written evidence from thousands of witnesses, commissioned 28 surveys of published research and interrogated over 4000 published sources. It published 31 interim reports, 41 briefings, a final report with conclusions and recommendations (Alexander, 2010), and a companion research volume (Alexander et al, 2010). Accounts of the Review's journey and impact, including its somewhat fraught relationship with policy makers and the media, have appeared in previous issues of *FORUM* (Alexander, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2014a, b).

The Review's 10 themes encompassed 100 questions. Five of them were about aims:

- What is primary education for?
- Taking account of the country and the world in which our children are growing up, to what individual, social, cultural, economic and other circumstances and needs should this phase of education principally attend?
- What core values and principles should it uphold and advance?
- How far can a national system reflect and respect the values and aspirations of the many different communities – cultural, ethnic, religious, political, economic, regional, local – for which it purportedly caters?
- In envisaging the future purposes and shape of this phase of education how far ahead is it possible or sensible to look? (Alexander, 2010, p. 523).

The Review's response to these questions is presented in chapter 12 of the final report (Alexander, 2010, pp. 174-202). It is grounded in 87 regional focus group sessions with teachers, head teachers, school governors, parents, politicians, community representatives, faith leaders and children themselves, together with a comparative analysis of the stated aims of other education systems, a historical trawl through the evolving aims of public education in England since the nineteenth century and four separate literature searches (White, 2010; Machin & McNally, 2010; Chawla-Duggan & Lowe, 2010; Shuayb & O'Donnell, 2010).

It fell to me to make sense of all this material and attempt to crystallise from it a statement of educational aims that coherently and convincingly reflected the hopes and concerns of the Review's witnesses while having direct

practical application. That it has achieved this in many schools since 2010 was due in no small part to Michael Armstrong, whom I invited to work with me on the task. During 2008 the statement went through many drafts, and among the people on whom we tried out the aims as they progressed was John White. John had written extensively on aims and did so again for the Cambridge Review (White, 2010). His comments and advice proved invaluable.

Michael was pleased with the outcome and frequently quoted the aims in his talks and writing (including in *FORUM* – Armstrong, 2014, p. 346). As a former school head he was very clear about the way that schools should use the aims. To adopt them without question was as unacceptable as using them decoratively in the manner deplored below. Instead, Michael proposed that schools should take the aims one at a time as the basis for a series of intensive collective staff discussions that might take a term or longer to complete. About each aim they should ask what it meant, how far it resonated with the school's existing thinking, whether it should be adopted, and if so, how in the school's everyday encounters and practices it should be pursued and manifested.

This piecemeal approach has its drawbacks, because it will be seen below that the aims combine into a coherent statement of intent and are intended to be more than the sum of their parts. This was emphasised in the Review's explanation:

The aims are interdependent. Thus, for example, empowerment and autonomy are achieved in part through exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense, through the development of skill, through the liberation of the imagination, and through the power of dialogue; and well-being comes not only from having one's immediate needs met ... but also from deep engagement in culture and the life of the community, from the development of meaningful relationships with others, and from engagement in those domains of collective action on which the larger well-being of civil society and the global community depend. In other words, our twelve aims are not a pick-and-mix checklist but the necessary elements in a coherent view of what it takes to become an educated person. (Alexander, 2010, p. 199)

However, Michael's priority was to propose a practical strategy for ensuring the essential first step: ensuring that the aims were confronted and explored by those in a position to make them an everyday reality.

The main part of the submission to the House of Commons Education Committee, slightly edited, now follows.

### **The Discourse of Aims: tokenism and dichotomy**

The Cambridge Primary Review's exploration of educational aims followed discussion with a wide range of stakeholders, a comparative analysis of the stated aims of other education systems and a historical check on the evolving

aims of public education in England since the nineteenth century. This revealed remarkable continuity in educational sentiment but also a tendency for public statements of aims to bear little relation to the purposes manifested by other policies, especially on the curriculum. Indeed, it can readily be demonstrated that official statements of educational aims tend to be largely decorative.

