

Chapter 2

Primary Education: From Market Forces to Personal Development

Clare Kelly

At the heart of the educational process lies the child (DES 1967).

The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said; and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement (DfE 2013).

Introduction

These statements represent opposing paradigms of primary education. The first from the influential Plowden Report, published in 1967 and the second from the introduction to the recently redrafted proposals for the National Curriculum for England. They represent divergent views on the role of the child in their learning and the most recent poses questions about the purposes and outcomes of education. Locating statements that refer to children in Coalition documents and Gove's speeches proves to be problematic. The emphasis is on teachers, subjects, schools, leadership, behaviour, initial teacher education, standards and accountability, but not the child, who seems to have got curiously lost in the discourse on 'excellence'.

The government's proposals for assessment and accountability (DfE 2013, 2) can help to clarify the Coalition's position by confirming 'the single most important outcome that any primary school should strive to achieve is making sure as many of its pupils as possible are "secondary ready" by the time they leave', which fits comfortably with Cameron and Clegg's declaration in the foreword to the Schools White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (2010, 3) 'in the education debate what really matters is how we're doing compared with our international competitors'. The government's intention for the connection between education and the labour market is clear.

The neoliberal agenda, developed and sustained by New Labour and intensified by the Coalition government since 2010, has seen the processes of education diminished to dogma and the promotion of a view of teaching and learning that is reductionist and directly linked to the shaping of the economy. The marketing of education as a commodity has led to increased diversification of schooling based on semi-privatisation and the spectre of running schools for profit, the introduction of free schools and the expansion of the academy programme to include more primary schools, often against the wishes of parents and governors. An alternative view of primary education cannot be inserted into this regime, but demands wider reforms including a reconsideration of the relationship between education and the state.

This chapter will argue that the neoliberal agenda for education, evident in the UK and the West at the end of the twentieth century, but consolidated in the twenty-first, has damaged schooling in England in the primary and early years and an alternative construct of education as personal development is necessary. Personal development is not envisaged here as foregrounding individualism

but enabling growth of the whole child intellectually, culturally, socially, politically and emotionally to become a confident, independent and critical learner capable of participating as a citizen in an inclusive and socially just society. It is argued that such a shift would require cultural, structural and curricular changes if primary and early years educators are to offer children opportunities to learn and develop in relation to principles of equality and fairness, and will depend for its actuality on the formation of alliances between parents, trade unionists and others interested in the quality and promise of state education.

The centralised curriculum and the distinctiveness of primary and early years education

Plowden, published almost 50 years ago, although criticised for its dependence on Piagetian theory, was ground-breaking with its emphasis on a flexible curriculum, the significance of the educational environment, the importance of heuristic learning and a requirement to evaluate rather than measure progress. It was followed almost a decade later by the Bullock Report with its well-reported assertion that ‘no child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he (*sic*) crosses the school threshold’ (DES 1975, 286). Although neither of these reports is directly applicable to the present era, many of their principles are kept alive by those who argue for a child-centred view of education, demonstrating that there are valuable lessons to be learnt from the history of education policy, taking account of what was successful.

One less helpful legacy of Plowden has been its use as a reference for concerns and misrepresentations from traditionalists and the right-wing press about ‘trendy’ practices and the outcomes of progressive methods that endure to the present day. Yet studies

show there is little evidence to suggest the validity of these claims and that nationally, teachers and schools did not wholeheartedly embrace the new ways of working introduced in the report (Galton *et al* 1980).

Labour Prime Minister Callaghan's Ruskin speech in 1976 marked a move from autonomy to centralisation, to facilitate, among other matters, the link between education and economic prosperity. Little more than a decade later, the Education Reform Act introduced a subject-based entitlement National Curriculum assessed by levels, and monitored by tests. These policies had significant implications for primary education with the downward pressure from a secondary school curriculum model and the requirement to test children aged 7 and 11, which necessitated a shift from child-centered practices, introduced a concern for 'coverage' and established ability grouping (Pollard *et al* 1994). Such changes impacted significantly on teachers' workload and conditions and were the subject of action by NUT members; the boycott of SATs in 1993 to 1995 won the end of league tables for seven year olds.

