

## EVIDENCE, POLICY AND THE REFORM OF PRIMARY EDUCATION: A CAUTIONARY TALE

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In 2008, at the height of New Labour's drive for educational transformation, four prominent academics, one of them a university vice-chancellor, issued this warning in *The Independent*:

We are specialists with considerable experience of the different phases of education who have come independently to the same conclusion: that government policy is no longer the solution to the difficulties we face but our greatest problem. ... It is not only the torrent of new policy that rains down on each sector, the constant changes in direction and the automatic rubbishing of any discomfiting evidence. ... It is also the failure of successive ministers to appreciate that reform has to be accompanied by continuity if the stability of our educational institutions and the quality of their courses are to be preserved.<sup>1</sup>

Their judgement that in England policy has become the problem rather than the solution is what I want to test. I shall do so in relation to primary education, the sector in which I started my professional career fifty years ago and about which I've researched, written and campaigned ever since.

Why England? Well, apart from being Scotland's neighbour, it's a good test of Michael Sadler's frequently-quoted injunction that 'the practical value of studying ... the workings of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to ... understand our own.'<sup>2</sup> Comparison is all the more pertinent if, as Lindsay Paterson from this university argued in a recent British Academy lecture, the education systems of Scotland and England have more in common than their surface differences suggest.<sup>3</sup>

Behind that letter to *The Independent* lay a deeper unease about the centralisation of decision-making and control that England's schools have experienced since 1988. This unease is now widespread, except perhaps among beneficiaries of the inducements and honours through which the present government's free school, academy and teaching school schemes have been promoted.<sup>4</sup> But what cannot be denied is the extent to which ministerial power has increased. In 1950, Atlee's Minister of Education, Lancastrian

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<sup>1</sup> Coffield *et al*, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Sadler, 1900.

<sup>3</sup> Paterson, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> After the announcement of the 2014 New Year Honours, Warwick Mansell (2014a) reported that 59% of the honours overall, and all but one of the seven top honours (knights, dames), went to academy heads and sponsors, yet at that time a mere 16% of England's 21,000 state-funded schools were academies. He subsequently reported that the government had earmarked Primary Academy Chain Development Grants to encourage community primary schools to convert to academies, a use of public funds which another commentator called a 'bribe', and noted that one academy head was being paid a salary of £230,000 on top of a directorship of £265,123 (Mansell 2014b). The inflation of academy senior management teams and their rewards, especially in secondary schools, has also been chronicled by Stephanie Northen (2011). She gives examples of bloated senior management structures, grandiose titles and salaries far in excess of non-academy equivalents. The United States has no truck with feudal or imperial titles, but in other respects these developments mirror the UK's acknowledged model, US charter schools (Ravitch, 2013, 156-179). Others will have to judge whether all this justly reflects the overwhelming success of academies in comparison with maintained schools, or something less edifying. Emerging UK data tend to suggest the latter, showing that 'low performing primaries that have been converted to sponsored academies are improving at a slower rate than their conventional state school counterparts' and that DfE's 2013 figures 'cast doubt on the effectiveness of the government's key primary improvement policy of turning schools with poor results into academies.' (Stewart, 2014).

George Tomlinson, famously said, ‘Minister knows nowt about curriculum’.<sup>5</sup> This was a statement of legal fact, not ignorance. Government provided the administrative framework; local authorities and schools decided what and how to teach. Even the inspectors stayed clear. When I started teaching in 1964 I armed myself with the curriculum handbook produced for the Ministry of Education (as DfE was then known) by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI). It was entitled, cautiously, *Suggestions for the consideration of teachers and others concerned with the work of primary schools*.<sup>6</sup> Education Minister Tony Crosland, who introduced sweeping changes to other aspects of English education, nevertheless respected this compact: ‘I didn’t regard either myself or my officials,’ he said in 1967, ‘as competent to interfere with the curriculum.’<sup>7</sup>

Fast forward to 2013 and the current Secretary of State, Michael Gove. No polite ‘suggestions for the consideration of teachers’ in *his* curriculum prospectus. Here he is, laying it on the line and lobbing one of his trademark insults while he is about it: ‘We have stripped out the ... piously vapid happy-talk and instead laid out the knowledge that every child is entitled to expect they be taught.’<sup>8</sup>

You’ll find a similar shift, in substance if not tone, in other areas of education, including pedagogy, the final frontier of professional autonomy. In 1991, echoing Crosland, Education Secretary Kenneth Clarke said: ‘Questions about how to teach are not for government to determine.’<sup>9</sup> Just six years later Tony Blair stormed into government with ‘Education, education, education’ and imposed closely-prescribed daily literacy and numeracy lessons on every primary school in England. These told teachers not just what to teach but, minute by minute, when and how.

Nor is the phrase ‘rains down’ in that letter to the *Independent* – ‘the torrent of new policies that rains down’ – an exaggeration. Between 1996 and 2004 England’s primary schools received 459 official documents on literacy alone.<sup>10</sup> That’s over one a week, even before we start counting the many directives on numeracy and other matters in which government also believed it necessary to intervene.

Staying in the same metaphorical territory, it’s generally accepted that the watershed in this process was the Thatcher government’s 1987 Education Reform Bill, enacted as law in 1988. Of this the then Labour opposition education shadow Jack Straw said: ‘Under the disguise of fine phrases like “parental choice” and “decentralisation”, [it] will deny choice and instead centralise power and control over schools, colleges and universities in the hands of the secretary of state in a manner without parallel in the western world.’<sup>11</sup> Rousing words indeed, worthy of that other Jack Straw who in 1381 was one of the leaders of the Peasants’ Revolt. But in view of Labour’s reforms a decade later, Straw Junior might have added, ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet.’

As might Michael Gove. He continued but also far exceeded what had been initiated by the Conservatives in 1987 and Labour in 1997, further weakening local authority control, greatly expanding directly-funded academies along American charter school lines and encouraging parents, charities and business to set up government-funded free schools, all in the name of standards, choice and freedom.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile he tightened the government’s grip on curriculum, assessment and inspection, while with local authorities in steep decline he removed the remaining checks and balances on absolute ministerial power, ensuring that nothing obstructed the line of command between his office and the schools.

It’s therefore entirely pertinent to recall the warning of Chartist leader William Lovett in 1840:

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<sup>5</sup> Lawton, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education, 1958.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Kogan, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> Gove, 2013a.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Moss, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Straw, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Gove, 2010a. His post-election letter to schools uses ‘freedom’ six times, but each time confines the offer to schools opting to become academies.

While we are anxious to see a general system of education adopted, we have no doubt of the impropriety of yielding such an important duty as the education of our children to any government ... If ever knavery and hypocrisy succeed in establishing the centralising, state-moulding and knowledge-forcing scheme in England, so assuredly will the people degenerate into passive submission to injustice, and the spirit sink into the pestilential calm of despotism.<sup>13</sup>

Strong words, but then he was writing from Warwick Gaol having been imprisoned for posting placards condemning the Birmingham police for their heavy-handed response to a peaceful demonstration. Sounds familiar? But Lovett's warning that some policies are too important for government, or that they trespass too far on individual liberties, is worth pondering; for state-moulding and knowledge-forcing are what, in some countries, education is very much about.

