Alternative Currents

Richard Noss and Harvey Goldstein

In this important article, Richard Noss and his colleague Professor Harvey Goldstein at the University of London Institute of Education follow up their recent critique of the concept of 'levels' by arguing that there has to be a reasoned resistance to the worst aspects of the Government's curriculum and assessment proposals.

Recapitulation

In an earlier article (**Forum** Vol 33 No 1), we discussed the theme of 'levels' in the National Curriculum and indicated that this could be seen as a precursor to a return to streaming and external grading throughout a child's school career. We also suggested that the concern with levels in the National Curriculum and associated testing was part of a general concern to introduce the ethics and economics of the marketplace into schooling (for a thoroughgoing analysis of the social and educational rationales and effects of the National Curriculum and its associated testing in relation to mathematics, see Dowling and Noss 1990).

Since writing that article the Conservative Government's actions have revealed more clearly than ever that their real concern is to pursue these structural aims. The elaborate assessments at key stage 1 have been emasculated, so that the Standard Attainment Tasks will no longer cover all attainment targets. The Education Secretary has also suggested that simple written tasks will suffice at key stage 3, ignoring not only the recommendations of the TGAT Report but also the advice of SEAC itself (we should clarify that we were and remain highly critical of the TGAT Report, but for rather different reasons than those of the Secretary of State).

The early phase of the National Curriculum debate involved discussions about 'good' educational practice, and those involved in testing have consistently voiced their opinion that carefully-constructed tests could and would bring about positive educational reforms. This view has become increasingly marginal and it is more than ever clear that these arguments have helped to apply an educational veneer to the Government's real intentions, namely to carry through a programme of centralized testing in order to provide (maintained) schools with a common currency with which to compete for pupils and resources. It is instructive to reflect briefly on how this has occurred.

In the months up to the passing of the 1988 Education 'Reform' Act, there was a very intensive period of activity which saw the publication of the TGAT Report and the start of the National Curriculum working party activities. By cleverly using the language of educators and stressing its concern for the well-being of all children, as well as employing the more familiar rhetoric of educational 'standards' the Government was able to presuade most of the 'educational establishment' to collaborate with its plans. This not only lent an initial legitimacy to what was being done; it also, crucially, allowed a very tight timetable to be implemented without any serious overt or covert attempts to resist. It is only in 1991 that any real signs of large-scale opposition to the whole curriculum and assessment programme have become apparent through voices within teacher unions, and more significantly, by parental action.

The real problem for those who fear the worst consequences of the 1988 Act is that it is now very difficult to initiate major improvements. Indeed, as the Government itself has begun to point out, the initial schemes for testing, drawn up by educationists themselves, are far too elaborate and time-consuming. Hence the proposals to cut them drastically and simplify their implementation. Yet this simplification process is likely to remove just those elements which many educationists originally found attractive: the practical and oral work for example, and the integration of the SATs into ordinary classroom teaching.

Rounds one and two without doubt have gone to the Government.

Testing to Destruction

Our own attempts to set the current situation in historical perspective lead us to two general conclusions. First, that there has to be a reasoned resistance to the worst aspects of the Government's curriculum and assessment programme, as well as opposition to its fundamentals. Second, that hopes for structural change are unrealistic in the short term and that opposition needs to be carefully and patiently argued.

One of the most important ways in which the late 1980s and early 1990s differ from earlier periods is that reasoned argument no longer seems to form a shared basis for decision-making involving the Government. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the Government's proposals on the reporting of school assessment results. In its recently-issued draft proposals on the reporting of GCSE results and as far as can be seen in the reporting of national assessment results, the Government still intends to report school mean grades or scores. Yet all the evidence suggests that this is misleading and unjust. Work on examination results in the Inner London Education Authority (Nuttall et al, 1989) and elsewhere has shown that average schools scores or grades more than anything reflect the achievements of the children when they entered the school. The only secure foundation for making comparisons between schools rests on measuring the 'value added' factor, that is by allowing for the 'intake' achievements of the children. To do this, however,

requires long-term study and careful analysis of results. Almost certainly it could not lead to any simple ranking of schools or production of 'league tables'. All that we know, on the basis of careful and extensive work of a number of investigators around the world, suggests that the comparison of schools on the basis of their performances of their students is a delicate and difficult operation. The Government's persistent refusal to acknowledge the complexities involved can only reinforce our view that it is less interested in improving schools than in introducing mechanisms for differentiation and selection.

