



... children, their world, their education

PRIMARY REVIEW
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PRIMARY CURRICULUM FUTURES

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 3/3, *Primary Curriculum Futures*, by James Conroy, Moira Hulme and Ian Menter. The report was commissioned to draw from the research literature ideas which might stimulate thinking and discussion about the character of the primary curriculum of a less conventional kind than usual. The authors, being based in Scotland, are able to view the English system from the outside. **The full report, including details of sources consulted, is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.**

The survey charts some of the recent alternatives to the models of curriculum structure and organization that emerged in the wake of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Additionally, it looks at the efficacy of various curriculum alternatives including:

- schools that have established alternative curricula
- new approaches that are being promoted within maintained (and other) schools
- recent developments and findings in home schooling.

There are two significant trajectories evident within recent curriculum reform:

- a stronger focus on individual capacities and the development of core transferable skills (rather than subject content)
- a discernible 'affective turn' evidenced in renewed interest in the management of children's emotions.

These developments have been shaped by broader political, cultural and economic influences. The potential for reform of the primary curriculum cannot be separated from these complex contextual factors stemming from two key changes in the fabric of national life - the loss of national economic competitiveness and a perceived decline in social cohesion. Thus:

- *Politically*, migration has created new ways of looking at education which depend less than in previous ages on the transmission of a homogeneous culture, though this remains under review.
- *Culturally*, there is a perception that these shifts in population demography together with the growing influence of mass media have left youth bereft of the emotional resources to deal with an ever more complex culture.
- *Economically*, we have seen a radical move away from a dependence on the historic resources of industrialization and towards a knowledge-based economy.

These broad shifts suggest that education itself should become more fluid, with a greater emphasis on the dispositions of the learner than exclusively on what is to be known. The erosion of the traditional view of education as transmission has opened spaces for alternative deliberation over the curriculum. Yet, despite a changing landscape, it is not easy to shift existing paradigms and long established practices.

History suggests that changes which make their way into mainstream educational practices often have their origins outside standard, state-sponsored and state-controlled education. Despite the generally conservative nature of educational professionals there is a resurgence of interest in aspects of alternative approaches that acknowledge the limitations of national curricular prescription. This interest comes from a growing and substantial dissatisfaction with the extent and character of central government control as this has been extended and consolidated over the last 20 years. The interest is also driven, paradoxically, by the desire to raise standards through prioritising 'what works'. The loose coupling between emotion management and performance improvement has emerged from the intersection of child-centred education in the primary sector and outcomes-driven assessment in the post-primary phase.

Alternatives that are making their way into mainstream education, and which are discussed in this report include, among others:

- 'Brain Gym'
- Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment
- Philosophy with Children
- Philosophy for Children
- The Somerset Thinking Skills course.

There are clear links between these approaches and the recent attention to thinking skills promoted in the maintained sector by generic initiatives such as:

- Assessment for Learning
- Learning How to Learn
- Activating Children's Thinking Skills
- Cognitive Acceleration through Science (CASE), Cognitive Acceleration through Maths (CAME) and Cognitive Acceleration through Technology Education (CATE)
- Thinking through Geography.

All of these pay some attention to the emotional lives of children, and in June 2005 DfES responded by circulating the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning toolkit (SEAL), a curriculum resource to support the development of pupils' social and behavioural skills.

But the picture is complicated and there are significant questions raised about the efficacy and purposes of what has come to be regarded as 'therapeutic pedagogy'; that is, a pedagogy which aims to 'empower' less confident learners to overcome (self-imposed) barriers to the achievement of learning goals. Some commentators warn of the commodification of 'emotional intelligence' (EI) as a newly constructed 'competence' to be traded by trainers and teachers. Moreover, it is not always clear that the positive relationship that is often assumed between self-esteem and academic attainment is always or inevitably justified. Indeed, others suggest that therapeutic approaches to tackle the self esteem deficit are little more than 'snake oil remedies.'

Perhaps some of the alternatives that are available in non-standard state school contexts point the way forward as they appear to be less contrived and more natural than the state school norm. Educational alternatives have grown substantially in the last two decades as increasing numbers of parents have become dissatisfied with state sponsored schooling. In kind these include:

- 'free schools'
- the democratic schools movement
- small schools
- schools influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach to pre-school education
- Steiner-Waldorf schools
- home schooling movements.

Such educational alternatives range widely in their origins and motivations, from the pragmatic to the principled and from left to right of the political and educational centres. But these differences do not appear to make a substantial difference to performance as measured by the range of tests and examinations to which children in regular schools are subjected. What appears to characterise virtually

all alternatives is that children's academic success in them is markedly better than in mainstream schooling. When the data are examined, these better than average performances are not simply explained by economic advantage. Neither is a single formula available by way of pedagogical explanation as the philosophies and organizing principles can be very different. However, these alternatives do share some tendencies, including:

- significantly less time spent using televisions and computers;
- significantly more time spent on reading with and to children;
- greater emphasis on the life of the imagination;
- closer relationships between student and teacher.

At the same time, some of the evidence suggests that success in the future is likely to be more assured where there is:

- continuing emphasis on literacy and numeracy, though interpreted more broadly than at present;
- enhanced flexibility
- more emphasis on generic teacher dispositions and skills than particular teaching methods;
- genuine partnership between student and teacher;
- a more intimate institutional - as opposed to class - environment;

Conclusion

Now that the debate about the primary curriculum has re-opened and the extent and character of central control of curriculum and related matters is increasingly being questioned, the influence of educational alternatives and private initiatives may increase. However, as we move forward, we may need to pay much greater attention to emotions and dispositions in the educational process and to be wary of shibboleths about the educational place of technology.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Conroy, J., Hulme, M. and Menter I. (2008) *Primary Curriculum Futures* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/3), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-19-3.

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 **Curriculum and Assessment**.

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