

“World Beating” or “World Sustaining?” Aims or Outcomes? Dilemmas presented by Professor Robin Alexander

In November 2011 I was fortunate to attend a conference in Birmingham organised jointly by TIDE~ global learning and the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) entitled “Primary Global Learning – *a world fit to grow up in?*” The keynote address was delivered by Professor Robin Alexander, the Director of the CPR, with the intriguing title “A ‘World Class’ Primary Curriculum – Beating the World or Sustaining it?” I have heard Professor Alexander speak on more than one occasion and have read some of his valuable contributions to a range of educational debates. I am grateful, as all professional educators, interested parties and the like should be, for the pivotal role he is playing in enhancing the rigour of discourse at this crucial time of school curriculum review.

On this occasion I enjoyed particularly his swift and pithy review of post-1980s government-led curriculum reform and of the context of the current curriculum review, plus his ability to present in an easily-digestible form several of the main messages of the CPR Final report. However, the more I reflect upon Professor Alexander’s address, the more challenged I am by his words – but isn’t that what should happen?

I welcome the apparent recognition by those involved most closely in the curriculum review of the need to give full consideration to the aims of the school curriculum. As Professor Alexander intimated, it would seem that in the past the documented aims of, for example, the National Curriculum for Key Stage 2 were ‘tacked on’ at the beginning, after the knowledge, skills, understanding etc had been decided. Surely, an example of constructing the building and then designing the plans ... or as some would say, “putting the cart before the horse”. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why many think that the wheels have fallen off the cart. Professor Alexander suggested that we should focus on what we wish to achieve in primary schools (and in all phases of education) by giving full thought to the aims of the curriculum and not begin with its outcomes. Now this is presenting me with a dilemma.

The CPR warned that, *“the quality of the national debate about education in England has been undermined by three destructive ‘discourses’ – of dichotomy, derision and myth.”* (Hofkins and Northen, 2009, p41 referring to Alexander, 2009, pp21-25). Of particular relevance here is dichotomy, which has resulted in what Hofkins and Northen (ibid) called, *“Catchphrases, some dating back to the 1960s, forc(e/ing) key concepts into unnatural opposition. The result is to create, at best, a sense of choice, at worst, a sense of conflict, where neither is warranted. The most pernicious recent example is the dichotomy between standards in the ‘basics’ and a broad and balanced curriculum.”*

As a nation (profession?) we have yet to slay this dragon as all the pointers that I can see suggest that many still perceive a conflict between high standards of pupil attainment in the 'basics' and devoting valuable classroom time to, say, the arts when the children could be having another dose of literacy. Such commentators would not share Professor Alexander's call for a broad curriculum in which every subject or domain is deemed essential to a basic education or his tenet that standards beyond the 'basics' do matter (Alexander, 2011).

As the CPR stated (Alexander, 2009) other dragons are alive and well – for example, standards not structures; standards not curriculum; we teach children not subjects; subject-centred versus child-centred; traditional versus progressive, teaching as facilitation versus teaching as management; teaching versus learning. To these I would add whole class teaching not small group/individualised learning; knowledge versus skills; subjects versus topics. Swift (2010) referred to such 'false opposites' as distractions into spending time on justifying a position rather than on the purposeful task of creating a powerful curriculum.

On reflection I am aware of the danger that I may add one more false dichotomy or opposite to my personal list – that of Aims versus Outcomes. I must ensure that I adopt the advice of the CPR and simply substitute "and" for "versus" in my curriculum thinking because outcomes are important, as illustrated by the second dilemma Professor Alexander left with me when he posed the question, "A 'World Class' Primary Curriculum – Beating the World or Sustaining it?".

Professor Alexander argued in his address, I believe, for a curriculum (an outcome?) that should not necessarily 'beat the world' by attempting to ensure that our pupils feature at the very top of various international league tables for their performance in literacy, maths and/or science, but that would support sustainable development and lead towards a sustainable world.