Yet indiscriminating opposition to centralisation is unhelpful and unrealistic. Governments are elected to govern, and even in totalitarian regimes some aspects of education are less centralised than others. Dale, for example, distinguishes *funding, regulation and delivery*; while OECD differentiates *organisation of instruction, personnel management, planning and structures and resources*.<sup>14</sup> The Cambridge Primary Review grouped 19 strands of educational policy into six broad areas before assessing their impact: children and families; curriculum; pedagogy; assessment, standards and accountability; teachers, teacher education and workforce reform; national and local infrastructure, finance and governance.<sup>15</sup>

From these I have time for just three examples: children and childhood, curriculum, and educational standards. You might also expect me to comment on this week's furore about free schools and academies. These are central to Michael Gove's liberationist theology and are already provoking accusations of zealotry, perjury, incompetence and financial malpractice comparable to those roused by charter schools in the United States.<sup>16</sup> But the issue is too current and heated for considered assessment, and hard evidence is as yet too sparse.

I make two final introductory points, about my stance and focus. First, I've spent much of the past few decades researching and writing about policy and practice in primary education in Britain and other countries. But I've also been a government appointee on national advisory bodies and enquiries: CATE, the body then responsible for vetting all teacher education courses in accordance with government requirements, from 1989 to 1994; the Secretary of State's so-called 'three wise men' enquiry into primary education in 1991-2;<sup>17</sup> QCA, the agency responsible for the national curriculum and the national tests, later abolished by Michael Gove, from 1997 to 2002. Between 2006 and 2012, as director of the independent Cambridge Primary Review, I had no fewer than 72 meetings with ministers, officials and leaders of government advisory bodies to discuss the Review's findings and implications. Even now, I find myself on a government group advising on resources for the very national curriculum of which I've been so critical. So I comment not from a distance but having engaged with policymakers regularly and directly – sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

Second, complaints such as 'The torrent of new policy that rains down on each sector, the constant changes in direction and the automatic rubbishing of any discomfiting evidence' challenge the way policy is created but do not necessarily prove that a policy is misguided in intention or ineffective in outcome, although if evidence counts for anything both propositions seem likely to be true. Such complaints prompt a necessary distinction between policy as such, the policy process, and the way policy is enacted. In what follows I shall comment on all three dimensions – content, process and enactment,

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<sup>13</sup> Lovett, 1840.

<sup>14</sup> Dale, 1997; OECD, 1998. For discussion of centralisation/decentralisation in an international context, see 'Primary education and the state' in Alexander, 2001, 154-72.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, 2010, 469-70.

<sup>16</sup> As recorded, for example, by Berliner and Glass, 2014; Ravitch, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992.

and shall return to the distinction at the end. For the moment, we need to be alert to the danger of treating policy as monolithic and immutable.

### **Case 1: children and childhood**

Following several appalling cases of child neglect and abuse which exposed a lack of co-ordination and liaison within and between the various local authority services concerned with children's education and welfare, Labour launched its 2003 'Every Child Matters' initiative. This required local authorities to provide 'joined up' multi-agency services in education and care, and to give all children entitlement to support in respect of their health, safety, educational achievement and economic well-being. A Children's Commissioner was appointed. The remit of Ofsted (England's equivalent to HMIE) was expanded to cover children's services as well as schools. Local authority directors of education became directors of children's services. The Department for Education and Skills became the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Michael Gove renamed it the Department for Education, though he did retain a Minister for Children and Families.

Then, encompassing inequality as well as protection, the Sure Start scheme was expanded to take in the 20 per cent of areas in England where social and economic disadvantage were most concentrated. These initiatives were followed by the 2004 Children Act, the 2006 Childcare Act, the 2007 Children's Plan and the 2007 Narrowing the Gap initiative which sought to reduce the gulf in social, educational and other outcomes between vulnerable children and the rest. Simultaneously, attempts were made to rationalise the complex mix of early years education and provision by requiring all providers, public and private, to adhere to the care and learning requirements of an Early Years Foundation Stage, the EYFS.

Much of this work has been taken forward by the present government. Labour's child protection structures were retained, as, initially, was the EYFS. Narrowing the Gap was upgraded to the Pupil Premium scheme, which in 2014 will provide schools with an additional £1,300 for every pupil eligible for free school meals to help them raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. The cost of the Pupil Premium is substantial: £2.5 billion in 2014.<sup>18</sup>

Although questions have been raised about the implementation of some of these initiatives, their rationale has been broadly accepted. There's a consensus, then, that in addressing gross inequalities and inadequacies in protection, support and provision for young children, and in attempting to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and the rest, not only is it right and necessary for government to intervene but government is perhaps the only body with the necessary power and resources to do so effectively. This indeed was the conclusion of the Cambridge Primary Review.<sup>19</sup>

Yet even here support shades into opposition. The Cambridge Review reported unease about the tendency for the developmental goals of the Early Years Foundation Stage to be undercut by pressure to get children reading and writing as soon as possible. This transmuted into objection when in 2014 the government made the EYFS non-statutory, replaced it with statutory baseline assessment and reintroduced tests of seven-year olds. And when in 2007 our Review published research evidence identifying the increasing 'scholarisation' of early childhood through formal learning backed by increasing quantities of homework<sup>20</sup> – both of them starting at a much younger age in England than in many other countries - we triggered widespread support. Except of course from ministers: they accused us of being more interested in play than standards. That dichotomy, as every early years expert will testify, is untenable.

What government failed to understand - and regrettably this goes for some schools too – was that young children learn at least as much outside school as within it and that some of this learning is of a kind that

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<sup>18</sup> DfE, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander, 2010, 508-9, paras 144-6.

<sup>20</sup> Mayall, 2010.

schools can't replicate. Researchers calculate that school effects count for only about 30 per cent of pupil attainment.<sup>21</sup> This statistic is rightly cited to justify interventions of a compensatory kind with families that are vulnerable, disadvantaged or marginalised. But it's also an argument for respecting children's out-of-school learning and allowing parents the same autonomy that teachers constantly demand.

