

Bill Laar and
Jackie Holderness

Reclaiming the Curriculum

Specialist and Creative
Teaching in Primary Schools



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For Alex Laar

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Preface

This book sets out to document educational practice of notable quality in a range of primary schools across the country, exemplifying effective, imaginative and innovative treatment of major aspects of the curriculum. The work described succeeds in cultivating pupils' cognitive and creative development in many ways and enhancing their learning and understanding in the broadest sense.

This comes at a time when the approach of many schools to pupils' curriculum entitlement is shaped, and significantly constrained, by their perception of a governmental emphasis on the core curriculum at the expense of the rest. This bias is reflected in the major importance attached to national testing, assessment and league tables as indicators of school effectiveness. Schools have come to believe that their success, as measured by Ofsted, largely relates to ongoing attainment in English and mathematics, with little more than limited reference to other subjects and aspects of the curriculum.

Many head teachers and teachers increasingly fear that their effectiveness, their standing, their reputation with parents and the community, and, indeed, the professional evaluation and fate of leaders and staff, are dependent on brief, data-driven inspections that take scant account of the totality of the education they provide. Some schools have responded with a disproportionate concentration on the teaching of English and mathematics in terms of time allocation, staff deployment, coaching and prolonged practice, and the extensive use of commercial materials, especially in the teaching of writing.

However, official recognition and acknowledgement of the potentially restrictive and adverse consequences for children's education and learning of this development has finally come.

In 2017, Ofsted's chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, commissioned a review into how the national curriculum is implemented in schools (Ofsted and Spielman, 2017). The review found that a significant consequence of a reduced understanding of the curriculum has been the narrowing of the primary curriculum in the final two years because of too great a focus on preparing for Key Stage 2 tests in English and mathematics. As a result, pupils were being deprived of lessons in subjects such as history, geography, languages, music, drama, computing, PE and art and design. She added that, as far back as 2001, there had been evidence of a restricted curriculum in primary schools, with the national literacy and

numeracy strategies, along with increasingly demanding performance targets, adversely affecting the breadth of education provided.

Amanda Spielman went on to say that she had met many people who agreed that expertise in curriculum development and leadership had waned, with school leaders choosing to push curriculum development down their list of priorities. These leaders indicated that preparing staff to teach to the tougher assessment criteria for new SATs was more pressing.

She warned: ‘Where school leaders and teachers have an overt focus on performance tables, this can lead to mistaking “badges and stickers” for learning and substance ... In addition, where there is little shared curriculum thinking among staff, it becomes increasingly difficult to moderate the influence of the test syllabus on primary curriculum design.’ The chief inspector did, however, draw encouragement from the fact that ‘many school leaders ... are already working to revitalise curriculum thinking to ensure that the content of young people’s learning takes precedence over performance tables’.

In conclusion, she reiterated her determination that Ofsted would ensure that the curriculum received ‘the proper attention it deserves’ and, by implication, that the inspection process would be modified to achieve a proper review and acknowledgement of the nature and quality of primary curriculum, balanced against test outcomes and SATs attainment.

Not all are convinced or optimistic, however – including those whose scepticism derives from the failure by Ofsted to take practical account of their own concerns about the narrowing of the primary curriculum, raised more than 15 years ago.

The following comments are fairly representative of staffroom reactions:

Why do Ofsted think we teach only to the test?

Why is it, in Year 6, the children do almost exclusively maths and English? Is it because the teachers love maths and English and hate all the other subjects? Or is it because, during Ofsted inspections, the primary focus is the maths and English data, and progress in maths and English? No one ever went into a ‘category’ based on lack of progress in art!

So, Ofsted expect a broad and balanced curriculum, but still punish you if your results aren’t up to scratch within a tightly defined list of subjects.

Schools cite as evidence of continued circumscribed inspection an article in the *TES* by Tim Brighouse (2016), which describes his survey of Ofsted reports from over 200 primary

schools. He found that reference to curriculum content was confined to English/literacy and mathematics, with no comment – in any report – to any other subject in the national curriculum.

