

Cambridge Primary Review Trust –South Region - November 2014

Response to the invitation from Robin Alexander:

'Please tell us what the next government should do – or not do – in order to help schools provide the best possible primary education for all the nation's children.' (Robin Alexander)

Context

21 November 2014 was 'Takeover Day' and four young people from Year 6 at Balfour Primary school, Naia, Joe, Nancy and Nell, joined their headteacher, Marcelo Staricoff, educational researcher, Sara Bragg and Chair of the South Region, Hilary Ferries, to discuss their thoughts about primary education and to let policy makers know what they think. We had a wide ranging discussion and several themes emerged.

1. About the curriculum

The children all felt that learning to learn is really important and rather than being given the answers they would like to find out more things themselves. They felt that their interests should drive their learning – for example to find out how a dishwasher worked and link that to learning across the curriculum. The curriculum should reflect what children need to know about society: for example how government works – they could have their own bank and tuck shop and be involved in the running of the school.

They believe that it is important to do practical learning. They are keen to have more science in school – with more hands on activities and more investigations / experiments. They feel that it is important that learning has a purpose: for example cooking. Gardening should be compulsory to make sure everyone can get outside and not be stuck in a classroom all day and to learn about how to grow food and the science of plants. It would be good for all children to learn a musical instrument. Perhaps there should be a pet in the school so pupils could learn how to look after animals.

They also feel it is important to learn about other countries and cultures to explore similarities and differences. They could use Skype to 'visit' schools to make that real experience and for children to talk to each other and share what is important in their lives. It is also important for all children to learn another language such as Chinese.

2. About learning

Valuing the learner and learning skills is crucial. Marcelo believes that primary school is the place to develop the child as a lifelong learner. Each year it would be ideal if every school started each academic year with a 'learning to learn week' where the children are taught how to learn effectively and where they are given the thinking tools and strategies that will enable them to access the curriculum throughout the year. All pupils at Balfour this year created their personal model of learning and were introduced to the concept of JONK or the 'the joy of not knowing', where children are very happy to not know as they realise that learning only happens if you didn't already know it. The children talked about the importance of becoming independent learners, to realise that it is good to make mistakes and to find things difficult. They said that sometimes they go 'in the pit' and they have to learn how to climb out. This makes them better learners.

3. Concerns about Y6 curriculum and experience

Headteacher Marcelo believes that children should have learning without limits and all children should have a wide curriculum offered to them and to learn from each other. Rather than set different tasks for different groups, he prefers children to be able to have choice about which task to do because then they can give themselves challenge. This is in contrast to the experience of being in Y6 for some of the children. They felt

that testing plays too great a part in year 6 and it would be better if they had a wide curriculum for the whole of the year, rather than this stopping for some months. They said that they think that some people like exams and tests because they help them realise what they know and sometimes tests can help them know if you are getting better. However, sometimes their friends got upset when they didn't do very well and this does not make them feel like confident learners. They don't like ability groupings for the same reasons, As well as putting limits on their learning it makes them feel that they are not able to do things well. They didn't feel that all testing helps them learn – they wondered whether they needed so many tests – and what the purpose was.

4. About Homework

Some of the children feel that when they have been in school all week working hard, then it is wrong to have to do more learning. Sara talked about the research which shows that homework doesn't make a lot of difference to outcomes, and is more about parental expectations. However should homework be about how good parents are at doing things? Also, not all parents know about how children do maths now and it can confuse children. The children said that it should be optional and they shouldn't be given detention if don't hand it in on time. Marcelo said he preferred the home learning and headteacher challenge approach that he is introducing into the school.

5. Life in school

One pupil mentioned that it would be good to link families more in school. She said 'you say we are like a family and then I never see my family'. They also feel that there is not enough time to get to know people as the days are so busy. They like having a buddy from another year group and feel that more mixing up between infants and juniors for learning would be good.

Another one of the children said that he thinks we need better links with secondary schools. This would mean that the children can see what is coming and have an idea of the standards and what learning looks like there. He also felt that would give children in Y6 someone to look up to '

Because primary school is so important one child felt that she would like everyone to have a book when they go into reception and they can put in special things each year to make memories of school and see how their learning had developed.

They felt that they didn't need lots of school rules. Rather, they should have agreed values and then live through these.

Uniform was an interesting discussion. The children like uniform - they wondered whether maybe each year group could have a different colour jumper (but realised that would be expensive for parents). One member of the group talked about sustainability and the cost to the environment of having white shirts because they take more washing to keep clean

6. School development

Children believe that they should have a voice in school development and school improvement in their school and their headteacher is developing this. He sets a half termly 'headteacher challenge' and for this half term they have been asked to bring in an idea for the long / medium / short term development for the school. These will be used as the basis for the school development plan and the 'school getting better plan', which is the child written version of the school development plan. Mr Staricoff has committed to involving them in decision making and they say they value this.

7. And finally..

There is lots to learn from what other countries are doing: for example the Australian curriculum has thinking skills in it. This is not just left to schools, but a part of what everyone does. We should look at the research about education to inform decisions.

Raising the profile of the profession – is important. We are not always seen in the same light as other professions and this does not encourage people to want to become teachers.

Conclusion

It was really interesting and valuable to discuss the future of education with those who are experiencing it, leading schools and researching it. The children said they enjoyed the experience and that they were listened to. We hope that this informs the paper that Robin Alexander is going to write.

Dr Hilary Ferries

Chair of South Region