For behind anxieties about the increasing intrusion of the state into children's lives there's a debate about childhood itself. Protecting young children is one thing; prescribing the character of their lives is quite another. To secure balance in this debate, here's what the Cambridge Primary Review concluded from the many written submissions it received on this subject and from its conversations with parents, teachers, community leaders and children themselves in 87 'community soundings' in regional locations ranging from Cornwall to Northumberland and Lancashire to Kent, and including conurbations like Birmingham and London:<sup>22</sup>

There are legitimate concerns about the quality of children's lives, but the 'crisis' of contemporary childhood may have been overstated, and children themselves were the Review's most upbeat witnesses. The real and urgent crisis concerns those children whose lives are blighted by poverty, disadvantage, risk and discrimination, and in such matters governments are right to intervene. Meanwhile, among the many positives of modern childhood our report celebrates the evidence on just how much young children know, understand and can do, and argues for a primary education which heeds their voices and empowers them as both learners and citizens. But the report also argues that the unique character and potential of childhood should be protected from a system apparently bent on pressing children into a uniform mould at an ever-younger age.<sup>23</sup>

## **Case 2: curriculum**

My second example is curriculum. Here, policies have proved much more contentious. The story starts in 1986 when, following ten years of ministerial muttering, Education Secretary Keith Joseph insisted there would be no national curriculum in England. One year later, as is the way with ministerial denials, a national curriculum was announced by his successor, Kenneth Baker. By 1988 it was enshrined in law.

Initial fierce resistance to this apparent manifestation of Lovett's 'centralising, state-moulding and knowledge-forcing scheme' was soon replaced by acceptance that its content was benign rather than threatening – though there was an awful lot of it – and that it had at last secured children's entitlement to the broad basic education that in too many primary schools they had not previously received. For, ten years earlier, HMI had found that whether children encountered science, history, geography or music in their primary schools depended largely on what their teachers felt inclined to teach.<sup>24</sup> The exceptions were literacy and numeracy, have been constants in English primary schools since 'payment by results' in the 1860s, together usually occupying about half of each day. 'Do literacy and numeracy in the morning when the children are fresh' was the stock advice to new teachers, signalling that art, music and other trivia should be 'done' in the afternoon when they are not. It's a formula that many primary schools still follow. Despite this, the refrain from the political and media right has always been the claimed neglect of literacy and numeracy rather than the actual neglect of the arts and humanities. Hence, in the list of education policy milestones in the third chapter of our final report you will find 'Back to basics' in 1969, 'Back to basics again' in 1992, and 'Back to basics yet again' in 1998.<sup>25</sup> 1969 refers to the now infamous Black Papers, 1992 to John Major's pre-election diatribe against progressive education and 1998 to Labour's literacy and numeracy strategies.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Berliner, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander and Hargreaves, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Cambridge Primary Review, 2010, 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> DES, 1978.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander, 2010, 40-43.

These earlier ‘back to basics’ flurries seem almost muted by comparison with events since Michael Gove launched the latest national curriculum review in 2011. Actually, this episode starts in 2007, under Labour. That was the point at which, having welcomed the Cambridge Primary Review when it was launched a year earlier, ministers became uneasy about the first of its interim reports and the anti-government spin the media attached to them. According to Mick Waters, the then head of curriculum at QCA, ministers saw which way the media wind was blowing and, aware that we were about to publish proposals on the primary curriculum, launched a pre-emptive strike in the form of their own primary curriculum review, commissioned from former primary chief inspector Jim Rose.<sup>26</sup> He and I had been colleagues and friends since the 1980s so this was frustrating to both of us and we attempted to pool our ideas. But ministers wanted none of this, and presented the two reviews as implacably opposed, as of course did the press.<sup>27</sup>

The Rose curriculum report was published in 2009<sup>28</sup> and Labour immediately set in train the legislative process leading to its implementation. But they were too late. The Conservatives didn’t like Rose, it fell victim to the pre-election legislative ‘wash-up’ when Parliament decides which bills to push through and which to dump, and one of the first acts of Michael Gove as incoming Secretary of State was to order a new national curriculum review with a very different remit. Primary schools, which had started preparing to implement Rose and were broadly in sympathy with its proposals, were not at all pleased.

The Rose report was unacceptable to Gove partly because he judged it to be tainted by 1960s progressivism (which it wasn’t – more on this later) but more simply because it was Labour’s creation. For another constant in education policymaking in England is the lack of incrementalism in contested areas like curriculum and the refusal to respect and build on earlier achievements. Each new government rejects as a matter of course what has gone before and, in what is now a predictable display of ministerial machismo, replaces it with a ‘tough new’ initiative designed to bring schools back to the path from which they have strayed. In Gove’s case, the neglected path was ‘essential knowledge’ in the ‘basics’: as if Labour’s daily literacy and numeracy lessons were about something other than that. Tough perhaps, but hardly new.

What Gove also did was to maximise the prospects for securing a national curriculum true to his beliefs by abolishing QCA, the body statutorily responsible for curriculum and assessment, and taking the entire process in-house at the Department for Education. He set up an ‘expert panel’ with a compliant chair but then rejected its report<sup>29</sup> because the panel’s other members were off message.<sup>30</sup> The message in question came from two sources: first, E.D.Hirsch’s critique of the knowledge deficit in the United States and his cataloguing of the ‘core knowledge’ that every American child should acquire;<sup>31</sup> second, a paper from his ‘expert panel’ chair (with an approving foreword from Gove himself) claiming that the way to raise standards was to emulate the prescribed curricula of PISA high performers like Singapore, Hong, South Korea and Japan, using 14 ‘control factors’ (pedagogy, testing, inspection, CPD, funding and so on) to maintain exact alignment between curriculum as prescribed and enacted.<sup>32</sup> Finland, significantly, was not proposed as a model, for Finland’s PISA success was the product of a system that ideologically was as far removed as possible from the American regimes of performativity and marketisation which Gove intended to emulate; and, of course, Finland does not use a battery of ‘control factors’ to make its teachers toe the line.<sup>33</sup> This ‘control factor’ strategy, incidentally, may have seemed novel but it was not, for it had already been used to ensure faithful ‘delivery’ of Labour’s literacy and numeracy strategies.

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<sup>26</sup> Waters’ testimony is quoted in Bangs, Galton and MacBeath, 2010, 157.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Lyle (2009). Featuring the Rose and Cambridge reviews, this issue of *Teaching Times* had two sumo wrestlers and ‘Clash of the Titans: Rose vs Alexander’ on its front cover.

<sup>28</sup> Rose, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> DfE, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Pollard 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Hirsch, 1987.

<sup>32</sup> Oates, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Sahlberg, 2011.

The Gove curriculum review was more than usually selective in its use of evidence about both what was wrong with the existing national curriculum and what might be done to improve it. Its use of international evidence is perhaps the most glaring example.<sup>34</sup> In addition, instead of reducing the corrosive split between the core and non-core subjects, which had long been criticised by the inspectorate as well as by the Cambridge Review,<sup>35</sup> the government deepened it still further. This ‘two-tier’ curriculum (as former chief inspector David Bell called it<sup>36</sup>) not only undermined breadth, balance, quality and opportunities for learning transfer between subjects. It was also counter-productive, for inspection evidence had consistently shown that the primary schools whose pupils performed best in the national tests at age 11 were those that provided a broad, rich and well-managed curriculum aiming for high standards in all subjects, not just in the basics.<sup>37</sup> This finding was too counter-intuitive or inconvenient for the present government, just as it had been for Labour. Yet as far back as 1985 a Thatcher government White Paper had criticised the ‘mistaken belief ... that a concentration on basic skills is of itself enough to improve achievement in literacy and numeracy’,<sup>38</sup> so in this matter recent governments have moved decisively backwards, failing even to heed the advice of their political kith and kin.

