



... children, their world, their education

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AIMS FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION: CHANGING GLOBAL CONTEXTS

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 1/4, *Aims for Primary Education: changing global contexts*, by Hugh Lauder, John Lowe and Rita Chawla-Duggan. The report reviews the growing international prominence of primary education following the 1990 Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), subsequent efforts to achieve universal primary education (UPE), and the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It considers key tenets in the new international vocabulary of education: globalisation, the knowledge based economy, lifelong learning and the benchmarking of standards, noting tensions between competition and equity and the growing divergence of public and private schooling. Finally, the survey provides brief case studies of recent systemic primary education reforms in India and China, the world's two largest countries by population.

The full report, including details of all sources consulted, is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk. The report is one of four research surveys which the Primary Review has commissioned on the theme of purposes and values in primary education and should be read in conjunction with reports 1/1 (*Aims as Policy in English Primary Education*), 1/2 (*Aims and Values in Primary Education: England and other countries*) and 1/3 (*Aims for Primary Education: the changing national context*).

Universalising primary education

Internationally, the 1990s was the decade of concern for 'basic' education, which by and large meant primary schooling. Education was defined as a fundamental human right, and 'Education for All' was formalised in the 1990 Jomtien Declaration, consolidated in the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action, and framed more widely by the UN's eight Millennium Development Goals, one of which is the achievement of universal primary education by 2015.

During the decade the development agenda shifted from widening educational access and extending provision to developing and securing quality. At the same time it was increasingly accepted that translating education into economic growth requires much more than primary education and that a critical mass of secondary schooling is essential not just to economic advancement but also to the universalisation of primary education itself.

Globalisation, the knowledge economy and lifelong learning

Developed nations typically operate within both a strong sense of globalisation as an imperative and a particular view of what globalisation entails: international competition and the use of education to enable one national economy to outsmart another. In fact, there is less consensus about the meaning and impact of globalisation than may be apparent from this policy convergence, and a growing awareness that the inequalities it fuels may be intra-national as well as international, not least in the UK where the wealth gap is especially wide.

Globalisation thus may lead to tensions and even contradictions in national education policy as 'social justice' competes with 'social cohesion for the sake of stability' and 'individualism, the market and meritocracy.' Neo-liberal policies sidestep the tension by the expedient of making social justice - in the sense of enhancing success and reducing social marginalisation - a matter for individual responsibility. One of the consequences of this view is the growth in high-cost private schooling, which further widens the gap between the successful and the marginalised.

Also problematic is the no less pervasive notion of the 'knowledge-based economy', the idea that the knowledge component of the global economy - ideas and, especially, skills rather than material objects - is the greatest source of added value and hence of individual and national prosperity. This too may lead to an overly instrumental view of education, elevating efficiency above equity and pursuing social cohesion without addressing the root causes of inequality.

Such tensions also attend lifelong learning, another key goal of a globally-oriented education. Here social democratic and neo-liberalist perspectives produce rather different notions of what lifelong learning is for and about. Though children in primary education are many years away from the labour market, this has a backwash effect as primary schools are encouraged to reconceptualise their task in terms of generic and transferable skills alongside the traditional 'core skills' of literacy and numeracy, while specific domains of knowledge, and even knowledge itself, diminish in importance. Also bearing on the primary phase is the other perceived precondition for economic and social empowerment, early childhood education.

Globalisation, standards and quality

Understandably, the goal of national global competitiveness has given considerable impetus to the drive to raise educational standards. But it has also led to standards being defined largely and relatively unquestioningly in terms of what is most marketable, even though what constitute standards and quality in education ought to be a matter for debate.

With the equating of educational quality with standards and standards with marketable skills has come a concern with school effectiveness, school accountability and the assessment of both through specifiable outcomes. The consequent narrowing of the entire discourse of education is recognised only in some quarters as a risk.

Globalisation and equity

The report considers two areas where the educational imperatives held to be associated with globalisation may compromise the goal of achieving greater equity. One, in those countries where English is not the national language - that is to say, the majority - is the teaching of English, which is increasingly seen as conferring skills crucial to accessing the top end of the labour market. The other is the rise of private schooling, which is seen as conferring a competitive advantage by providing teaching of a quality, or in subjects, which are not available in the public system. In many non-Anglophone countries the latter is the preferred and often only context for the former, and indeed there has been a significant international increase in the market for private, English-medium primary schools. Access to these is on the basis of income, and gaining access to them reduces demand on the mainstream schools to provide the desired teaching, thus widening the gap in provision for those on higher and lower incomes.

Case studies

Starting from very different points in terms of literacy levels, India and China provide instructive examples of systemic primary education reform in response to both national conditions and international trends. These are the world's two largest countries by population, and among the world's fastest-growing economies, so pace of change and the sheer scale of what their governments are attempting combine to magnify problems and successes alike.

Through its District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) India since 1994 has sought first to extend primary education to those groups and localities with greatest need and latterly to universalise education for all children in the 6-14 age range. It has done so on a platform which has combined the basic development prerequisites of access, enrolment and retention with quality and equity, especially in respect of the education of girls and children from cultural minorities, and a strong commitment to local engagement and devolved governance. Meanwhile, building on dramatic educational gains since 1979 in a very different cultural and political context, China has launched a drive to modernise the primary curriculum. In doing so it has borrowed freely from other countries while retaining the pronounced moral and collective orientation of earlier decades and indeed of traditional Chinese values.

Both case studies illuminate the possibilities and pitfalls of large-scale systemic reform, but, no less powerfully, both serve to foreground *equity* as a key and ever more pressing issue for education in a world in which globalisation is interpreted more in terms of competition than interdependence.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Lauder, H., Lowe, J. and Chawla-Duggan, R. (2008) *Aims for Primary Education: changing global contexts* (Primary Review Research Survey 1/4), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-15-5.

The report is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these deal with the opinion-gathering strands of the Review's evidence base. The remainder report on the thirty surveys of published research which the Review has commissioned from its 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education and to stimulate debate during the period leading up to the publication of the Review's final report in late 2008.

The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Review has ten themes and four strands of evidence (submissions, community and national soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data). The report summarised in this briefing relates to the **Research Survey** strand and the theme **Purposes and Values**.

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