Early Years and Primary school teachers know the context of their school and quickly get to know the children in their class because of the concentrated period of time they spend with them each day. Establishing relationships with children and their families enables teachers to recognise the complexity of factors both outside and inside school that impact on learner identities and can affect children's progress. Teachers frequently express frustration at the regulation of practices that should be based on their professional judgements and knowledge of children as individuals. Early years practitioners are familiar with the rationale for planning for children's learning based on understanding their interests and

concerns developed through close observation and partnerships with families. Yet Elizabeth Truss, Minister for Education and Childcare and a former member of the right-wing think tank, Civitas, deprecating these principles, denounced ‘chaotic’ pre-school settings that allow children to ‘do what they want all day’ when they should be ‘paying attention to the teacher and learning good manners’, so they can ‘sit still and listen when they get to primary school’ (Chapman & Chorley 2013). Her comments promote compliance and passive learning for the youngest children and demonstrate the pressure to correspond with expectations for statutory schooling. She is readily supported by Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector of Schools, who condemned the breadth of assessment represented in the current early years profile document, preferring instead a more rigid regime that linked to KS1, particularly in relation to numeracy and literacy (Ofsted 2013).

The ideological project embodied in educational policies since the ERA has introduced increased regulation of primary education and rapid changes that have contributed to a climate of uncertainty for schools. The threat of failure: for children, teachers, schools and education departments in universities, maintained by the government through policing by Ofsted, reductive league tables and a policy of public naming and shaming, is ever present. The current climate constrains risk-taking and experimentation and obstructs creative approaches to learning and teaching that could result in innovation and originality.

Neoliberal educational policies and inequality

Michael Gove has positioned himself as a champion of the working class, consistently blaming inadequate teachers and bad schools for underachievement rather than an unequal system. In the introduction to the *Importance of Teaching* and in subsequent

speeches, he promotes social mobility through meritocratic policies that are characterised as enabling working-class children to enter Oxbridge.

Making full use of his background as a journalist for News International, Gove exploits the media to publicly misrepresent and belittle educationalists, ‘unions and their allies’ who oppose his policies, as having low aspirations for children, distorting their arguments as acceptance of poor standards and mediocrity, branding them as ‘the enemies of promise’ (Gove 2013). Predictably, the complexities of the relationships between class, social disadvantage, educational opportunity and family circumstances intersected by ethnicity, gender and disability, do not feature in Gove’s vision of ‘equality of opportunity’. And although he frequently speaks about underachievement of the ‘poorest children’, the austerity agenda with which he is complicit leads to cuts in benefits, the movement of families from their homes and away from their local schools and reduces welfare provision and state responsibility for vulnerable groups, thus exacerbating economic and social divisions. The effect is indicated by the Child Poverty Action Group’s report (CPAG 2013) that 3.5 million (27%) of children are currently living in poverty and a further 600,000 are expected to be added to that number by 2015 under current government policies.

Gove does not appear to show interest in the learning of other groups either. His voice was not heard defending bilingual children and those from minority ethnic backgrounds who might require language or other forms of support, when the Coalition government cut funding to local authorities for ethnic minority achievement support services and many EMASS teams were made redundant nationally. The valued expertise and experience represented by

members of these teams were lost to teachers, schools and vulnerable groups of children.

Indeed, Gove reinforces an elitist view of languages. In the National Curriculum for 2014 language learning is valorised as a liberation from insularity, providing an openness to other cultures. Yet in the same document there is no acknowledgement that 17.5% of children in state primary schools speak more than one language and are likely to possess the advantages that are promoted by the new language curriculum. Their strengths are devalued as they are included in a section in the document on special educational needs. Researchers, such as Thomas & Collier (1997), have been arguing for many years that learning English as a new language does not constitute a special educational need and adopting a deficit model is likely to affect children's cognitive and linguistic development.

Before the Coalition, New Labour implemented some education policies that were designed to address disadvantage and promote diversity. The high profile Sure Start programme provided integrated services for families and pre-school experience for children through Children's Centres. Despite mixed evaluations of its overall success, Sure Start did not yield the expected cognitive gains for children and lacked the potential to address the complexity of factors involved in disadvantage. Wider welfare reforms on tax and benefits focussed on more deep-rooted issues leading to a reduction in levels of poverty between 1998/9 and 2011/12 (CPAG 2013).

Other enlightened policies such as *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES 2003), set out opportunities and provided models for primary schools to work creatively and make links with parents and the local community. The following year, *Every Child Matters*

promoted children's safety and well-being and was responsible for major changes to school practices. ECM was used by some schools to promote diversity, according to Sir Keith Ajebo the author of *Diversity & Citizenship*, which set out the importance of teaching about identity and difference and reiterated the fundamental role of citizenship education.