Then there’s the perplexing case of spoken language in the new national curriculum, and here the story takes a more personal turn because this is an aspect of children’s education in which as a researcher I’ve operated extensively and whose case I’ve tried to advance through my work on dialogic teaching.<sup>39</sup>

The long-standing evidence on the formative relationship between spoken language, cognition and learning, especially in the early and primary years, is widely accepted, as is the more recent evidence on the link between cognitively-challenging classroom talk and effective teaching. In 2011 I contributed to an international conference in Pittsburgh under the auspices of the American Educational Research Association which reviewed this evidence and concluded that we now have a critical mass of data showing not only that such talk advances children’s engagement, learning and understanding but that it also raises their test scores in literacy, numeracy and science.<sup>40</sup> The Pittsburgh conference coincided with the launch of the current government’s national curriculum review. Since this was in part impelled by concern about standards, I took this evidence straight to Michael Gove and proposed a high level seminar of ministers, officials and researchers to consider its implications for the new national curriculum. He agreed, and the seminar took place in February 2012, with keynotes from myself<sup>41</sup> and, by videolink from Pittsburgh, Lauren Resnick, a leading US researcher in this field.

At the seminar the case for raising and sharpening the profile of what at that time was called ‘speaking and listening’ was rehearsed and accepted. But afterwards, a minister who must remain nameless told me: ‘I understand the arguments and evidence, but I daren’t raise the profile of spoken language in the new national curriculum because it will distract teachers from their task of raising standards in literacy. And it will encourage idle chatter in class.’

‘Idle chatter in class’: the phrase is redolent of an era when children were seen but not heard, and lofty schoolmasterly disdain dismissed as inconsequential any talk other than closed answers to closed questions. In the subsequent drafts of the new national curriculum, and notwithstanding the weight of evidence with which ministers had been presented, spoken language was given an even lower profile than previously.

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<sup>34</sup> Alexander, 2012b.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander, 2010, 241-5

<sup>36</sup> Ofsted, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> DES, 1978; Ofsted, 1997, 2002a.

<sup>38</sup> DES, 1985.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Papers arising from this conference are in Resnick, Asterhan and Clarke, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander, 2012a.

Clearly, the minister just didn't get it. What others fully understood was that talk is an essential concomitant of learning to read and write, not a distraction from it, so literacy and oracy must go hand in hand. Self-evidently, talk is also vital in its own right. Further, the kind of classroom talk we were advocating is anything but 'idle'. It is purposeful, focused, structured, extended and above all cognitively challenging. But the minister stuck to his guns, and it was only after sustained pressure over the next twelve months that the government at last agreed to include a programme of study for spoken language in the final draft of its new national curriculum. However, though I count this a victory,<sup>42</sup> the published requirements remain too brief and generalised, so the legacy of misguided ministerial intervention in this vital matter will be with us for some time.

Here, then, we have a three-way tussle between peer-reviewed evidence, political ideology and personal prejudice, and evidence as always is the loser, so this episode really does raise the question of whether curriculum is one of those areas where policy is the problem rather than the solution. All the more so when, in September 2013, the government presented the final version of England's new national curriculum, with its deeper than ever divide between 'the basics' and the rest, its cursory treatment of the arts and humanities and its abbreviated inclusion of spoken language,<sup>43</sup> and did so under the banner of 'the best that has been thought and said.'<sup>44</sup> The phrase<sup>45</sup> was not attributed: perhaps it was hoped that an ignorant populace would credit it to the Secretary of State himself. The lack of attribution was perhaps just as well because Matthew Arnold wouldn't only have turned in his grave; I like to think that he would have leapt out, renamed his essay 'Culture, anarchy, plagiarism and hubris', and hit the Secretary of State over the head with it.

### Case 3: standards

And so to my third example, educational standards. Here we encounter the catch-22 of centralisation. The more policy-makers micromanage, the more they risk blame when things go wrong, and the more they then strive to deflect the blame back onto those who, having lost their autonomy, are no longer culpable. Thus it was with the Blair government's standards drive, and thus it may prove to be for the present government, which cites the need to raise standards to justify policies on the national curriculum, assessment, inspection, free schools, academies, teaching schools and much else. National tests are high stakes for teachers but for centralising governments they are no less so.

Labour's standards initiatives included: national literacy and numeracy strategies with prescribed daily literacy and numeracy lessons; the extension of the previous government's test regime to include targets for the percentage of 11 year olds who must achieve given levels; the publication of school and local authority test results and league tables; beefed-up inspections resulting in the naming and shaming of underperforming schools; competencies and standards for teachers' initial training and continuing development; ring-fenced funding for relevant CPD; and the appointment of local authority school improvement partners charged with checking schools' measured outcomes and ensuring compliance with the national strategies.

This was the stick, and a fearsome one it was too. Small wonder that one of the Cambridge Review's research teams concluded that together these initiatives amounted to a 'state theory of learning'<sup>46</sup> – a post-Soviet echo of William Lovett's 'state-moulding and knowledge-forcing scheme'. Without doubt, thousands of teachers, as predicted by Lovett, sank into 'passive submission.' The carrot was a substantial increase in school funding, teacher pay and staff appointments: 35,000 additional primary teachers and 172,000 teaching assistants appointed between 1997 and 2009.

<sup>42</sup> A PhD student's Freedom of Information request to DfE has revealed the influence of this author's 2012 DfE paper in persuading the government to change its mind: DfE, 2013a.

<sup>43</sup> DfE, 2013b. For a critique of the government's approach to the national curriculum, see Alexander, 2012b.

<sup>44</sup> DfE, 2013b, 6, para 3.1: '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.'

<sup>45</sup> Arnold, 1869.

<sup>46</sup> Balarin and Lauder, 2010.



As is well known, David Blunkett, Labour's first Secretary of State, promised to resign if the government's 2002 target for literacy and numeracy standards was not met. It wasn't, but Blunkett moved to another ministry and his successor resigned instead. Labour then commissioned an evaluation of its literacy and numeracy strategies from the University of Toronto.<sup>47</sup> This offered a decidedly mixed conclusion, though that didn't stop government from claiming that the strategies were an unqualified success. Then came the Cambridge Primary Review. Mindful of the heat of this particular potato we commissioned no fewer than six independent reviews of national and international evidence on primary school standards from teams at Bath, Bristol, Durham, Cambridge and Manchester Metropolitan universities and the National Foundation for Educational Research.<sup>48</sup>