Anxiety has arisen that the narrowing of the curriculum may begin as early as the reception stage. A letter to *The Guardian* in January 2018 from more than 1,700 signatories – among them educationalists, parents and the IVF pioneer Lord Winston – expressed concern in response to an Ofsted report, *Bold Beginnings*, which called for a sharper focus on the teaching of literacy and numeracy at the reception stage.¹ The signatories of the letter took particular issue with the fact that the report effectively inferred that reception classes should be taught like those in Year 1, which, in turn, would mean a narrowing of the curriculum, a more formal teaching approach and less opportunity for play-based activity. The signatories also contested the assertion that schools deemed to be ‘successful’ already teach in this way – pointing out that the report was based on visits to less than 0.25% of schools, and suggesting therefore that Ofsted only visited schools where the teaching was congruent with the recommendations the report would ultimately make.

Last, but by no means of least concern to teachers and parents are reports from schools that pupils entering Year 6 are preoccupied with, and fearful of, their eventual achievement in the SATs, to the exclusion of any expectation of an inspirational or memorable final year in primary education.

Reclaiming the curriculum

Yet, for all of that, in recent years we have witnessed many schools resisting what they believe to be a mistaken belief in the security of a narrow curriculum and what, inevitably, would be a diminished learning experience for pupils. They have succeeded in providing a broad curriculum offer that enhances learning and maintains continuity and progression in pupils’ attainment. These schools aim to nurture children’s capacity to reflect on and evaluate their work and identify personal strategies for study and further learning. Interestingly, they can point to evidence that their retention of a deep and generous curriculum results in outcomes that do not merely satisfy requirements in relation to national standardised tests, but consistently exceed them. Many of the schools included in this book have been rated as ‘outstanding’ in all areas.

We are convinced about the value of the work in these schools and by the substance of their claims. We have been enthralled by much of what we have seen, and believe that

1 See <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/16/ofsted-bold-beginnings-report-on-reception-class-curriculum-is-flawed>.

the following chapters and case studies describe education of a transforming nature, which takes pupils into the realms of exploration, enquiry, learning and, very often, scholarship, and which enriches them beyond measure. These schools' pupils grow and thrive in developmental and human terms, and are often inspired to pursue a curiosity-driven quest for further investigation, research and knowledge. We would argue that it is the right of all children, whatever their circumstances in life, to have such an education.

In this book we share aspects of inspirational education and practice that we hope will enthuse colleagues in other schools. We hope that these accounts of initiatives – written by over 20 colleagues, each working within state-funded education – will encourage readers to reflect on, identify and esteem their own creative practice, and have faith in the worth of a full, relevant and content-rich primary curriculum.

The chapters describe – mostly in the words of head teachers, teachers and specialist coaches – exciting and creative learning. In the process, our colleagues refer to the beliefs, values, principles and philosophies that underpin and motivate their practice. They articulate their views of learning and how it is most effectively accomplished, the purpose and intentions that inspired the initiatives and projects they describe, and the ways in which these were resourced, realised, carried through and eventually evaluated.

At the beginning of each chapter, we briefly summarise our perceptions of the educational value of each initiative or long-standing example of curriculum development, the significance of specific aspects and the ways in which, it seems to us, they are likely to help maintain faith in, and commitment to, full and relevant learning. We believe the vision of each contributor, and what flows from that vision, represents a reclaiming of the curriculum and an enriched education for children.

Introduction

The primary debate

We believe it is necessary to review, however briefly, the decisive developments in primary education which, over time, have left no school untouched. We also consider the impact of the political intervention that has brought us to the current situation and the conflicting beliefs (still unresolved in important respects) about favoured and strongly advocated approaches to education.

Over the years, the primary sector has seen much discussion and disagreement, some of it damagingly divisive and conspicuously unhelpful, about appropriate philosophies, practice and approaches to the education of children, from birth to the pre-secondary phase. The debate continues around certain issues, not least the teaching of English.

One example of ill-informed and ultimately misleading argument, waged by those who cite the comprehensive and universal access to information through the extraordinary advances in digital technology, is that technology makes redundant the need for a knowledge-centred pedagogy and instead favours skills-based teaching and learning. We shall return to this issue later, since it has relevance, not only for our account of the work of the schools in this book, but more importantly for the meaning and purpose of education.

It is generally accepted that learning is central to our existence, to human development and to our capacity for thinking, decision-making and problem-solving. This helps us to manage; to ensure good, fulfilling and rewarding lives, often in the face of formidable difficulties and challenging situations; to maintain positive and life-enhancing relationships; to develop the intellectual capability and moral and spiritual sensibility that equips us to be part of, and contribute to, civilised communities; and to cherish what is best and most worthwhile in life.