New Labour's imperative to develop social cohesion, if loosely defined, did not underestimate the pressures for schools of building relationships of trust with local communities based on their unique historical and cultural contexts. Kathryn Riley (2013) has shown how managing the interface between education policy and community challenges was exacting and caused tensions for school leaders.

The inherent problem for primary schools was a contradiction between the freedoms implicit in these reports which endorsed the development of schools as communities to promote inclusion and value diversity and the constraints of a prescriptive curriculum for maths and literacy, a coercive high-stakes testing regime and the threat of punitive Ofsted inspections. New Labour's policies were not sufficiently expansive or connected. The contradictions apparent in them appeared to reflect the tensions and divisions within the Labour Party.

The paradox of the National Curriculum in primary schools

The National Curriculum, introduced under the Thatcher government, was upheld by New Labour on coming to power. They prioritised 'the basics' by unveiling the National Literacy Strategy for primary schools 1998 and the Numeracy Strategy a year later, which were both superseded by the Primary National Strategy (PNS) in 2006. The National Curriculum was revised in 2000 and

reviewed in 2009 to accommodate these changes, but it was these *non-statutory*, highly regulated programmes, that were policed by Ofsted and enforced by local authority personnel, which formed the basis of teachers' planning. Government initiatives appeared to overrule the National Curriculum. For example, when the requirement to teach synthetic phonics was introduced nationally, with no consensus, the English programmes of study for reading at Key Stage 1 were adjusted, without publicity, to remove references to use of a range of reading strategies, most notably, those that relied on meaning or language (Wyse & Styles 2007).

The description of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 as 'broad and balanced' and 'an entitlement' is apparent in successive revisions, with the exception of the proposals for 2014 which does not include such emancipatory language. These terms, often repeated, became increasingly meaningless as primary teachers focused on numeracy and literacy, which represented in effect, the much narrower offer of number, reading and writing, spending every morning on these 'core' subjects. Teachers in years 2 and 6, adjusted their teaching to fit the narrow demands of the SATs tests (Harlen 2007). Consequently, it became a struggle to incorporate other areas of the curriculum such as art, geography, music or PE, which were officially relegated in 1999 to the status of 'foundation subjects'.

The Coalition's proposals for the National Curriculum 2014 maintain this hierarchical subject-based construct, validating teaching as the transmission of knowledge and learning as memorisation and the accumulation of skills. The programmes of study channel primary aged children's energies into the rigidity of mechanical learning and underestimate their capabilities, for example in relation to multimodal literacy practices. It ignores their

concerns about sustainability and climate change and interest in politics and world and community events, evident from research (Warwick 2008). By abolishing the citizenship curriculum and enforcing the promotion of British cultural heritage through other subjects, there is a danger the 2014 curriculum will deny primary-aged children channels for discussion of issues that are important to them. At the time of writing, a Charter for Primary Education (2013) has been drawn up and circulated by a group of teachers, parents, authors, academics and others which sets out key principles for teaching and an alternative construction of young children as involved learners.

The high level of prescription in NC 2014 does not match Gove's intention set out in the 2010 White Paper to 'free our teachers from constraint and improve their professional status and authority' (DFE, 8). It is unlikely that primary teachers will feel liberated to make judgments about the balance between subjects, because they know that the next Ofsted inspector who visits their class will examine their teaching of the micro-managed English and Maths programmes of study. In addition, success in recently instituted tests of nonsense words for six year olds and decontextualised tests of spelling, punctuation and grammar for eleven year olds will demand coaching and drilling. The primary curriculum cannot be divorced from a coercive accountability agenda: assessment through targets and testing, punitive monitoring by Ofsted and professional liability through published league tables..

The content of the National Curriculum has been responsible for major changes to the organisation of schools, teachers' practices and pupils' experiences, but its history also shows it is not the monolithic document it is made out to be and in the past it has been used selectively, manipulated and ignored. Perhaps the biggest

contradiction for the latest version is that as the expansion of academies and free schools continues, the NC will apply to progressively fewer schools, since these establishments are not required to follow it.

An alternative model of education

Deeper questions about the purposes of primary education must be addressed to sever the link between the shaping of the work force and the day to day experiences of young children. A curriculum that reflects an understanding of education as the development of the whole child will have no place for what Robin Alexander termed the hegemony of the core subjects. It will restore a genuinely broader offer, including a central position for the arts as both valuable in their own right, in addition to providing the basis for affective and intellectual development. Official constructions of teaching and learning will be realigned with theory and classroom-based research so that learning is seen as a human social experience and not a race to reach superficial targets of quantifiable knowledge.

The Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2009) made comprehensive recommendations for all aspects of primary education following extensive research at regional and national level. Its recommendations were wide ranging, covering ten educational themes emphasising the importance of a rich curriculum and the autonomy of teachers to make decisions about their practice in relation to their knowledge of children and their context, advocating also that formal schooling should not begin until age six, corresponding to international practice. The Review's conclusions were discounted if not ignored by the New Labour government, which had commissioned its own review of the National Curriculum which was in the process of implementation

in schools when they lost the election in 2010. Nevertheless, the Cambridge Review, albeit with some reservations (Drummond 2010) is a reference point for an alternative vision for primary education based on democratic principles.

Studies of primary education have shown the quality of interaction and communication between children and their teachers is a significant factor in improving learning experiences and supporting progress (Wyse *et al* 2008). Moving children through a curriculum overloaded with objectives restricts time for questioning, exploring ideas and developing reflective responses. There is much to be learnt from schools who have worked to create a broader experience for children through, for example, co-construction of the curriculum in the LB Wandsworth or arts-based learning in the LB Newham or the introduction of Forest Schools in many areas nationally.

In these schools and others striving to develop creative practices, the processes of learning are foregrounded. Dialogic teaching, learning through play, children's active engagement, exploration and enquiry in a collaborative environment offer children and teachers approaches to learning that should be the norm rather than the celebrated exceptions they are at present.

A dialogue about the fundamental role and practices of primary education would need to involve teachers and other educationalists, and as such has the potential to restore the status of teaching as a professional activity. Providing support for teacher-led research that takes account of children in the classroom and the community of the school is a more effective way to develop new practices that improve children's educational experience than scaling up

initiatives from one context with the assumption they are applicable for universal translation (Levin 2013).

The development of literacy in early years and primary classrooms requires urgent reconsideration to prevent more children being subjected to the outcomes of an instrumental, skills-based conception of reading and writing. The Independent Review of Reading, commissioned by New Labour in 2006, was neither independent nor about reading, only phonics. Conducted by Jim Rose, a former HMI but not a literacy or early years specialist, it recommended the wholesale introduction of systematic synthetic phonics, based mainly on visits to ten schools and spurious evidence from two studies in Scotland (Wyse & Styles 2007). Learning to read was characterised as developing decoding skills and since that time a rigid programme of phonics teaching has dominated early years and key stage 1 classrooms to the exclusion of meaning-based approaches, despite many teachers' professional knowledge and experience telling them otherwise.

Reductive approaches to literacy do not take account of the complexities involved in becoming literate in the 21st century, meet the needs of children or instill a sense of the possibilities and personal satisfactions that can come from reading and writing. The most recent international comparisons of the reading achievement and attitudes of 9 -10 year olds (Twist *et al* 2011) show that results for England point to a tail of underachievement. Although most able readers were among the best in the survey, the weakest were amongst the worst. Children's attitudes to reading were less positive in England than the international average.

Henrietta Dombey (2011) draws on evidence from a series of studies in the US to show that successful reading comes from

incorporating word identification skills with attention to meaning, engaging in quality interactions with adults, a high level of child engagement and close monitoring of individual progress. Restoring talk at the heart of literacy, introducing children to a range of texts and authors through personal reading and reading aloud, encouraging preferences and developing critical and reflective responses are successful practices that are grounded in research (O'Sullivan & McGonigle 2010) and have the potential to connect with children's lives outside of the classroom to make them truly literate.

Another area for urgent attention is Citizenship. Seen as irrelevant by Gove and removed from the Primary Curriculum 2014, it should occupy a central place in the curriculum and feature again in ITE and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes for teachers. Education as development brings with it the responsibility to prepare children to participate as citizens in a society that promotes social justice and shared values. Enabling respect for difference and recognition of diversity as strength can start with the youngest children. Talking about children's cultures, heritages, languages and multiethnic identities is an important starting point for anti-racist education and can lead to both links with local communities and an understanding of global citizenship.

The Coalition government has continued to dismiss issues of equality that affect learning outcomes for children, except in a narrow way as previously discussed. Children bring understanding and interests to school that are rooted in the lives of their families and communities (Kelly 2010). Education for development would mean children share their cultures and languages in the classroom to demonstrate their strengths, enrich the school community and establish that making links with knowledge and experience from

home is an important part of the learning experience. The challenge for the early years and primary teacher is to help children draw on these familiar experiences to make connections with school learning and its more abstract use of language and other symbolic forms.