Then began the war of words. We published our six interim reports, together with briefings and press releases, in two instalments. As might be expected, our research teams exposed the complexity of the data and the difficulty of making hard and fast judgements, especially about trends over time. We identified evidence of initial success but also problems. Acting on the well-known journalistic maxim 'First simplify, then exaggerate',<sup>49</sup> the press ignored the positives in our reports and amplified the negatives with baleful headlines like: 'Primary tests blasted by experts' ... 'Too much testing harms primary school pupils' ... 'Literacy drive has almost no impact' ... 'Millions wasted on teaching reading' ... 'An oppressive system that is failing our children' ... 'School system test-obsessed' ... 'England's children among the most tested' ... 'Our children are tested to destruction' ... 'Primary pupils let down by Labour' ... 'Primary schools have got worse' and 'A shattering failure for our masters'.<sup>50</sup>

Labour's response was bullish: 'There have never been so many outstanding primary schools' ... 'The government does not accept that children are over-tested'... 'There have been unambiguous rises in results using standardised tests' ... 'Primary standards are at their highest ever levels. This is not opinion; it is fact'.<sup>51</sup> Then Labour went for the jugular: 'These reports use tunnel vision to look at education' ... 'Professor Alexander is entitled to his opinions but once again we fundamentally disagree with his views, as will parents across the country'.<sup>52</sup> (*His* views? These were the considered conclusions of six independent research teams). 'I am not going to apologise,' said the Secretary of State, 'for what parents want even if these researchers – on the basis of old research – don't like it'.<sup>53</sup>

In truth, our reviews of the evidence on standards led to something that neither politicians nor sub-editors can readily handle: a mixed message. The findings were both positive and negative. This was inevitable, because we tracked trends over time and uncovered methodological problems such as shifting test criteria and inconsistent data as well as the collateral curriculum damage<sup>54</sup> and increases in pupil and teacher stress that the press reported.

We also refuted<sup>55</sup> a number of the claims by which government defended its standards policy: testing of itself drives up standards; parents support testing; tests are the only way to hold schools to account; the pursuit of standards in 'the basics' is incompatible with a broad and balanced curriculum; literacy and numeracy test scores are valid proxies for standards across the entire curriculum; and – the most

<sup>47</sup> Earl, Watson *et al* 2003a, 2003b.

<sup>48</sup> Tymms and Merrill, 2010; Whetton, Ruddock and Twist, 2010; Wyse, McCreery and Torrance, 2010; Harlen, 2010; Balarin and Lauder, 2010; Cunningham and Raymont, 2010. The first three re-evaluated the test data; the other three examined the test and inspection processes and other aspects of the standards drive.

<sup>49</sup> Attributed to a 1950s editor of *The Economist*.

<sup>50</sup> These headlines are referenced in Alexander, 2011. Most are also in the Cambridge Primary Review media archive: [http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/media/media\\_archive\\_2007.php](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/media/media_archive_2007.php)

<sup>51</sup> See note 39.

<sup>52</sup> Ed Hawkesworth (DCSF press officer), 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Ed Balls (Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families), 2008.

<sup>54</sup> This educational application of a phrase previously used by US four-star generals to explain away civilian casualties is from Berliner and Nichols, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander, 2010, 473–4.

transparently unprovable claim of all - England has the highest standards ever. Ever? Since when? 1997? 1066? And who was present at the big bang to start measuring?

And so the slanging match over standards goes on, generating ever more heat than light. Before the 2010 election Labour cited PISA to prove the success of its drive to raise standards in England's schools. After the 2010 election the new government used PISA 2009 to show that far from rising, student performance had 'plummeted' under Labour from 12<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> in the world, and Michael Gove's doom-laden verdict to Parliament barely concealed his political delight: 'Literacy, down; numeracy, down; science, down: fail, fail, fail'.<sup>56</sup> However, after re-analysing the data John Jerrim of London University's Institute of Education concluded that PISA 2009 neither justified such alarmist claims nor provided a safe basis for the sweeping changes which, in the name of standards, Gove's government introduced.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile, others have questioned PISA's validity and reliability and the way it has been elevated into a measure of the performance not just of samples of 15 year olds in limited aspects of their learning, which it is, but of entire education systems.<sup>58</sup> An increasing number of governments have succumbed to PISA panic in a scramble to cherry-pick the policies of those jurisdictions that for the moment occupy the winners' podium. Never mind differences in history, culture, demography and politics: if Singapore's 15 year olds score higher in maths than England's they must have superior policies and we should copy them. If Shanghai's students outperform England's in PISA, let's invite their teachers over to show ours how it's done. (These are real cases).

As thus conceived, the PISA-fuelled global educational race is in danger of spiralling out of control. It certainly prompts bizarre policy responses. In presenting the 2012 draft of England's revised national curriculum the Secretary of State said, 'We must ensure that our children master the essential core knowledge which *other nations* pass on to their pupils.'<sup>59</sup> Other nations? Granted globalisation and the absolute imperative of an international outlook, this is a pretty rum definition of 'the best that has been thought and said'. And if, as Denis Lawton argues, curriculum is a selection from culture,<sup>60</sup> the Singapore mathematics syllabus is an odd place for England's cultural selection to start.

### **Recurrent themes: evidence, mediation and narrative**

Childhood, curriculum and standards: three policy cases from the many more I could have provided. In order to move towards a verdict on the claim that in England education policy is more problem than solution I want next to cross cut these cases with three themes relating to the policy process as a whole. They are *evidence*, *mediation* and *narrative*. After considering these I shall add one more dimension – the relationship between policy as prescribed and enacted and the challenge of judging impact – before offering a verdict on the quoted claim about educational policy in England with which I started.

#### ***Theme 1: evidence***

Evidence-informed policy, the wags tell us, is really policy-informed evidence, because governments first devise their policies then look around for evidence to justify them, ignoring what doesn't fit. On the strength of the Cambridge Primary Review's experience I can confirm that the relationship between evidence and policy is frequently, shall we say, uneasy. If not as brutally cynical as 'policy-informed evidence' implies, the process is certainly selective. Three kinds of selectivity seem to be at work: *electoral*, *ideological* and *methodological*.

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<sup>56</sup> Gove, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Jerrim, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> For instance: Alexander, 2012c; Meyer and Benavot, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Gove, 2012 (my italics).

<sup>60</sup> Lawton, 1983.

*Electoral selectivity* is illustrated by the Labour government's blunt rejection of any evidence that challenged the efficacy of its standards drive because to acknowledge such evidence would have been, for a government committed to 'education, education, education', political suicide. Similarly, ministers' suspicion of spoken language, the educational power of which is amply demonstrated in research, in part reflected the fear that it would compromise the government's 'back to basics' pitch on reading, writing and school discipline.

*Ideological selectivity* is illustrated by the current government's refusal to accommodate well-regarded evidence on the true problems of the primary curriculum – problems such as the backwash into entitlement, quality and standards of the two-tier curriculum and the distortions produced by high-stakes testing – because these conflict with ministerial preference for a narrow spectrum of supposedly essential and largely propositional knowledge. For that reason, against the evidence that standards and breadth are interdependent, governments continue to insist that literacy and numeracy must override all else.

