

## Thinkpiece

### Ideas into action ~ six assertions and a *fait accompli*

After a long and often fruitful consultation about a new primary curriculum, including conferences, seminars, teacher projects, presentations, policy submissions and so and, and so on, we are still working with Curriculum 2000.

So what has moved on? And what does that mean for primary schools, and for global learning? In this personal thinkpiece I am seeking to raise some questions, get some debate going, take a few steps towards answers ... and the next generation of thinking about these things.

This thinkpiece draws on all the activity above, to make six assertions and offer one *fait accompli*.

1. **The basics. Children engaging with the real world as learners and citizens is 'a basic'**
2. **Whose curriculum? The curriculum belongs to schools**
3. **There is plenty of value still to be found in the Rose and Alexander reviews**
4. **Global learning is good learning [but is good learning always global learning?]**
5. **Leadership is essential to change [and we can all offer leadership]**
6. **There is plenty to be done ...**
7. **... and plenty of support available**

#### **Assertion 1. The basics. Children engaging with the real world as learners and citizens is 'a basic'**

Governments change, policies change, and the world keeps changing. What is more, children keep on growing up into that changing world. Change itself is a constant, so it seems to me that a crucial question for educators is how we prepare children to live with that change.

Moreover, it seems to me that trends towards social, economic and cultural globalisation are persistent features of that change, as are related hopes and concerns about sustainable development, climate change and the nature of the communities we live in.

Recognising this has radical implications for teaching and learning. How we understand such things, and what we know about them, are as subject to change as the things themselves [which are anyway often contentious and multi-dimensional]. Today's received wisdom is therefore unlikely to prove a sound basis for tomorrow's needs. I think a more useful learning agenda than received wisdom is one about resilience, adaptability, critical acumen and 'thinking on one's feet'.

In Summer 2010, Schools Minister Nick Gibb announced that his aim was *"to ensure a relentless focus on the basics."*

But which basics? Whose basics? In order to address the huge question of change and globalisation, then I suggest the basics would include:

- *Enabling children to make sense of what it means to live in a changing and interdependent world.*
- *Developing their abilities to determine for themselves how to go about creating a just, sustainable and democratic future.*

Of course, in order to achieve these ends, children will still need to be confident and capable in using literacy, numeracy and ICT ... but these capabilities will have a context and purpose. Children will also, however, need other assets, such as self-confidence, social skills, critical literacy and creativity, as well as a grasp of some big ideas or concepts which help them get a handle on the world.

*In 2008 Tide~ proposed some **core ideas and understandings** for global learning. Are these still fit for purpose? Or do we need something new?*

See [www.tidec.org/Tidetalk/articles/GL\\_in\\_primary\\_sch\\_feature/GL\\_in\\_primary\\_sch.html](http://www.tidec.org/Tidetalk/articles/GL_in_primary_sch_feature/GL_in_primary_sch.html)

## **Assertion 2. Whose curriculum? The curriculum belongs to schools**

*"Trust the professionalism of teachers as curriculum makers. What we need is not more consultation, but to create the base for more creativity to take place. This is about the profession taking ownership of the future. As a profession, we could grasp control in such a way as we could survive any changes governments wanted to make"*

- ITE lecturer at consultation meeting, May 2010

The Number One message that I have taken from teachers and heads, during all the comings and goings about the primary curriculum ... **this is our curriculum.**

Schools are already moving away from curriculum delivery to curriculum making. Many are directly engaging children's voices in that process, as well as those of parents and the wider community. Schools are no longer prepared

to sit around passively while ministers and civil servants decide things for them. To me, this suggests a radical shift in the balance of power.

By schools, I am here including learners and the wider school community, as well as the confident and capable professionals who strive to meet their needs. Together, teachers, heads and the school community are better placed than anybody else to choose how best to make any curriculum work effectively - 'official' or not.

However, schools are not only part of their local communities, but a wider society. They are affected by it, and partly serve its needs. In our interdependent world, such a society includes a mind-boggling range of local, national and global connections. Any thinking about curriculum will want to bear these connections in mind.

In terms of that wider ownership of curriculum, there may well be some shared values and notions of entitlement that wider bodies of people can subscribe to. This is not the same as a state imposed national curriculum. Nor is it about the creeping privatisation of the 'free schools' programme.

It suggests to me that we need a balance of curricula, and at different scales: a school [or even learner] specific curriculum; but also *a community curriculum*; and [in terms of the wider vision of society] a national or even an international curriculum. In this, it may even be that national government still has a part to play.