To follow the Government's recommendations would inevitably lead to some 'ineffective' schools being labelled as 'effective' simply because they had a high-achieving intake and for that reason alone produced good results, but otherwise failed to offer optimum 'progression' for their students. Likewise there would be other schools, perhaps very 'effective' in terms of the educational progression of their pupils, but doomed to produce at best mediocre results due to the low-achieving starting-points of their students. The extraordinary fact is that the Government, and certainly its senior civil service advisors, know this yet chooses to ignore it. Instead it chooses to reiterate its claim that parents have a right to know how well a school is doing and that information about achievement should not be withheld. The fact that such information as it is proposing to release will be highly misleading is ignored.

In the present climate, appeal to rational debate with Government seems to be less than fruitful. This makes it all the more important that such debate should be pursued among those who are genuinely concerned with the health of the educational system and the welfare of its students. This means teachers, parents, administrators and others responsible for making the system work. It implies, we believe, a long-term perspective and a refusal to be constrained in our thinking by the narrow agenda set by Government. Specifically, we have some proposals, which we now outline.

Proposals

Our first three proposals concern assessment. The first is that we should do all we can to develop forms of assessment which are superior alternatives to the centrally-devised SAT's. The principal vehicle for these will be the formative records of achievement, many of which are already operating in schools. The key features of such assessments are their cooperative nature, involving students, parents and teachers, and their essentially private and formative nature (we contrast this with the public nature of the Government's tests: see Noss R., Goldstein H and Hoyles C., 1989, for elaboration of this distinction). They are for the promotion of each individual child's learning and not for the comparison, grading or streaming of children. We already have a large pool of expertise concerning the construction and use of such records (Broadfoot et al, 1991) and the challenge now is to ensure that they are not simply turned into yet another instrument for labelling a child. Sadly there are signs that this may be the intention in some quarters, by linking them to existing SAT results. The challenge to the profession is to avoid that happening, on the grounds that the public, grading function of assessment is fundamentally incompatible with its private, diagnostic features which are required by teachers, parents and children.

Our second proposal is based on the need to focus on the testing associated with the National Curriculum, rather than trying to ignore it. Our strategy is concerned with explaining why the Government's present assessment proposals, especially those concerned with reporting results, are bad. While the Government may legally force the publication of misleading assessment results, it would be unable to prevent the profession from pointing out just how unreasonable such publication is. If every school and Education Authority were to issue its own 'health warning' whenever required to publish such figures, and if teachers were to explain to parents and the public why such results were useless, the Government would soon have to realise the futility of its aims. Once the legitimacy of the currency for school (and teacher) comparisons has been destroyed, the remainder of the market-place proposals will become much more difficult to operate.

Thirdly, there are signs that parents are taking action into their own hands. At the time of writing it seems as if in Scotland parental action in boycotting the equivalent 8-year-old tests has undermined the Government's aims rather effectively, and the first stirrings of similar dissent are unfolding in England. If such action, in cooperation with teachers, prevents substantial numbers of children from taking the tests then this would further contribute to the invalidity of school comparisons, as well as seriously undermine the Government's claims that it is testing pupils in response to parental wishes for accountability.