Accountability

Accountability is part of the democratic process: teachers and schools should be accountable to the children they teach and their families, to the local community and to the public who fund education. However, the current audit culture and proliferation of targets and league tables in the guise of public accountability, serve the short-term needs of politicians. Diane Ravitch (2010) has shown how high stakes bureaucratic assessment procedures, distort teaching, impoverish children's experiences and restrict their learning. An alternative view of assessment which draws on teachers' judgements and validates the status of formative assessment, which can also be used summatively, takes account of the complexities of the learning process, which is currently essentialised and numbered. The abolition of targets and testing would prevent the labelling of children and could reverse the ubiquitous growth of ability grouping in primary schools that Susan Hart and colleagues (2004) have shown facilitates the systematic reproduction of inequalities.

The ERA established parents as consumers and that role has been intensified with the diversification of schooling and increased competition for places. At a recent meeting about education policy, the parent of a primary-aged child at an academy spoke of her frustration at receiving regular numerical summaries of her child's attainment. A conception of education as development would as many schools already recognise, promote an ethos of working with

parents who want to know about the quality of their children's experience and relationships as well as their progress.

Colin Richards (2010), building on the work of the Cambridge Review, suggests a three level alternative accountability framework overseen by an independent body which would use sampling discretely to survey standards nationally across all curriculum areas. School level evaluation by suitably qualified and experienced personnel would involve staff and take account of the school's self-evaluation and improvement processes. Judgments of individual progress would take the form of a combination of on-going teacher assessment and summative measures to include children's attitudes to learning, although the argument that this would also involve testing is problematic.

Richards' system would give parents and the wider community information about children's progress and the quality of schooling while acknowledging schools' understanding of their own contexts, teachers' professionalism and the broader influences involved in making judgements about learning.

Pedagogy

Primary education as personal development would also demand an interrogation of the nature of pedagogy beyond teaching methods and the selective transfer of technical practices that appear to be effective in educational systems outside the UK. Wrigley *et al* (2012, 10) reject pedagogy as curriculum or assessment and suggest it is rather:

‘the need for alignment between knowledge, curriculum, assessment, institutional mores and social context framed by understandings about the nature of knowledge, of reality and

human society, of human capacity for learning and growth and of aspiration for a better future.’

This definition has significant implications for an alternative view of primary education. It demands an evaluation of power relations in educational structures and professional relationships between staff; between teachers, children and families; the school, the classroom and local community. It has implications for the links between children’s ‘funds of knowledge’ from home and school learning, and for the architecture and design of spaces where teaching and learning take place.

The introduction of competition as part of the neoliberal free market strategy for education, has no place in this definition of pedagogy. Currently, schools are in competition with each other for pupils and parents and university education departments are in competition for students. With the introduction of payment by results, teachers in the same school may soon be in competition with each other too. The business model does not translate to human learning. Teaching and learning are collaborative enterprises and teachers as well as children learn from each other. In the past teacher networks have provided strength and facilitated shared professional development as teachers have learnt from and supported each other in a spirit of partnership, rather than as passive recipients in courses about the requirements of the next national initiative.

Reframing primary education would also demand reform of initial teacher education, which since 1998 has been subject to centralised control, in many ways corresponding to that imposed upon schools. A well publicised government disdain for educational research and the denouncement of teacher educators as subversive Marxists

(Hall 2004) have been used to publicly justify centrally imposed direction. The detail of the curriculum and assessment framework for ITE is prescribed within a standards agenda that requires regulation by government agencies and surveillance by inspection, with punitive repercussions for institutions not considered to be 'compliant'. Recent policy implemented by Gove, creates a confusing array of routes to Qualified Teacher Status and confers responsibility for ITE on schools, in some cases excluding the involvement of higher education institutions; a move in the direction of privatisation as academy chains and others take over the role of teacher educators.

A view of education as development would necessitate beginning primary teachers learn more than the mechanics of teaching and have sufficient time and opportunity in universities to reflect critically on theory and research evidence. Relating their developing understanding of theory to the realities of the classroom will encourage new teachers to develop a philosophy of education, a set of principles upon which to build their future practice, and a basis from which to analyse and question policy.

After the Coalition, an alternative model of education as preparation for participation in a just society has the potential to transform primary schooling, if accompanied by the cultural and structural, and curricular changes outlined above, including a return to a democratically administered education system. Forming an alliance of teachers, support staff, parents, children, school leaders, academics, employers, and others to share their vision and assert their demands for education taking account of the lessons of history, will be the most positive and productive way forward for developing policy.

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