Is this pie in the sky? It is, at the very least, worth having a debate about. The Alexander Primary Review has raised similar questions. Schools are already familiar with ideas about pupil voice and personalised learning, at one end of the scale. At the other end, there are also international commitments to children's rights, education for all, education for sustainable development and so on.

The big question is how we can match these scales up, without it becoming untidy or chaotic. I think we will do this best by keeping learner need and professional creativity at the heart of the process – in a sense, by 'thinking globally and acting locally.' In that, both Rose and Alexander give us something to build on.

### **Assertion 3. There is plenty of value still to be found in the Rose and Alexander reviews**

The Cambridge [Alexander] Primary Review had this to say about the balance of power between schools and state: *"the teachers who were least worried by national initiatives were those who responded to them with robust criticism rather than resentful compliance, and asserted their professional right to go their own way. There is a lesson from such empowerment for government as well as schools."*

- Community Soundings, 2007.

Professional creativity and learner need, in a changing world, have been key themes in the Rose and Alexander reviews.

The Cambridge Primary Review has eloquently argued for a greater degree of local autonomy for schools and the curriculum, and for a rebalancing of local and national curricula. It suggests that creative curriculum development networks should be a key means for change, and it has begun to set some up. This chimes well with the style of work that Tide~ has adopted, and I see real potential in networks of this kind working together. This is ‘change from below’.

The Rose Review, while working to a narrower brief, has also generated valuable ideas about ‘essential’ ingredients in any forward-looking curriculum. Even more useful than its many good ideas, however, has been the professional debate which has been stimulated by its development.

In effect, it has allowed many schools to give themselves permission to construct the solutions which are most appropriate to their needs. Although Sir Jim’s proposals have been stopped in their tracks, ‘the genie is out of the bottle’, and I see a growing groundswell for curriculum renewal and proactive professionalism.

As one Primary headteacher put it, in an e-mail to me, and drawing on her experiences of using the Rose Review proposals to start developing a global learning curriculum across the school: “*We will continue to move forward anyway as, whatever happens, what we are doing is having such a positive effect - certainly on motivation levels ... as well as the all round development of our children. So why stop?*”

#### **Assertion 4. Global learning is good learning [but is good learning always global learning?]**

*“Global learning is particularly useful if you want to go back to the child and their needs.”*

- Primary Teacher at consultation meeting, May 2010

*“We will know we are making some progress when - there are more young black men in university than there are in prison; there is less domestic violence; when women are paid the same as men; when disabled people play a full part in society.”*

- Robin Richardson, Insted, at conference, March 2010

As I have already asserted, global learning is about learning in the context of a changing and interdependent world. Since all learning, arguably, is in that

context, my colleague Jeff Serf's questions seem well worth repeating: *"is the word 'global' actually redundant? Or do we miss something if it is left out? What does a school look like which does not do global learning?"*

Responding to Jeff, it seems to me that global learning is really a question: *it may be learning, but in what way is it global?*

When I try to answer that question, it becomes clear to me that global learning is good learning, but not *just* good learning. From my privileged overview of a variety of work in primary schools, here are some of the *ways in which learning might be global*:

- 'making it real' – it is grounded in children's experience and the real world;
- it is 'outward looking' [even when locally-based];
- it involves social learning - group work, collaboration, talking with a purpose, valuing different perspectives, developing empathy;
- it engages pupil voice, including but not only in the learning process – emphasising children's agency as learners and citizens;
- it makes connections [eg between different scales of time and place, concepts, skills and ideas, values and understandings, self and others, subjects, learning and doing/the application of learning];
- it is **learning for a purpose** – and often an ethical purpose.

There is plenty I could add to the list. Schools are full of these things. When we see what it looks like, we can see why it matters

### **Assertion 5. Leadership is essential to change [and we can all offer leadership]**

*"We need to be working as senior staff to support colleagues in being more fluid and flexible. We need to go back to why we are doing it."*

– Elaine Huntington, primary headteacher

*'This is all about shared learning.'*

– Lin Reilly, primary headteacher

If we are moving from curriculum delivery to curriculum making, and therefore giving ourselves permission to be creative and responsive professionals, then this also has implications for leadership in schools.

The old metaphor for education was all about 'delivery.' Frankly, and especially when it comes to notions such as citizenship, sustainable development or [heaven help us], personalised learning, I have always found 'delivery' to be almost as nonsensical as it was objectionable.

In a 'delivery' model, governments determine what happens with education, headteachers and LAs enforce it, teachers deliver it, and children are the

[presumably grateful] recipients of the educational ‘product.’