John Huckle (2011) provided a stimulating and challenging discussion of what a curriculum that aims to sustain the world should involve when he posed four crucial questions and offered some initial responses; namely, "What is sustainability?", "Why are societies around the world not developing in sustainable ways?", "What has to happen to set societies on a more sustainable path?" and "Should lessons on sustainability foster commitment to a pre-determined ethic?"

Huckle concluded that, "*Sustainability literacy requires the development of both moral autonomy and political literacy*" (p119) and directed us towards an approach to education that is more radical than has been adopted to date in most English schools; namely, ecopedagogy as advocated by Richard Kahn (2011) et al. I would venture that this is an outcome that the quality of life for us and future generations is very much dependent upon and is one which ought to feature in any meaningful debate about a curriculum that must support learners "*to understand that there are alternatives to the fast capitalist neo-liberal world*" (Morgan, 2011, p124).

Professor Alexander supported his call for a 'sustaining curriculum' by referring to a litany of facts that should cause any intelligent individual to stop and think. Figure 1 is a sample of the statistical evidence that Professor Alexander quoted.

Fig. 1 - **WORLD CLASS EDUCATION: GLOBAL REALITIES**

- o The world's richest 500 individuals have a combined income that is greater than the combined income of the world's poorest 416,000,000.
- o Every year, 11,000,000 children die before the age of five.
- o Every 10 days, 300,000 children die from malnutrition, poor sanitation or preventable disease.
- o Armed conflict denies 28,000,000 children access to education and exposes them instead to violence, bereavement and abuse.
- o 69,000,000 of the world's children are out of school, over half of them in just 15 countries.
- o 800,000,000 of the world's adults cannot read or write.
- o Only 60% of countries achieve gender parity in primary school enrolment (in secondary schools only 31%).
- o In 2009, worldwide military expenditure was US\$1.5 trillion. \$16 billion of aid is needed annually to provide basic primary education in poor countries (1% of what is spent on arms) but in 2009 those

And here is my second dilemma. I do not want to sustain such a world; I do not want, for example, five million children under the age of 5 to die every year in 'developing countries' because of malnutrition (<http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats#>). I do not want anyone to be able to suggest that youth unemployment, youth disengagement or youth exploitation results in civil unrest similar to that that occurred in some English cities in August 2011. I do not want to tolerate the gross inequalities that exist in the city where I live, let alone be repulsed by the global injustices and abuses of human rights that I witness through my television screen. I do not want education to be subject to the short-termism of whoever 'has the Minister's ear this month'. I do not want to be accused of condoning that we may be "*the first generation that is in danger of teaching our children less than we know*" (anon). I do not wish to sustain this world. I do want to beat it. Because I think we have to.

Professor Alexander concluded his Birmingham address by commenting that, "*Primary schools may be the one point of stability and positive values in a world where everything else is changing and uncertain. For many, schools are the centre that holds when things fall apart.*" I will conclude here with another literary reference.

Michael Gove, on behalf of the Coalition, has promised teachers freedom to innovate in their classrooms and schools freedom to respond to the needs of their pupils. Professor Alexander (2011) has warned of the potential pitfalls of allowing or even 'encouraging' teachers and schools to focus almost completely, if not entirely, on literacy and numeracy,

and of assuming that breadth alone is sufficient to ensure high standards across the whole curriculum.

A high quality curriculum that both sustains and beats the world will not be achieved overnight, or without meaningful dialogue. It will be a long walk to freedom and it is to be hoped that we don't take any more wrong turnings or find ourselves directed into any more dead-ends.

Elsewhere I have argued for a curriculum that is fit for purpose, one that enables individuals to survive in, thrive in and contribute to their society – be that locally, regionally or globally (Serf, 2009, 2010). I am sure that the current school curriculum is not fit for purpose and I fear that after the current period of review we will be at best only marginally better prepared to 'beat the world'. We are in danger of merely ensuring the sustainability of a system that has served us not too well for some time and that we may repeat the alleged mistakes of the past (and present?).

“Education ... has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading.” George M. Trevelyan (1876-1962)

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