

## BENCHMARKS AND BARRICADES

**Robin Alexander** commends the US report on arts education as essential reading for the national curriculum review team

High summer for teachers. High noon for the curriculum. The first phase of England's latest national curriculum review approaches its end. Ministers will shortly unveil their list of 'essential knowledge in the key subject disciplines', thereby also revealing what they regard as educationally inessential.

English, mathematics, science and PE will be catalogued in detail, though that very specificity makes controversy about their content inevitable (is Hardy more 'essential' than Heaney, or do neither make the grade?). But what of the rest of the curriculum? Aside from the routine nod towards 'breadth and balance' will it be left to chance? Will the promised curriculum freedoms be won at the expense of what any national curriculum worthy of the name ought surely to guarantee: children's entitlement to a rich array of educational and cultural experiences alongside a secure grounding in literacy, oracy and numeracy? (Yes, oracy: in pursuit of both entitlement and standards let's transform the traditional duo into a vibrant trio).

Cue the recent report on arts education in America's schools from the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (honorary chair, Michelle Obama). This should be compulsory poolside reading for every member of England's national curriculum review team, for the evidence it presents is in its way no less compelling than the PISA league tables that policymakers equate with 'world class' educational standards.

They say we must 'benchmark' our national curriculum against systems like Singapore and Hong Kong which do well in PISA. PISA tests students' 'key competencies' in reading, maths and science, so that's where the benchmarking starts - and stops. These subjects are rightly viewed as non-negotiable. Yet this is benchmarking the basics, not the curriculum. The report from the President's Committee reminds us that for the sake of our children, our economy and our culture 'key competencies' can and must be more broadly defined; that an entitlement curriculum is about more than is tested, and indeed more than *can* be tested, for the learning that cannot be measured, computed and translated into performance tables is often more profound and searching.

So let's benchmark the arts and humanities too, though without demeaning their character. Let's also note that some of the countries we are told to emulate are now belatedly investing in the very subjects that in England have become most vulnerable, conceding that these too entail 'essential knowledge'.

The US report is consistent with the 2009 final report of the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR), the 1999 Robinson report on creativity, culture and education, the 1982 Gulbenkian report on the arts in schools and endless lobbying by artists great and good. After 30 years the case is unimpeachable: how often must it be repeated?

But *Reinvesting in Arts Education* doesn't merely reinforce familiar arguments about breadth, enrichment, culture and creativity. It also presents persuasive evidence on the relationship between high quality arts teaching and pupil engagement, especially among disadvantaged and disaffected pupils, and on the potential of good arts education to narrow the attainment gap, which in Britain and the US remains wider than in most other rich countries. The report cites studies showing correlations between high levels of participation in good arts education and improved test scores in literacy and numeracy; research on the transfer of arts skills to aspects of reading and mathematics; and evidence from brain research on the relationship between exposure to the arts and children's attentiveness, cognitive development and long-term memory.

The Cambridge Primary Review has consistently challenged politicians' claim that the way to raise standards in literacy and numeracy is to concentrate on these alone and not worry about the rest of the curriculum; in this it is supported by HMI, Ofsted and sheer common sense. The report from the President's Committee implicitly endorses this challenge and supports the CPR's insistence, in both its final report and its evidence to the current national curriculum review, that the distinction between the curriculum 'core' and the rest has become a barricade, with patently adverse consequences for the non-core subjects and even perhaps for the core subjects themselves; for, as the new report reminds us, learning in one area enhances learning in others.

The US evidence supports our recommendation that the statutory requirements of the new national curriculum must not be confined to English, mathematics, science and PE. It underlines our objections to the narrow focus of assessment, inspection, initial teacher training and teachers' professional standards, which may discourage schools from striving for genuine (as opposed to token) curriculum breadth; and it shows that the CPR was right to press for an investigation into the system's capacity to provide high quality teaching in all aspects of a broad curriculum, not just 'the basics'. For breadth without quality is pointless, and without an unwavering commitment to high standards across the entire curriculum 'breadth and balance' is mere cliché.

This last condition is crucial. Taught with rigour and flair, the arts don't only enrich children's minds and lives. ('Only'? That's no small achievement). They also engage the disengaged and raise educational standards. On all counts they amply meet the government's criterion of 'essential knowledge in the key subject disciplines'. So will the Henley review of cultural education now ignore the clause in its remit which tells it to make no assumptions about the inclusion of the arts in the national curriculum? Will the government expand the scope of both the national curriculum core and – following the recent Select Committee report - the EBac? Better still, will it at last abandon the core/non-core divide, crude in conception and damaging in its consequences, and replace it by a more generous account of children's educational entitlement, at one bound leaping from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first?

Professor Robin Alexander directs the Cambridge Primary Review, now in its dissemination and networking phase: [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk). For the US report *Reinvesting in Arts Education*: [http://www.pcah.gov/sites/default/files/photos/PCAH\\_Reinvesting\\_4web.pdf](http://www.pcah.gov/sites/default/files/photos/PCAH_Reinvesting_4web.pdf).

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