A better metaphor for meeting the needs that I have described so far is about **enabling**. An enabling, or creative, curriculum model turns the ‘delivery’ process on its head. It conceives of children as agents in their own learning, teachers as enablers of learning, headteachers and LAs as offering support and quality assurance, and governments as providing frameworks and resources to help this all take place.

In this enabling model, everybody in the system takes on a degree of active responsibility, and everybody assumes a degree of leadership. What is more, everybody – emphatically – is also a learner. That seems to me to be a model better suited to the needs of flexibility, adaptability, personalisation and democracy: the needs of a changing and interdependent world.

Moreover, such an enabling model seems to me to be more, not less, accountable: not just to government, or governors and maybe parents; but also to learners themselves, and the wider community in which they reside.

So, all leadership matters, and leadership is fundamentally about learning together. Easy to say. However, we are also working within existing structures, where the role of heads and senior managers is *absolutely crucial* in supporting real change towards such a learning culture in curriculum and schools ... and especially if such change is to take place beyond the occasional lesson, or the individual enthusiastic teacher. So there is a rebalancing of power to be thought about at that level, as well.

The question of accountability takes us to the present moment, and the idea of the ‘big society.’ Right now, it is not yet clear how the idea of ‘big society’ will shape up ... and what its potential or durability will be. Can we, for example, talk in any meaningful way about a ‘big global society’? How ‘big’ can a society be [and if it is really big, can it also be really inclusive?]? It seems tempting to see some real potential for global learning in all this, as well as potential pitfalls.

The debates that the ‘big society’ ideas have raised about local control, and a changing role for the state, do allow us some space however for re-visioning not only the relationship between schools and government, but also between schools and their communities [at various scales], and including children. In such a vision, who is included in the curriculum making process ... and in what role?

I have made some suggestions above. I think that everybody needs to be included, and to offer a degree of leadership. But how this could work, while exciting, will need a lot more thinking and negotiation. It may well mean re-visioning schools themselves. There is a great deal still to be done.

### Assertion 6. There is plenty to be done ...

Tide~'s March 2010 conference was entitled "ideas into action" – and it is clear to me from that event that, while there have been some brilliant ideas to work with, and some excellent experiments in a relatively small number of schools, there is a great deal still to be done in terms of mobilising action to fully develop the potential of global learning in primary schools.

If I am right about the 'basics', then all learners have a fundamental entitlement to the essential elements of global learning. And in that case, then - morally and professionally – I should be working with others to set some wheels in motion to make those 'basics' a reality. This article is one part of that process.

The following are four priorities that the conference identified for taking global learning ideas into action. Some of these have already been touched on in this thinkpiece, and they are expanded on elsewhere in Tidetalk~:

- Leadership and whole school change;
- Evaluation and assessment;
- Partnerships and networks;
- Continuous renewal.

If we bear in mind the points I have already made about curriculum ownership and leadership, this seems a pretty good agenda to be getting on with.

The fourth element in this list brings us back to 'doh.' To recap: the world keeps changing, children change, our understandings change, and so we will need to keep rethinking what and how we teach.

Teaching is, and always will be, a creative, responsive profession. Above all, we respond to the needs of our learners. We therefore have to do this for ourselves, in our own schools and communities, but we are absolutely not alone.

### Assertion 7. There is plenty of support available

*"Put teachers together, give them a task and some space and they will fire on it. The same for kids."*

- teacher on Tide~ study visit course

I said in the introduction that this was a 'fait accompli'. Strictly speaking, that's not true: there is and always will be a need and opportunity for new partnerships, fresh resources, curriculum networks, creative ideas ...

A few years ago, I co-edited a book called "*Building blocks for global learning.*" These blocks were key elements that very young children would

need to engage with, if we took the idea of global learning seriously.

Teachers have their own essential building blocks, some of which take the form of CPD and resource support from Tide~, the Global Dimension website and others. There are also existing and emerging networks: within LAs and subject clusters, around the Primary Review, through Tide~: islands of change, which I can imagine starting to join together in productive ways.

And yes, government can have a support role to play: not least in providing some resources, some opportunities and spaces for sharing, in helping profile good ideas, in sharing its vision: but also in keeping out of the way when it's not really needed, and resisting its in-built tendency to over-manage and to interfere.

So yes, 'top down' is sometimes important, but it's the 'bottom-up' and 'side-to-side' stuff that mostly interests me. What is really challenging, even exciting, is that – as teachers and educators, as school communities - we are going to need to keep thinking and playing together, to create new building blocks of our own. And in that endeavour, our best support is undoubtedly each other.

Ben Ballin  
Tide~ global learning

[www.tidegloballearning.net](http://www.tidegloballearning.net)