*Methodological selectivity* is marked by government preference for what the US National Research Council called 'type 1' and 'type 2' educational research, that is large-scale quantitative studies and McKinsey-style extrapolations from these for the purposes of identifying cause, effect and solution. Conspicuously absent from this evidential bank are 'type 3' studies that engage with teaching and learning to the depth that improving them requires.<sup>61</sup> So the top-down character of policy is reinforced by evidence which is as detached from school and classroom realities as are the policymakers themselves, and this detachment inflates ministerial perception of what interventions dreamed up in Westminster can achieve in classrooms. School improvement is then reduced to banalities such as 'The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers', 'The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction' and 'High performance requires every child to succeed', all of which are from Michael Barber, Labour's one-time chief adviser on standards.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Theme 2: mediation***

Policy reaches the public through the media, over which policymakers exercise as much control as they can through the apparatus of communication strategies, press officers, leak, spin, briefings on and off the record, attributed interviews, unattributed quotes and so on. The relationship is one of mutual dependence and is fraught with risks on both sides.

Those such as academics who seek to convey evidence to policymakers are similarly circumscribed. They can write journal articles that few people read, or they can engage directly, entering the same arena as the policymakers themselves. Knowing how much hung on successful media exposure for an enquiry that government had initially welcomed but hadn't commissioned, the Cambridge Primary Review recruited an experienced director of communications. Each report was accompanied by a four-page briefing plus a one-page press release, so it was available in full, in summary and as highlights. Each publication event was preceded by a press conference, telephone briefings of key journalists and, where possible, strategically placed articles or interviews by Review members.

In one sense the strategy was highly successful: on five of the ten occasions between 2007 and 2009 when the Review published its reports, independent media analysis showed that it was top UK news story overall.<sup>63</sup> What we couldn't control, of course, was the nature of that media coverage. In this, it was the sub-editors rather than reporters who most ruthlessly enacted that maxim 'first simplify, then exaggerate'. Broadsheet reports that were perceptive and balanced were frequently undermined by sensationalising headlines.

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<sup>61</sup> NRC, 2003.

<sup>62</sup> Barber and Mourshed, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Analysis undertaken for Richard Margrave, CPR Director of Communications, 2006-10.

Yet it was to the headlines, not the accompanying pieces and certainly not the Cambridge Review reports themselves, that ministers felt obliged to respond. In our archive we have a record of all media coverage of the Review and all published government responses. There is a clear and direct relation between them. Government responded not to what we reported but to what the media said we had reported. When the media attacked the government, the government attacked us.

But there is another level of mediation, and it is rarely discussed. Behind the scenes, ministers who were too busy to read our reports and briefings relied on their officials and advisers to relay and explain their contents. Such government mediators were as adept at spinning to their ministers as their press officers were at spinning to the media. In 2008, *Guardian* journalist Jenni Russell lifted the lid on this hidden layer of research mediation:

Since 2003, every education secretary and minister has been distinguished by an almost wilful determination to ignore the mass of research that does not suit their agenda. Politically, that is the easiest choice. They are encouraged in this by their senior civil servants, whose careers have been built around delivering a particular agenda, and who have nothing to gain by seeing it change course. What is truly alarming is that ministers rarely even glimpse the reports they dismiss. Last year I mentioned a particularly critical Ofsted report to one minister. ‘Oh, my people tell me there’s nothing new in that,’ he said, breezily. In fact, it had a great deal that was new and important, and the individuals who put thousands of man-hours into preparing it were probably writing it for an audience of three – of which the minister who never read it was the most important one. It seems that the Cambridge Primary Review is meeting the same fate. This extensive, diligent review of published evidence and new research was dismissed in 10 seconds by another minister in a private conversation: ‘My people say it’s rehashed.’ Publicly, the Department for Children, Schools and Families has written off the latest reports as ‘recycled, partial and out-of-date’.<sup>64</sup>

The role of senior civil servants and advisers, and the extent to which they mediate incoming evidence in order to protect their backs, is certainly worthy of investigation, because such mediation compromises not only evidence, but also the very policy process these people are employed to serve.

There’s a footnote to this. Just before the 2010 general election I had a meeting with the then Secretary of State and the Schools Minister about the need to give more serious consideration to the implications of our final report for post-election government policy. This time the ministers didn’t get there first, for the ministers both had their own well-thumbed copies of our report. Brandishing his copy the Secretary of State said, ‘I’ve read this now. It’s rather good. There’s a great deal here that we can use.’ A few weeks later he was out of government. His officials kept their jobs, ready to offer their dark arts to his successor.

### ***Theme 3: narrative***

Evidence and policy require narratives. Evidence has to be interpreted, and politicians need to offer a simple and convincing tale if they are to persuade people not just to vote for them but also to accept the pain that policy can cause. Margaret Thatcher was rather good at that.

Each of the headed paragraphs in the briefing on the Cambridge Primary Review final report tells its own story: ‘Primary schools: how well are they doing?’ ... ‘What is primary education for?’ ... ‘A world fit to grow up in’ ... ‘Standards: beyond the rhetoric’ ... ‘Children’s needs: equalising provision in an unequal society’ ... ‘The curriculum: not there yet’ ... ‘Assessment: reform, not tinkering’ ... ‘A pedagogy of evidence and principle, not prescription’ ... ‘Expertise for entitlement: re-thinking school staffing’ ... ‘From novice to expert: reforming teacher education’ ... ‘Decentralising control, redirecting funds, raising standards’ ... and even ‘Policy: solution or problem’.<sup>65</sup> *Our* problem was that for each of these stories the

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<sup>64</sup> Russell, 2008.

<sup>65</sup> Cambridge Primary Review 2010.

government had written its own, and the versions didn't necessarily agree. Indeed it's frequently the case that evidential and political narratives find themselves in conflict, for seeking truth and retaining power are rather different pursuits. So I want to end by mentioning two of the most persistent and problematic narratives in the world of primary education policy in England.

First, there's the narrative of progress. This is essential to political survival. Although Labour were profligate with their 'best ever' claims, progress needs a baseline and policymakers must tell convincing stories not just about what they have achieved but also about how bad things were when they arrived. Remember George Orwell: 'Who controls the past controls the future.'<sup>66</sup> So the current government habitually talks up 'the economic mess we inherited from Labour' but rarely mentions the bankers and speculators who were the true culprits. And here's Labour's own narrative of what it found in 1997 and what by 2007 it had achieved. The storytellers are Downing Street director of policy delivery Michael Barber and Schools Minister Andrew Adonis, as they then were.