In contrast, the aims presented by the Cambridge Primary Review have been adopted by many schools and are regarded by them as an essential basis for curriculum planning and a touchstone for school life as a whole. We are therefore confident that these aims are as apposite in 2016 as they were in 2009 and that they have genuine practical purchase. They are presented below for the Committee's consideration.

However, in light of the tokenistic tendencies alluded to above, the Committee should consider carefully how such aims can best be translated into practice. There is little point in their spending time on this exercise if aims march in one direction and the curriculum in another.

There is a further problem: the tendency for discussion about aims to be couched as a conflict between irreconcilable values. When he launched the present inquiry, the Chair of the Education Committee said:

In this inquiry we want to ask the question, what is education for? ...  
Is it, for example, to prepare our young people for the world of work? Is it to ready our children for adulthood and provide them with the skills to lead fulfilling lives? Is it to provide them all with broad academic knowledge, based on a shared culture and values?  
(Carmichael, 2015)

To these questions we would respond: education can and should pursue *all* of these purposes and in so doing eschew the common tendency to treat them as mutually exclusive. The country needs a skilled workforce. It also needs active and critically minded citizens, strong and compassionate communities, and individuals who 'lead fulfilling lives' whether they are in employment or not.

It is an abiding weakness of recent policy, especially in relation to the National Curriculum, that it has concentrated on the first of these purposes at the expense of the others. It is true that ministers routinely commend a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, but this phrase, originating in a 1970s HMI report and still deployed in Ofsted inspections, has now become utterly devalued by casual overuse in government rhetoric and by tokenistic application in practice – as has ministers' somewhat disingenuous coining of Matthew Arnold's 'best that has been thought and said'. For, with rather greater force and frequency, ministers tell us that the true job of (primary) schools is to get children 'to read, write and add up' (or as an occasional variant 'do their times tables') while one minister has gone so far as to assert that the job of primary education is to make pupils 'secondary ready' – as if the longest phase of compulsory schooling, during children's vital formative years, has no imperatives of its own.

This attitude produces a curriculum that rightly prioritises literacy and numeracy, but is ambivalent about science while treating the arts and humanities

as desirable but inessential; that elevates the basic skills of reading, writing and calculating over those of orally communicating, relating successfully to others, solving problems and striving for the common good; that pays more attention to children's test performance in a limited range of capacities than to their development as rounded individuals; and that has little to say about education's role in addressing pressing national and global challenges such as cultural diversity, poverty, inequality, social fragmentation, climate change and sustainability.

We reject this needlessly narrow, polarised and parochial account of education's purposes, and are deeply concerned about its impact on the learning experiences of those children who are in schools whose leaders capitulate to such minimalism because they fear the consequences of the Government's regimes of testing and inspection. We are pleased that by asking for evidence on this matter the Committee has tacitly allowed for the possibility that the official account is inadequate.

No less important, evidence from the Cambridge Primary Review and Ofsted shows that the narrower account of purposes is, in relation to the standards agenda by which it is usually justified, counterproductive; for there is a clear and proven association between breadth of purpose, the quality of the wider curriculum and standards in 'the basics'. (The evidence is summarised and referenced in Alexander, 2010, p. 243.) This evidence has been common knowledge since the 1970s and was approvingly cited in a Conservative government White Paper all of thirty years ago, in 1986. This castigated 'the mistaken belief, once widely held, that a concentration on basic skills is by itself enough to improve achievement in literacy and numeracy' (Department of Education and Science, 1985). The Committee might remind the Government of that. We have, many times.

### **What is Education For? An Aims Framework**

The aims below are in three groups. They echo the triumvirate of concerns captured in the Cambridge Primary Review's strapline, 'Children, their World, their Education', and remind us that education must attend both to the development and needs of pupils and to the condition of the society and world in which they are growing up.

Thus the first group identifies those qualities and capacities that schools should foster in every child, and the personal needs to which teachers should attend. The second group includes four critically important orientations to other people and the wider world, reflecting witnesses' concerns about the opportunities, challenges and responsibilities of life in the twenty-first century. The third group focuses on the content, processes and outcomes of learning itself.