There is also general agreement that, in the primary years, children typically learn in the following ways:

- They learn through being told things, having information and knowledge passed to them, having phenomena and skills demonstrated to them – hence the importance of the ‘traditional’ element of teaching.

- They learn through language, their main instrument of enquiry. The more competently they can use speech, the more capable they will be as readers and writers, and the more effective and autonomous they will be as learners.
- They learn through play and varied experience, often mediated by informed adults and peers.
- They learn from negative knowledge – that is from trial and error; from determining why certain answers and solutions may be incorrect or flawed; why ideas, models and inventions might be improved upon, modified, refined or rejected altogether in favour of alternatives; and why it may be necessary to go back to the drawing board. Almost all human learning grows from, and harks back, to some extent, to ideas, hypotheses, notions, theories and beliefs that initially may have been wide of the mark. Such a process reflects the fate of all scientists, inventors, designers and artists.
- They learn through a balance of what we will call performance and problem-solving: on the one hand, through the acquisition, mastery and development of a variety of vital skills; and on the other, through the resolution of meaningful, relevant and demanding problems to which these skills are applied.
- They learn through regular experience of engagement with well-matched and meaningful learning tasks which are pitched, in cognitive terms, within reaching distance and the much quoted ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 1986).
- They learn when they are inspired to pursue, individually and collectively, further lines of study and are equipped with the skills and resources to do so.
- They learn when teachers and informed adults are available to support them through this process of venturing out into deeper water.
- Crucially, children learn through talk.

Recent research has provided fresh evidence of the importance of talk, especially high quality dialogue, in children’s development and learning (Alexander, 2017a). The Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2009), for example, identified dialogue as being central to the aims of primary education.

Over the last decade, a growing number of primary schools have been implementing Robin Alexander’s framework for dialogic teaching, which advocates a more extensive range of both teacher and pupil talk repertoires than those conventionally found in our classrooms, together with patterns of talk and classroom organisation that help teachers to more precisely diagnose pupils’ needs, advance their learning and assess their progress.

Dialogue is about much more than oral exchanges in the classroom, however; it speaks to a particular stance on knowledge, learning and the curriculum. Alexander (2017b: 62) emphasises that dialogic teaching ‘is as distinct from the question-answer and listen-tell routines of traditional teaching as it is from the casual conversation of informal discussion’. It requires:

- *interactions which encourage students to think, and to think in different ways;*
- *questions which invite much more than simple recall;*
- *answers which are justified, followed up and built upon rather than merely received;*
- *feedback which informs and leads thinking forward as well as encourages;*
- *contributions which are extended rather than fragmented;*
- *exchanges which chain together into coherent and deepening lines of enquiry;*
- *discussion and argumentation which probe and challenge, rather than unquestioningly accept;*
- *professional engagement with subject matter which liberates classroom discourse from the safe and conventional;*
- *classroom organisation, climate and relationships which are so disposed as to make all this possible. (Alexander, 2017a: 10)*

While broad agreement exists over such factors that contribute vitally to the learning process, a significant division endures over the most effective approach to the implementation of the learning process and how it can be most appropriately classified, managed and delivered.

For decades throughout the 20th century, theory relating to the education of young children was greatly influenced by so-called ‘child-centred’ approaches. The philosophy that underpinned these ideas had its genesis as far back as the 18th century in the work and beliefs of the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau; the educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and his great disciple, the German educationalist Friedrich Froebel, and the American educationalist John Dewey, whose views and theories substantially built on their work; Maria Montessori and Reggio Emilia’s Loris Malaguzzi in Italy; and sisters Rachel and Margaret McMillan, and Susan Isaacs in the UK.

Much of the work of these educational pioneers was inspired by a belief that the child is a powerful, active participant in their own learning and cognitive development. In later years, it became fashionable to describe the child as the agent at the heart of their own learning. This was motivated by powerful evidence that children are inextricably and decisively involved in the learning process from birth, driven by an innate and insatiable curiosity, by their capacity to respond consciously, to think and deduce, and to come to conclusions, however tentative, based on observation and sensory engagement.

They were seen to engage in a constant process of making sense of their environment, and the questions and problems it posed. From the outset, this experience of their immediate world seemed to lead to conclusions and decisions that formed a basis for reflection, for further exploration and investigation, of constant effort to enlarge on and refine what they had already consciously absorbed.