Until the mid-1980s what happened in schools and classrooms was left almost entirely to teachers to decide ... but, through no fault of their own the profession was uninformed ... Under Thatcher, the system moved from uninformed professional judgement to uninformed prescription. The 1997-2001 Blair government inherited a system of uninformed prescription and replaced it with one of informed prescription ... The White Paper signals the next shift: from informed prescription to informed professional judgement. The era of informed professional judgement could be the most successful so far in our educational history. It could be the era in which our education system becomes not just good but great.<sup>67</sup>

Anyone teaching before 1997 would be understandably offended by Barber's charge that their professional judgements were uninformed, but his ludicrous claim that pre-Labour autonomy equated with ignorance allows him to assert that government needed to step smartly in and take control. Adonis picks up the tale, peppering it with claims that, once again, the evidence doesn't support:

We know that in the post-war period improvements in reading were static. It was precisely this analysis that led us in 1997 to seek a step-change in literacy through the introduction of the national strategies and daily literacy hour, an emphasis on phonics, and training for every teacher in literacy. This has worked. In recent years there have been unambiguous rises in results ... We make no apologies for policies which are delivering the highest standards ever.<sup>68</sup>

There they go again: 'the highest standards ever'. But then along comes cheery Michael Gove to puncture Labour's fantasy. New story, new voice:

Literacy, down; numeracy, down; science, down: fail, fail, fail.<sup>69</sup>

But wait: just a few months earlier, and within a few weeks of the election, he had followed Labour's reckless plunge into eternity with 'the best generation of young teachers ever'<sup>70</sup>. So which is it, failure or excellence? The usual trajectory is from inherited disaster to mighty achievement tidily in time for the next election but on this first occasion Gove confounded hyperbole with litotes, unwittingly credited the opposition and effectively confirmed that in the matter of accounting to the electorate governments deal mostly in myth.

From progress to the progressives who frustrate it. The other recurrent narrative in English primary education, the habitual spur and accompaniment to 'back to basics', abandons all pretence at either

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<sup>66</sup> Orwell, 1946.

<sup>67</sup> Barber, 2001, 13-14.

<sup>68</sup> Adonis, 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Gove, 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Gove, 2010b.

rationality or veracity. It's the fable of an actual or planned takeover of English primary schools by left-wing, child-centred progressives. Named by some as 'the educational establishment', and by Toby Young as 'the blob',<sup>71</sup> this motley gang is set on undermining the standards for which right-thinking and right-leaning ministers, newspapers and think tanks have so strenuously fought.

This McCarthyite nonsense has been around since soon after the 1967 Plowden report<sup>72</sup>, on which such follies are mostly blamed, even though during Plowden's most influential decade, the 1970s, the inspectorate reported that only five per cent of primary schools exhibited 'exploratory' Plowdenite characteristics and chalk and talk were the norm in three quarters of them.<sup>73</sup> Hence, from one typically nasty bout of progressive-bashing in the early 1990s, 'Look on your works, Lady Plowden, and despair' ... The education of millions of children has been blighted in the name of an anarchic ideology' ... 'Children spend more time with paint pots than mastering the three Rs' ... 'Happiness but little learning' ... 'Trendies in class who harm pupils' ... and much more, some of it barely repeatable.<sup>74</sup>

Bizarrely, the Cambridge Primary Review - led by the same person whose earlier reports on primary education<sup>75</sup> had been approvingly cited to justify headlines such as those above - roused a similarly vitriolic response in some quarters. On the one hand it was fulsomely praised by the *Economist* for its 'passionate defence of knowledge' and its attack on educational 'dumbing down';<sup>76</sup> on the other, Labour education adviser Conor Ryan accused the Review of being '... another deeply ideological strike against standards and effective teaching of the 3Rs ... reversing the changes of the last twenty years and returning our schools to a time when there was no public accountability.'<sup>77</sup> Clearly Ryan had either not bothered to read the report or in the interests of defending his masters he chose to ignore its 'passionate defence' of knowledge, standards and accountability and reached for the only way of marginalising sustainable but unpalatable evidence about government policies of which he was aware, dismissing it as the nostalgic ramblings of a mythical 'educational establishment'.

Just before the Cambridge report was published, I returned to the text of Plowden to show the gulf that opened up within a year of its publication between that report as written and as demonised in matters such as curriculum and teaching methods - the two versions of Plowden are worlds apart - and warned that the Cambridge report could well suffer the same fate because the Manichaeic tendency persists and wilful misrepresentation is its weapon of choice.<sup>78</sup> This warning was repeated in the report itself, in the faint hope that it would encourage the demonisers to think twice and respond to what the report said rather than what their narrative required it to say. They didn't, but then if they didn't read the warning they could hardly heed it.

This, alas, is not yesterday's narrative. In 2014 it is alive, kicking and nurtured by no less than England's Secretary of State for Education. Those who during a period of invited consultation and feedback proposed an alternative national curriculum vision to his were denounced as 'enemies of promise' and 'Marxists hell-bent on destroying our schools';<sup>79</sup> while early childhood experts who raised legitimate questions about the kind of early years experience that will help children to thrive educationally were accused of 'bleating bogus pop-psychology', dumbing down and lowering expectations.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Young, 2014.

<sup>72</sup> CACE, 1967; for an account of gap between Plowden as published and as demonised, see Alexander, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> DES, 1978.

<sup>74</sup> These headlines were prompted by the 'three wise men' report of 1992, though they bore little relation to what it said. For an account of this episode and sourcing of the headlines in question, see Alexander 1997, 216-265.

<sup>75</sup> Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992; Alexander, 1997.

<sup>76</sup> Joyce, 2009.

<sup>77</sup> Ryan, 2009.

<sup>78</sup> Alexander, 2009

<sup>79</sup> Gove, 2013b.

<sup>80</sup> Gove, 2013c. For discussion of this episode see Alexander, 2014.

It is narratives such as these that are the real enemies of promise, for they imprison political thinking and action within the same stock of endlessly repeated myths and reinvented wheels. So while the research narrative builds evidence upon evidence to take our understanding forward, the political narrative remains pathologically defensive in the face of such evidence and locked in its discourses of dichotomy and derision and pulls us - and our children's education - back. Back to basics, back to basics again, back to basics yet again: an utterly sterile slogan not only because it reduces educational progress to a single issue but also because the 'basics' are English primary education's one constant. Meanwhile, ministerial minders see to it that the evidence is ambushed and disposed of.

### **Towards a verdict: from prescription to enactment**

If we now return to my initial question of whether in English primary education policy has become the problem rather than the solution, the answer seems clear enough. If important evidence is ignored, distorted or traduced whether from fear of tabloid headlines, the self-serving interventions of ministerial officials, because it is politically inconvenient or for other reasons, then the quality of policy as promulgated must suffer; and if the sheer quantity of initiatives generates policy fatigue, fear or resistance, then their effectiveness is likely to be diminished. These conditions have obtained in two of the three cases I have exemplified (curriculum and standards) and in others that I could have cited, while in the third example (childhood) acquiescence and support tipped into unease and even hostility when government appeared to be trespassing too far into children's formative development and their lives outside school.

