

National Union of Teachers
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**CAMPAIGNING FOR EDUCATION:
THE FRED AND ANNE JARVIS AWARD 2011**

Robin Alexander's acceptance speech

I'm delighted and honoured to accept this award. I see it as recognition not just of my own work but also of all those who have contributed to the Cambridge Primary Review. That includes the NUT itself, which has consistently supported us - without of course agreeing with everything we've said - since back in 2004 when we started planning an independent enquiry into English primary education, right through to when your General Secretary and I shared a radio phone-in programme to discuss the final report, 18 months ago. I want to thank the NUT for this support. It has meant a great deal.

It's a particular honour to receive an award bearing the name of Anne and Fred Jarvis, whose combined record as educational campaigners is second to none. It's a personal pleasure, too, for I've known Fred for many years and even now I'm a member of an educational forum which he founded and continues to lead and inspire.

Since I started working in education, 46 years ago as a primary teacher in Birkenhead, it's with primary education that I've been mainly concerned. The Cambridge Primary Review marks the current stage of this journey. It has covered every aspect of this vital phase of children's education, but constantly returns to three basic questions: 'How well is England's system of primary education doing?' 'How can it be improved?' and 'What kind of primary education do our children need as the basis for their learning and their lives in today's complex and fragile world?'

Governments also ask these questions, well the first two anyway - how well is the system doing and how can it be improved - though governments usually know the answers they want to hear and those they don't, hence that jibe that 'evidence-based policy' all too often means 'policy-based evidence': first devise your policy, then select the evidence that fits it, and ignore, rubbish or suppress the rest. The Cambridge Review understands this tendency only too well, having asked questions and provided evidence and answers that the previous government found, shall we say, inconvenient.

That was then: what about now? Well, the latest stage in the present government's quest for educational improvement is yet another national curriculum review. Resisting the urge to say 'Been there, done that' (Jim Rose might say that too), the Cambridge Review has submitted evidence, as I'm sure has the NUT and as I hope have many of you.

Although the Cambridge Review enjoys a more constructive relationship with the current government than with its predecessor, and indeed the government has accepted some of our key proposals, they know that we retain our independence and our right to speak truth to power. So in that spirit I have to say that I'm disappointed that the latest national curriculum review makes the same mistake as all its predecessors, and fails to pose the question that I asked a moment ago and which, when one is devising a national curriculum, must surely precede all others: 'What kind of an education do England's children need as the basis for their lives and learning in today's world?' Without clear aims *now*, at the beginning of the process -

and that means aims that have been thoroughly researched and properly debated, that command a high level of support and provide a coherent vision - how on earth can the government decide what subjects to make statutory, compulsory or optional, or which aspects of the favoured subjects should count as what the government calls 'essential knowledge'? How can they determine what is 'essential' without criteria? Essential for what?

Perish the thought, but the consultation form that many of us have just returned to DfE includes 232 tickboxes (yes, I counted them), so perhaps in the absence of aims for the new national curriculum its content will be determined on the basis of votes. Not so much a review as an election. 'And the votes cast in the election for the non-core subjects were as follows: history 51%, geography 49% I therefore declare history the winner. Better luck next time, geography. No, music, you can't have a recount.'

Or if not on the basis of the votes of those who have returned their consultation forms, will the curriculum planners, as has been proposed in all seriousness, simply copy the curriculum of those countries whose students do better than ours in the PISA tests in the belief that this will deliver the goods - thus ignoring not just the limitations of the tests themselves but also the fundamental cultural differences which give each country's education system its distinctive character? Or the fact that in one of the much-admired education systems 60% of primary pupils receive extra tuition out of school to boost their performance? Or that another much admired system is a one-party state where political dissent isn't tolerated? Will we copy that too?