These aims arose from an enquiry into primary education. Mindful of the Committee's interest in the education of children of all ages, we note that we have been frequently told that they apply equally to early years education and

the secondary phase, most recently at the 2016 annual conference of the secondary-oriented Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) (Alexander, 2016b). It is in that spirit that we commend them for the Committee's consideration.

*Aims of Education: the individual*

1. *Well-being.* To attend to children's capabilities, needs, hopes and anxieties here and now, and promote their mental, emotional and physical well-being and welfare. Happiness, a strong sense of self and a positive outlook on life are not only desirable in themselves: they are also conducive to engagement and learning. But well-being goes further than this, and 'happiness' on its own can seem merely self-indulgent. Caring for children's well-being is about attending to their physical and emotional welfare. It is about inducting them into a life where they will be wholeheartedly engaged in all kinds of worthwhile activities and relationships, defined generously rather than narrowly. It is about maximising children's learning potential through good teaching and the proper application of evidence about how children develop and learn and how teachers most effectively teach. Fostering children's well-being requires us to attend to their future fulfilment as well as their present needs and capabilities. Well-being thus defined is both a *precondition* and an *outcome* of successful schooling.
2. *Engagement.* To secure children's active, willing and enthusiastic engagement in their learning. This too is a precondition for learning. It is also a manifestation and test of successful teaching.
3. *Empowerment.* To excite, promote and sustain children's agency; empowering them through knowledge, understanding, skill and personal qualities to profit from their present and later learning, to discover and lead rewarding lives, and to manage life and find new meaning in a changing world.
4. *Autonomy.* To foster children's autonomy and sense of self through a growing understanding of the world present and past, and through productive relationships with others. Autonomy enables children to establish who they are and to what they might aspire. It enables them to translate knowledge into meaning. It encourages that critical independence of thought which is essential both to the growth of knowledge and to citizenship. It enables children to discriminate in their choice of activities and relationships. And it helps them to see beyond the surface appeal of appearance, fashion and celebrity to what is of abiding value.

*Aims of Education: self, others and the wider world*

5. *Encouraging respect and reciprocity.* To promote respect for self, for peers and adults, for other generations, for diversity and difference, for language, culture and custom, for ideas and values, and for those habits of willing courtesy between persons on which civilised relations depend. To ensure

that respect is mutual: between adult and child as well as between child and adult. To understand the essential reciprocity of learning and human relations.

6. *Promoting interdependence and sustainability.* To develop children's understanding of humanity's dependence for well-being and survival on equitable relationships between individuals, groups, communities and nations, and on a sustainable relationship with the natural world, and help children to move from understanding to positive action in order that they can make a difference and know that they have the power to do so.
7. *Empowering local, national and global citizenship.* To help children to become active citizens by encouraging their full participation in decision making within the classroom and school, especially where their own learning is concerned, and to advance their understanding of human rights, democratic engagement, diversity, conflict resolution and social justice. To develop a sense that human interdependence and the fragility of the world order require a concept of citizenship which is global as well as local and national.
8. *Celebrating culture and community.* To establish the school as a cultural site, a focal point of community life and thought. To enact within the school the behaviours and relationships on which community most directly depends, and in so doing to counter the loss of community outside the school. To appreciate that 'education is an embodiment of a culture's way of life, not just as a preparation for it'.

*Aims of Education: learning, knowing and doing*

9. *Exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense.* To enable children to encounter and begin to explore the wealth of human experience through induction into, and active engagement in, the different ways through which humans make sense of their world and act upon it: intellectual, moral, spiritual, aesthetic, social, emotional and physical; through language, mathematics, science, the humanities, the arts, religion and other ways of knowing and understanding. *Induction* acknowledges and respects our membership of a culture with its own deeply embedded ways of thinking and acting which can make sense of complexity and through which human understanding constantly changes and advances. Education is necessarily a process of acculturation. *Exploration* is grounded in that distinctive mixture of amazement, perplexity and curiosity which constitutes childhood wonder; a commitment to discovery, invention, experiment, speculation, fantasy, play and growing linguistic agility which are the essence of childhood.
10. *Fostering skill.* To foster children's skills in those domains on which learning, employment and a rewarding life most critically depend: in oracy and literacy, in mathematics, science, information technology, the creative and performing arts, the humanities and financial management; but also and no less in practical activities, communication, creativity, invention, problem

solving, critical practice and human relations. To ally skills to knowledge and a sense of purpose in order that they do not become empty formulae devoid of significance.