Some observers likened the process to what is loosely referred to as a scientific mode of thinking: observation and involvement in aspects of experience, investigation and analysis of what is taking place, leading to the formulation of ideas and concepts, the sharing of findings and conclusions with others, the testing of outcomes and, eventually the re-examination and review of new evidence, leading to fresh attempts to refine the concepts that have been formed and to test further, and extend, the knowledge that has been acquired.

In practice, head teachers and staff in nursery and early years settings (and in some cases, in the first stages of primary education), inspired by the child-centred ideal, provided opportunities for children to engage in intensive exploratory investigation and experimentation with a range of selected and random materials within school and in the natural world. It was practice that, in time, came to be recognised and encouraged by school inspectors, writers and researchers. The movement, or at least some aspects of it, gradually took hold in increasing numbers of primary schools, and continued to develop in the post-war era and from the 1960s onwards, coinciding with the abolition of secondary selection in many areas.

As a concept of, and an approach to, the education of young children, it received what might be called its imprimatur in the great Plowden Report, *Children and their Primary Schools*. The report declared: 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child. No advances in policy, no acquisitions of new equipment have their desired effect ... unless they are fundamentally acceptable to him' (1967: 7).

Underpinning much of the thinking and practice of child-centred educationalists at this time, and thereafter, was the work of the Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget.

His hugely influential and complex theory about the acquisition, construction and use of knowledge, as it applied to children in the first and early years of their lives and across the primary age range, is likely to have inclined some teachers to steer clear of what they perceived to be the danger of prematurely engaging them in abstract areas of learning and, by inference, to regard specialist teaching as dispensable before the secondary stage.

What followed in the couple of decades after Plowden came to be perceived as a golden age of child-centred education. There was certainly some outstanding educational practice inspired by its theories and principles. At its most assured, children were placed at the centre of learning, which was often initiated and instigated by the learners' own interests, pursuits and explorations, in environments and contexts structured and organised by teachers.

The following, witnessed by the authors, might be described as a classic example of such creative practice:

Some years ago, Year 6 pupils at Mandeville Primary School in Hackney were studying aspects of flight. The teacher had selected the theme largely for the opportunity it afforded for work in mathematics, science and technology. The temptation offered by such a subject to draw everything possible into the study – art and geography, history and drama, and even, perhaps, music and dance – was strictly resisted. Aims and objectives were rigorously devised and ordered to promote significant learning, the acquisition of important knowledge, an understanding of concepts and ideas and the mastery of critical skills. The project was rounded off with a visit to the Science Museum. It was what happened there that caused the project, at the very end, to go beyond its meticulous and ordered boundaries into a new and unpredicted realm of experience, learning and rare achievement.

In a remote corner of that museum, glittering with one marvel and revelation after another, the children came across a faded photograph of an aviator from a long-ago age, standing by a triplane, constructed it seemed from little more than wood, piano wire, string and sturdy brown paper. The aviator was A. V. Roe, with the flimsy aircraft he had designed and built alone, and in which, in 1908, he had made the first powered flight in Britain. The feat, an epic of lonely perseverance, imagination, courage and creative genius, was totally lost to memory a few weeks later when Louis Bleriot, encouraged and massively supported by the French government and accompanied by units of the French navy across the English Channel, made the first flight from France to Britain.

In a museum resplendent with exhibitions devoted to the achievements and glories of the great, Roe's modest little exhibit might well have gone unnoticed by pupils jaded at the end of an eventful day. But it was his photograph and the related information that transfixed them: for Roe had built the triplane underneath the railway arches on Walthamstow Marsh and made that historic flight in the clouds above the marshland, all within hailing distance of the children's school.

They were dazzled by the discovery, struggling perhaps to come to terms with the stark contrast between the bleak, desolate landscape of their environment and the marvellous transforming thing that had happened there, on a sunlit day, long ago.

When, next morning, ablaze with expectation, they ventured down to the arches, they found them deserted and overgrown. No single trace of that creation and flight remained. But their wonder and a kind of vicarious pride remained undiminished. It was as if some suggestion of the terror, the exhilaration and the glory of that venture into the unknown lingered still in the marsh air and touched their spirit.

It was they, not their teacher, who claimed there should be something at the site to commemorate what had happened there. It was he, the teacher, who led them gently from dreams of statues and pillars to think about the possibilities of a prestigious Greater London blue plaque.