Yet it will also be clear that we are discussing policies in the plural rather than policy as a monolithic entity, so the final verdict is likely to be mixed. Having weighed its evidence on the period up to 2009 the Cambridge Primary Review offered this assessment:

It would ... be wrong to infer that government intervention is never justified. Since 1997, funding for primary education has increased massively. The policy prospectus has included ambitious initiatives relating to children and families, early childhood, curriculum, pedagogy, standards and accountability, teachers and workforce reform, and national and local infrastructure. In the policy balance sheet the case for a national curriculum is generally accepted; the government's childhood agenda is warmly applauded; its obligation to step in to protect vulnerable children is understood; the move to integrated services for education and care ... is welcomed. However, opinion is divided on workforce reform and the national strategies, and such division escalates into deep and widespread hostility when we move into the remainder of the government's 'standards' agenda – national targets, testing, performance tables and the current practices of external inspection (as opposed to the principle, which is generally supported). However, we emphasise that the debate is not about the pursuit of standards as such ... but about the way they have been defined and measured, and the strategies through which government has attempted to improve them ... The issue is not *whether* children should be assessed or schools should be accountable, but *how*.<sup>81</sup>

The popularity of a policy – the main focus of the reactions summarised in this quote – does not necessarily prove it to be right, any more than a policy constructed with an eye for electoral gain is right. In the empirically and professionally contested area of educational standards, for instance, no political party can afford to appear soft in a public arena dominated by those tabloid headlines I've illustrated, so offending teachers and ignoring researchers may be the safer course, however contemptible we may judge such political calculations to be.

Further, though governments themselves talk of 'implementation', the word is misleadingly clinical because policies are enacted, sometimes untidily, rather than implemented as they stand, and enactment

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<sup>81</sup> Alexander, 2010, 508-10.

entails varying interpretations and practical responses.<sup>82</sup> The current government has naively judged that lifting features from Singapore's prescribed maths curriculum will raise standards when Singapore's own evidence – and common sense - show that it's the *enacted* curriculum that makes the difference.<sup>83</sup> In approaching a verdict on the UK government's curriculum policies we must not make the same mistake, for a paper curriculum has limited meaning or force until it is given life by what teachers decide and pupils experience in the classroom; and between government directive and that experience are stages of translation, transposition and transformation by advisers, publishers, head teachers and teachers before the final enactment, so what is intended and prescribed by Westminster and experienced by children in schools even only a couple of miles away can be very different.<sup>84</sup> As I noted at the launch of the Cambridge Primary Review's successor, the Cambridge Primary Review Trust:

Those who judge the Cambridge Review by the number of its recommendations that have been adopted exactly as they stand, or who presume that policy is the sole determinant of what schools do in areas to which policy applies, don't understand how either policy or classroom practice work or the complex array of factors to which each is subject. And policies have little meaning until they are enacted by schools, and to enact is to domesticate, reinvent or even subvert as well as comply. Domestication – adapting generalised policy to unique school circumstances - is perhaps the most common response.<sup>85</sup>

In relation to the particular case of curriculum reform, then, the key is pedagogy. That's why pedagogy has always been understood to be the final frontier of professional autonomy (or, in Oates's rather chilling terminology, 'control factor'<sup>86</sup>) and it's why Labour's literacy and numeracy strategies marked the tipping point in the process of educational centralization initiated by the 1988 Education Reform Act. The architects of those strategies knew exactly what they were doing when they judged that it was only by taking control of pedagogy that they would achieve their goal of raising literacy and numeracy standards. Others saw the strategies as an egregious and dangerous intrusion by the state into a domain where in a democracy the state has no business. Hence the properly understood overtones of a 'state theory of learning.'

So in this matter, much hangs on the *extent* of prescription and control. The Labour government's literacy and numeracy strategies were specified in the greatest possible detail, leaving little room for manoeuvre. They were then tightly policed through tests, inspection and local authority school improvement partners. In this case the line between prescription and enactment was short and direct, so both credit and culpability rested with government and political credibility dictated that evidential challenges of the kind offered by the Cambridge Primary Review must be neutralised by whatever means possible, fair or foul.

In this case, too, the impact of the standards drive could be fairly judged by the very tests of student attainment through which compliance was secured, not merely on the basis of teacher and parental response. Interestingly, another 'control factor', Ofsted inspections, offered a more positive judgement on the literacy and numeracy strategies than the tests, which suggests either an interesting comparison of subjective and objective evaluation or that Ofsted was not as independent as it claimed.<sup>87</sup> The Ofsted reports on the strategies also appeared to presume that compliance and outcome were synonymous – 'Not all teachers are using the strategies' assessment materials ... some do not know about them ...'<sup>88</sup> as if the policy as promulgated was beyond reproach and the only obstacle to their success was the tiresome tendency of some teachers not to do as they are told.

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<sup>82</sup> Ball, 1990.

<sup>83</sup> Hogan *et al* 2012.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander, 2001, 552-3.

<sup>85</sup> Alexander, 2014, 158.

<sup>86</sup> Oates, 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Ofsted, 2002b, 2002c; Alexander 2004.

<sup>88</sup> Ofsted, 2002c, para 9.3.



Yet Ofsted's finger-wagging reminds us that even in such extreme cases of policy enforcement teachers are not wholly powerless and this indeed is one of the most important messages that the Cambridge Primary Review has attempted to convey to a profession which has long complained of prescription but in which compliance is not always unwilling and which historically has tended towards dependency. For every teacher that saw in the Cambridge Primary Review a passport to liberation there were at least as many others that spoke of their need for 'permission' to do other than treat official directives as non-negotiable, and at least as many others again who were frankly more comfortable being told what to do and how to think. The centralisation of curriculum, pedagogy and standards in English primary education may be a classic case of Gramscian hegemony, a relationship between rulers and ruled that moves beyond the polarities of domination and subordination to degrees of consent.<sup>89</sup>

These qualifications about the variegated and reflexive nature of the policy process, even in centralised regimes, are important. However, for as long as evidence counts for so little, political narratives peddle fiction rather than fact, and considered critique is met by ministerial abuse, the balance of judgement may tend to support the four eminent academics with whose letter to *The Independent* I started. Moreover, their concerns are consistent with the findings of the Rowntree Foundation Power enquiry into the condition of British democracy, whose disturbing final report was published in 2006.<sup>90</sup> What we are dealing with here, therefore, are conditions in British political life that reach well beyond policy specifics like the national curriculum:

The questionable evidence on which key educational policies have been based; the disenfranchising of local voice; the rise of unelected and unaccountable groups taking key decisions behind closed doors; the empty rituals of 'consultation'; the authoritarian mindset; and the use of myth and derision to underwrite exaggerated accounts of progress and discredit alternative views ...<sup>91</sup>

And so, as I felt obliged to say in September 2013 at the launch of the Cambridge Primary Review's successor, the Cambridge Primary Review Trust<sup>92</sup>:

Deep and lasting improvements in England's education system will be secured only when, in their discourse and their handling of evidence, policymakers exemplify the educated mind rather than demean it, and practise the best that has been thought and said rather than preach it.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> The exercise of power in the development of public education in England is explored in Green, 1990 and Alexander, 2001, 154.

<sup>90</sup> Joseph Rowntree Trust, 2006.

<sup>91</sup> Alexander, 2010, 481.

<sup>92</sup> [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)

<sup>93</sup> Alexander, 2014, 164.

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