11. *Exciting the imagination.* To excite children's imagination in order that they can advance beyond present understanding, extend the boundaries of their lives, contemplate worlds possible as well as actual, understand cause and consequence, develop the capacity for empathy, and reflect on and regulate their behaviour; to explore and test language, ideas and arguments in every activity and form of thought. We assert the need to emphasise the intrinsic value of exciting children's imagination. To experience the delights – and pains – of imagining, and of entering into the imaginative worlds of others, is to become a more rounded and capable person.
12. *Enacting dialogue.* To help children grasp that learning is an interactive process and that understanding builds through joint activity between teacher and pupil and among pupils in collaboration, and thereby to develop pupils' increasing sense of responsibility for what and how they learn. To help children recognise that knowledge is not only transmitted but also negotiated and recreated; and that each of us in the end makes our own sense out of the meeting of knowledge both personal and collective. To advance a pedagogy in which dialogue is central: between self and others, between personal and collective knowledge, between present and past, between different ways of making sense.

### **Aims into Practice: beyond metrics**

The Committee has posed two further questions:

- What measures should be used to evaluate the quality of education against these purposes?
- How well does the current education system perform against these measures?

I suggest that it would be sensible to address the Committee's first question, 'What should be the purpose of education in England?', before considering the two above, because existing performance measures relate, as I have indicated, to a somewhat restricted view of education's purposes and priorities. However, there are some preliminary ground-clearing comments to be made.

First, if the actual purposes of education in England, as manifested in government policy and much educational practice, are narrower than the vision espoused by the Cambridge Primary Review, it follows that the current education system does not in general perform well in relation to aims such as those the Review has proposed – though there are, as I have noted, many schools that successfully resist pressure to reduce education to what is tested and inspected.

Second, the Committee's use of the word 'quality' is ambiguous. Quality relates to education both as experienced and as achieved, but the prevailing rhetoric and formal requirements relating to quality are exclusively about

*outcomes*. But quality and outcomes must on no account be treated as synonymous because – if we consider the primary phase by way of example – to do so would be to presume that an education that produces good test results in a limited range of outcomes in just two subjects is by extension of good quality in the remaining twelve. Quality in education is about more than what is tested, and what is tested cannot be treated as a proxy for the whole.

Third, the Committee asks about ‘measures’ but a glance at the aims proposed above shows that many of them are not amenable to measurement. Which is not to say that they should not be assessed. They should, for if an aim is worth pursuing then we need to know whether and to what degree it has been successfully achieved, and how it has impacted on children’s learning and lives.

I therefore suggest that one of the tasks of this inquiry is to extend the vocabulary of assessment and evaluation in order to allow proper consideration of the achievement of aims. First, the notion of *quality*, which is about both process and product, needs to be disentangled from *outcomes*, which are about product alone. Second, and consequently, the Committee should be prepared to investigate quality in this wider sense. Third, it must accept that some of education’s most vital purposes, processes and outcomes are beyond the reach of measurement and other evaluation approaches are needed.

Here it is useful to introduce a further term: *indicators*.

Measures measure, indicators indicate: they do different jobs. A measure is a procedure, device or unit for measuring and is irrevocably tied to quantity. An indicator is a more complex and variable clue about whether something is happening and if so to what extent. Approaching clouds indicate the imminence of rain but they don’t guarantee it and they certainly don’t measure rainfall. A noisy classroom may indicate lack of student concentration but it doesn’t conclusively prove it, still less measure the precise balance of student attention and inattention. (Alexander, 2015)

If we are validly to evaluate the performance of schools in relation to the complex spectrum of human learning and behaviour encapsulated in aims such as those proposed above, then we must enlarge the evaluation options to include indicators as well as measures and understand that subjective judgement in relation to some outcomes is inescapable. That is not a weakness: the weakness lies in insisting that evaluation starts and ends with metrics, and that metrics alone define what is educationally important.

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