And so began what seemed, at times, a hopeless quest – the putting together by the children of written appeals and submissions, of daunting oral presentations to authorities, politicians, historians and all the great and the good to secure a blue plaque for that derelict marshland arch. They persevered in the face of initial incomprehension, incredulity and even occasionally outright scepticism, with something of the irresistible determination that must have sustained the aviator/inventor himself.

Eventually, on a morning sunlit like the day of that first flight, and bearing their scrupulously constructed scale model of the triplane, the class marched across the marsh to the arches. There, watched by the surviving sons of Mr Roe and their families, who had travelled far for the occasion, the children of Mr Newland's class solemnly drew aside the velvet curtains and unveiled, on the old arch, a blue plaque in commemoration of the forgotten pioneer.

These Year 6 pupils were children to whom advantage, privilege and the things that come to the more fortunate in life were unknown and largely unattainable. But they were blessed to have encountered in their life a gifted teacher who took them into the realms of rich experience and to achievement that most would have thought beyond them. In the process, some, if not all of them, learned that they had within them the creative power and capacity to change their environment and to challenge and perhaps transform their circumstances.

What characterised this and similar inspirational work that we saw, whether it was the striking and spectacular or the low profile and unremarked, are certain prerequisites:

- Clear intentions about desired learning outcomes defined in specific aims and objectives.
- A transforming environment.
- A powerful narrative.
- Resources that inspire and support experimentation and invention.
- Encouragement of the scientific mode of enquiry.
- Access to high quality information.
- The involvement of teachers, informed adults and other specialists who intervene at crucial moments, so that 'what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow' (Vygotsky, 1987 [1934]: 211).

At the same time, however, we saw other initiatives that were flawed in serious respects in terms of educational worth or value. Such shortcomings included:

- A marked limitation in the depth of learning achieved, due largely to the lack of teacher expertise in relation to important aspects of the study.
- Less than rigorous planning, leading to a lack of coherence in learning.
- A failure to fully or profitably engage some pupils to a degree that guaranteed deep learning.
- A temptation to include a range of subjects without fully identifying their relevance, or the value of the knowledge and learning they might yield.

The following episode, witnessed by the authors in the years immediately following Plowden, might be described as symptomatic of a lost learning opportunity for pupils, arising from teaching approaches limited by a lack of subject awareness and expertise.

Children in the infant department of an urban primary school had made a visit to a working windmill some miles away, and on their return, in classic learning fashion, had constructed a model of the windmill from a range of materials provided by their teachers. They talked, informedly and enthusiastically, to visitors about the construction, explaining that a windmill was a construction with sails driven by the wind. The sails, they explained, turned a great pole in the middle of the mill that, in turn, revolved a massive pair of stones at the bottom. The children insisted that the great revolving stones made bread, revealing in the process a hiatus in their conceptual understanding of the milling process.

A member of the class, a boy of 7, intervened to inform the listeners that, during the Second World War, the Dutch resistance regularly arranged the sails in ways that secretly communicated to the community information and advice. In the process, he was unconsciously signalling that he was one of those children with needs and capacities for whom teachers must plan and provide.

The positive outcome, and a reminder of the value of the school visit, was the children's achievements: having seen the phenomenon of a working windmill for the first time, they reconstructed it later in vivid style and commendable accuracy, and discussed some of its more obvious technical aspects with fluency.

A top junior class in the same school visited the windmill immediately afterwards and they too reconstructed it in model form. It was a superior creation in several respects – more correctly proportioned, the sails more secure and revolving more smoothly. What was missing, however, were any technical elements or working parts, any awareness or informed account of the workings of such a building, or any capability on their part to discuss the historic, economic or geographic reasons for the dominance of windmills in parts of the landscape of Britain, and why they had, in time, become largely obsolete.

There was little evidence in the response and understanding of pupils four years older of significant continuity and progression in their learning. For them, the educational visit and the activity that resulted from it might be said to be of severely limited value. And it was due, at least to some extent, to the fact that their teachers did not themselves possess the specialist knowledge and skills or the detailed curriculum maps that would have enabled them to challenge and enrich the pupils' understanding and take their knowledge further.