And apart from the dangers of so blinkered a use of international comparison, what an eccentric way to construct a national curriculum anyway: raiding the curricula of other countries in the hope that the resulting pick-and-mix will make some kind of educational sense, rather than starting with the condition and needs of children and society here in Britain, meanwhile consolidating our core values and building on what we do well. Of course we can and must learn from other countries - and I say this as one who has undertaken comparative educational research in many countries of the world and has shown how its lessons can be applied - but culture-blind cherry-picking in the hope of a higher place on a dubious league table is not the way to do it.

There's another danger, and it arises from the sharp distinction which is being made between the four protected subjects - English, maths, science, PE - and the rest of the curriculum: the danger of neo-Victorian minimalism. The Cambridge Review has consistently argued that at the primary stage children should have a legal entitlement to a broad and rich curriculum in which every aspect is taught to the highest possible standard regardless of how much or little time is allocated to it. If it's worth teaching at all, it's worth teaching well. We want an end to the two-tier curriculum in which the non-core subjects are at risk of losing out in terms of quality as well as time, receiving scant attention in initial teacher training, CPD, inspection, leadership, resourcing and support.

You'll know, I hope, that we argue our case for a statutory entitlement to curriculum breadth and balance allied to quality on three grounds: first, because this is surely the least that one of the world's richest countries can do for its children; second, such a foundation is essential for later learning and choice; third, because evidence shows that it raises standards. Of course the so-called 'basics' are essential, but you don't secure the basics by ignoring everything else. On the contrary: Ofsted evidence consistently shows that our best primary schools achieve high standards in the Key Stage 2 literacy and numeracy SATs by embedding what is tested in a broad and balanced curriculum which is well taught and managed across the board.

A principled and well-taught curriculum for all our children is something to campaign *for*. There are also things to campaign *against*. You will have your own list of concerns and will be debating them this weekend. But I want to put in your sights tendencies of a general kind which can infect the entire policy process, and professional debate too, whatever the issue: the selective or naive use of evidence; pseudo-consultations on matters where political minds have already been made up; the false dichotomies that allow no middle ground and are the enemy of reason – knowledge versus skills, subjects versus themes, and of course basics versus breadth, and so on; the habitual refusal of politicians to acknowledge past achievements or to respect and learn from history – a refusal (or is it vanity?) which leads them to insist that the only way to improve the system is to demolish it and start again; and the calculated smears and myths about those who hold different opinions, or whose research has uncovered inconvenient truths, which are the stock in trade of those who have no real evidence with which to defend their own position.

Only this week, on Radio 4 *Today*, we heard the myth-mongers at work on one of their favourite themes. Teacher training, they told us, should be transferred lock stock and barrel to schools because teaching is a straightforward practical activity and university departments of education are full of dangerous left-wing ideologues peddling 1960s educational nonsense – a claim which is not only ludicrous but also ignores Ofsted evidence that over the past decade or so schools and universities working in partnership have raised teacher training to new heights. Except that, tellingly, the institutions were referred to by the Radio 4 presenter not as universities but as ‘training colleges’. Doesn’t the BBC know that training colleges went out with the Robbins Report of 1963? Yes, nearly 50 years ago. And doesn’t it know that partnership – between schools and universities, researchers and practitioners – is now the norm? And don’t those pushing this line understand that teaching, like medicine, is certainly a practical activity – which is why well over half of PGCE course time is spent in schools – but that like medicine it entails practice of a special and complex kind which needs to be informed by professional knowledge, by evidence from research and by judgement, as well as by technical skill?

So, in terms of both the focus and the tone of the education debate there are tough times ahead and a lot to play for. But whenever we feel powerless in the face of ludicrous claims, poisonous myth-making, selectively-used evidence or misguided initiatives, let us draw strength from the exceptional examples of Anne and Fred Jarvis and remember this: *individually*, teachers in their schools and classrooms have far more power to transform children’s lives for the better than they sometimes realise – after all, a curriculum on paper is nothing until you as teachers make it come alive; and *collectively*, by engaging in the big educational debates, by responding to the latest consultation rather than waiting to be told what to do, by challenging those who judge us rather than meekly submitting to their prejudices, and by shedding the awful legacy of fear, compliance and permission, collectively we *can* make a difference.

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