Our proposals on the curriculum are in the nature of patient attempts to continue to develop all the gains and good practice before the imposition of the National Curriculum. Our argument centres on our belief that the Government is interested only marginally in what is taught. In fact, it is more interested in what is not taught. Beyond the attack on 'silly teaching methods' and calls for a 'return to basics' we need to have a concern that children develop a critical awareness of the world they live in. The fragmentation of the mathematics curriculum, the artificial boundaries of time and space imposed on history and geography, and the ridiculous debate about 'real books' appear to be much more concerned with depriving children of knowledge and ways of thinking than with dictating what they should learn via the statutory orders.

Yet, paradoxically, we think that this gives teachers space in which to reassert their craft. We do not propose that pre-National Curriculum schooling was faultless, and undeserving of any criticism, nor that the debates around the National Curriculum have not yielded some useful ideas. We do assert that British education, particularly primary education, has made tremendous strides in the last thirty years, both in the context of what is taught, and in the ways in which schools and classrooms are organized. In our view teachers should attempt to reassert curricular content within the National Curriculum 'statements of attainment'.

It is clear that there are pressures to redefine curriculum in terms of these statements: already there is a plethora of textbooks which seek to define content in terms of them. The statements of attainment by themselves cannot define the details of the curriculum, yet it is the working out of this detail which is crucial. We suggest that teachers should celebrate their existing achievements by incorporating them into the curriculum structure which the present law obliges them to follow. We do not think that this strategy will bring about instant results: but we are confident that the edifice is already crumbling, and we believe that the time is right to begin the creation of an alternative current that will prepare people for more rational and constructive curriculum policies.

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Losers in the Market Place: Children Under Five

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A tutor in Primary Education at the Cambridge Institute of Education and a member of the Forum Editorial Board, Mary Jane Drummond here highlights our appalling record in providing and funding services for the under-fives.

'If you want to be under five', Harriet Harman once remarked, 'don't do it in Britain'. That is, don't do it if you believe that as a young child you have a clear entitlement to publicly-funded care and education before you reach the statutory school age of five. If you do believe this, you are doomed to disappointment.

For a number of reasons, you would do much better to be under five almost anywhere else in Europe; firstly because levels of provisions for young children are dramatically higher there. In this country as a whole, only 24 per cent of three and four-year-olds attend a maintained nursery school or class, compared with 95 per cent in France and 88 per cent in Italy. In some local authorities in England there is no nursery education at all (DES 1990).

There are, of course, other forms of pre-school provision in this country, and the number of places offered by the voluntary and private sectors (in playgroups, private nurseries and by childminders) is growing year by year. In 1985, 85 per cent of children aged three and four experienced some form of pre-school provision: the majority of these children attended playgroups (Pugh 1988). In 1989, playgroups were still the most important form of provision, in terms of numbers of children attending: they provided places for about a third of all three and four-year olds (Moss 1991). But it is important to remember that most of these places are not publicly funded: for the country as a whole, the Pre-school Playgroup Association has estimated that grants contribute less than two per cent of total running costs.

Elsewhere in Europe, the level of public sector involvement in providing and funding services is substantially higher. Most other countries (the exceptions are Ireland and the Netherlands) have, or are actively working towards, two or three years of publicly-funded nursery education or kindergarten, available to all children. This country is still at the very bottom of the European league table for both levels of provision and levels of public funding for services to under-fives.

National figures mask extreme local variations. Nursery education is provided for 66 per cent of three and four-year olds in Hounslow, while in eighteen LEAs, fewer than one in ten of children under five gets a place in a nursery school or class (DES statistics 1986). If you must be under five in Britain, and you insist on your right to education, choose your local authority with care.

Inequality of opportunity for the under-fives does not stop here. Within the limited services available, some families and some children will benefit to the exclusion of others. The largest study of pre-school services carried out in this country (Osborn and Millbank 1987) reports substantial social inequality in access to pre-school education: 'as many as 46 per cent of the most disadvantaged children had received no form of pre-school education, compared with only 10 per cent of the most advantaged group' (p 56). Racial inequality was also identified: 'As many as 46 per cent of Indian/Pakistan children and 35 per cent of Afro-Caribbean children had no pre-school experience. This