A further consequence of the absence of detailed curriculum definition and substance was practice in many primary schools, especially at the upper junior stage, which was concentrated on the 'creative' domain, with a particular emphasis on visual art. In most

cases, such work, guided by teachers skilled and at ease in the subject, resulted in high quality outcomes and achievement. But the focus often tended to be extravagant in terms of the time committed, both by teachers and pupils, to the partial exclusion or diminution of other subjects, especially those of a more esoteric nature.

A typical example of this lack of balance in the curriculum was evident in a school that was nationally renowned for children's work in fine art, especially observational drawing and painting of outstanding quality. This village school was located not far from a major port, and long-distance lorries had found a shortcut through it to their destinations. A great mass of heavy traffic thundered constantly through the narrow roads, night and day, shaking the very foundations of the village and creating a serious hazard for pedestrians.

The children's glorious artwork often featured their local landscape, but when asked by an observer about the ever-present influence of the lorries in their community, they revealed no concept of their business or purpose. They didn't know where they had come from and where they were eventually destined, why they were so numerous, what was so precious and urgent about the cargo they carried or what incited them to such dangerous haste.

There was no evidence that the children were being made aware in their daily education of the great forces that were impinging on their lives to such a significant extent. Regularly passing by the school was traffic that belonged to a wider world, evidence of vital activity and business, of other languages and cultures, of other life systems that were, in effect, changing the nature of the children's environment and their mode of living. Yet, to them, they meant little or nothing. What, in fact, characterised the school, justifiably renowned for the art education it provided, was a lack of breadth, balance and, crucially, relevance in their children's learning.

In response to examples of this kind, concern about the nature and quality of much 'informal' child-centred education grew. It was tellingly conveyed by the distinguished educationalist Sir Alec Clegg (1909–1986), the chief education officer of the West Riding of Yorkshire County Council, which was renowned for the quality of its child-centred education. In a critique of contemporary national primary practice, Clegg suggested in the often-quoted phrase that too many teachers had 'climbed on the bandwagon but cannot play the instruments' (quoted in Alexander et al., 1992: 10).

At that time, schools and teachers had a considerable degree of autonomy in relation to the education they provided, as well as its substance and quality. One could visit schools a mile apart and see a significant difference between them in terms of the curriculum on offer. In some schools, children's learning experience could be replicated in successive years with little substantial progression in what they encountered or learned.

Curriculum guidelines

Peter Mortimer (1988) points out that about 40% of the schools sampled in his survey at that time furnished their staff with ‘curriculum guidelines’. We are given no information other than this about the guidelines – nothing about which subjects or the extent and type of guidance they provided. The implication is that the other schools sampled offered no guidelines at all.

This is not to suggest that schools were negligent or took no account of continuity or progression. In most cases, teachers passed on the work the children had been doing to the colleagues responsible for the next stage of their education. There were general expectations of what the children should be achieving. Nevertheless, we suggest that for too many children education was a lottery; what they experienced in learning terms was heavily dependent on the school they attended.

It was not uncommon for teachers to unwittingly bias curriculum content according to personal preference and competence. The unbalanced project/topic – as distinct from the flight example described earlier – became symptomatic of the lack of curriculum coherence that characterised at least some primary practice in the decades succeeding the Plowden Report.

Some teachers took matters further and suggested that curriculum content was not of major significance; they perceived the learning process – in effect, teaching children to learn how to learn – as the truly critical issue. This state of affairs led to what was widely and derisively referred to as ‘the dead greenfinch’ curriculum, due to the probably apocryphal story of a teacher basing an exhaustive term-long project on a dead greenfinch discovered on his way to school. Though some schools provided inspired teaching and impressive attainment, especially in the visual arts, the doubts continued because there was no external national testing or assessment.

There was no requirement on schools to provide parents with evidence of their children’s attainment and progress in comparative terms. While most parents were informed about their children’s broad educational experience, it would not have been possible for them to know where they stood in terms of attainment in numeracy or literacy in a local or national context, simply because some schools might themselves not have known to any precise extent.

But an end was in sight. It was increasingly clear to a growing body of educationalists, among them HMI, that at least part of existing primary practice needed a radical review. There was a growing demand for:

Many schools believe that the value of their work is undermined by a test-driven agenda that limits the breadth of the education they provide – and who can blame them?

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A former primary school head teacher, **Bill Laar** has been a local authority inspector in Birmingham, Oxfordshire and London, where he was deputy director of education. He was patron of National Primary Heads (NPH) and is a well-known speaker. He has written for school leaders and teachers on inspection, learning, literacy and leadership.

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