

Between Rocks and Hard Places

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I have always been interested in the twists and turns of education policy. It's tempting to dismiss a lot of it scornfully, as the ravings of some semi-informed nutters. But the hard reality is that education is a very difficult area of policy and one in which it is hard to make an impact quickly. The political cycle (4 years) frequently demands quicker results than can be produced – and few education ministers progress to serious high office. Thatcher I suppose has to be considered an exception. But her education policy is itself revealing. If there is a single political idea with which she will forever be associated, it is 'privatisation'. Her central belief was that governments should not run utility companies – since she believed they could be more efficiently run in the private sector. Based on this political belief she oversaw the most enormous sell-off of state assets (telephone/gas/water etc) and her successor then sold off the railways. She was an absolute privatiser. But what of her education policy?

Forgetting for a moment her rise to ministerial fame as 'milk-snatcher'; some years later when she was really holding the reigns of power in No 10 – and with an absolute majority that enabled her to do whatever she wanted – what did she do? She centralised. She created the Secondary Examinations Council (SEC) in 1981 to have a hard look at all the examination courses that had grown up under the GCE/CSE era. The brief was to cut them back. Not to allow schools a free market choice of examination courses. SEC created *standardised* 'National Criteria' for all subjects – and then drafted the framework for a nationalised set of examination courses. 1985 was – in one sense – a great watershed, when the former twin system of GCE/CSE was abolished and re-placed by the single system of GCSE. But it was – at the same time – a shocking watershed. It was a moment at which the former 'free-market' in school examinations was stamped out and replaced by government control of these examinations. Not content with this control, Thatcher then embarked on her even greater centralisation that resulted (as she was finally sacked by her Ministerial colleagues in 1990) in the National Curriculum. Not just examinations this time – but the WHOLE of education. Its content – its pacing – its assessment – its regulation. On and on and on went the centralising. As the SEC gave way to SEAC, and then to SCAA, and then to QCA and now to Ofqual, it has been a branch of British government policy of which Stalin would have been proud. And all this from Thatcher the free-market privatiser. Funny old world.

Anyhow, as a result of this quirk of political history, government quangos have – for almost twenty years – had complete control over the education landscape. And as these mechanisms of state control were ratcheted up, the autonomy of teachers to decide things for themselves was systematically and quite deliberately eroded.

But – pendulums being what they are – the last year or so has seen any number of official and unofficial bodies bemoaning the straightjacket in which schools now find themselves. And the agenda has progressively shifted towards the need to slacken the inhibiting shackles of state control over the primary curriculum: to create more space in the curriculum for primary teachers to do their thing. Few would argue with such an ambition. So, nearly 20 years on from the NC and all those multi-coloured folders, along comes the vehicle through which this new-found freedom is to be delivered – the Rose review.

Rose – we do well to remember – was one of the 'three wise men' (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead) who trashed primary practice in 1992, ridiculing cross-curricular topic work and recommending more attention to the rigour of 'subjects' in the primary classroom.

Over the last few decades the progress of primary pupils has been hampered by the influence of highly questionable dogmas which have... devalued the place of subjects in the curriculum. much topic work has led to fragmentary and superficial teaching and learning. There is also ample evidence to show that teaching focused on single subjects benefits primary pupils.

Alexander R, Rose A.J., and Woodhead C. (1992)

So, in 2008, Ed Balls asked Rose to head up this 'root and branch review' of the primary curriculum to 'create more space for teaching basics.' which was now seen to include a foreign language. The 'Interim Advice' from Rose was published in December 08 and the final report emerged just a couple of weeks ago. The ensuing 'consultation' is due to unfold through May-July and new Programmes of Learning will be published in the Autumn for implementation in 2011. Acres of newsprint has been lavished on the report, so I won't go into the details here. But it is hard to resist some observations.

The primary curriculum is to be organised under 6 'areas of learning'. One might have thought that it would be sensible to make these six areas the existing six elements of the early years foundation stage:

- Communication and literacy
- Creative development
- Knowledge and understanding of the world
- Personal social and emotional development
- Physical development
- Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy

But no, the new six are...

- Historical, geographical and social understanding
- Understanding physical health and well-being
- Understanding the arts

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Understanding English, communication and languages
Mathematical understanding
Scientific and technological understanding

Two things immediately jump out from this list.

First they are all focussed on 'understanding', where the earlier list is focused on 'development'. This seems a very passive, academic transformation. 'Understanding' music (or science or anything at all) is nothing like the same as participating in it and become capable in doing it. The framework labels reek of a knowledge-first, academic interpretation of learning.

Second, the 'areas of learning' seem to me to be thinly disguised subjects. Given Rose's pre-existing view of subjects in the primary curriculum this should come as no surprise. Its easy to read the list (in reverse order) as science, maths, English, art, PE, history and geography. That of course raises the question 'where is design & technology?' And the immediate answer to that question is, I fear, "no-where obvious".

Not surprisingly, the Design and Technology Association has been working away on the sidelines as Rose's advice has been drafted and presented. I am reliably informed that until well through the review process there was a 7th area of learning explicitly devoted to design & technology. But now it's not there. There are just the six. And any potential slot for design & technology would therefore appear to have to be elbowed in to either 'understanding the arts' or into 'scientific and technological understanding'.

And this is where the rocks meet the hard places. It's a matter of delicate judgement to decide how to play the game from this point on, from what is undoubtedly a position of weakness. One approach would be to argue that design & technology is ubiquitous – and certainly fits comfortably in both the art and the science arenas. I know that David Layton made famous the 'indivisible whole' of design and technology, but at a practical level its easy to see how science merges into technology and how art merges into design. In both cases the influence of design & technology would be beneficial – bringing user awareness, need and purpose, and a degree of real-world practicality to what Rose's formulation presents as dry 'understanding'.

So it was with some surprise that I read the D&T Association response to the Rose recommendations.

The Design and Technology Association strongly recommends that:

Recommendation 1: Design and technology should be sited in *one* area of learning – the area currently called 'scientific and technological understanding'.

Recommendation 2: The area of learning should be re-named to become 'understanding of science, technology and design'.

Recommendation 3: This area of learning should provide a full entitlement to all aspects of design and technology, including food technology. (The Design and Technology Association. Wellesbourne. Feb 09)

So the D&T Association has decided to put all of its eggs (our eggs) in one basket. It has rejected the idea of allowing D&T to fit in wherever it can – including in one that might have been 'art & design' – in favour of a one-shot attachment to science. This makes me very nervous, for two reasons.

First, the bit of design & technology that is most critical – and in which the UK has a world leading reputation (both in schools and in commercial practice) – is **designing**. And it now seems that design (or designing) has disappeared from the headline labels in the six areas of learning. If one digs deeper into the report (into the 'breadth of learning' and the 'key skills' of the scientific and technological understanding area) then designing is recognised. But that critical opening statement (the 'importance' statement) is a pale shadow of the terrific one that we have been using since NC 2000. It needs urgent attention.

Second, D&T now finds itself tightly allied to science and therefore inevitably fighting for curriculum time and space with this high status 'partner'. Sadly, I could number on the fingers of one hand the science educators I know who have any understanding of, interest in, or capability in teaching designing. There is every danger that science will carry on being science – and the technology bit will become 'making it' (the torch/carousel).

So – as the rocks grind remorselessly against the hard places – D&T is left gasping for air in a curriculum that has been designed to 'create more space'. The final irony is that our best bet now would appear to be to accentuate the power of thematic cross-curricular work. And we all know what Rose thinks of that.

References:

Alexander R, Rose A.J., and Woodhead C. (1992) Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools. A discussion paper. DES.