



... children, their world, their education

TESTING TIMES FOR PRIMARY ASSESSMENT

Robin Alexander

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(Published with the title 'Three reports should prompt debate on primary's future')

Today the Primary Review publishes three more interim reports in a series which will eventually number over thirty. By releasing this material as we go along we aim to inform professionals and the wider public about the condition of primary education and about options for the future in a fast-changing world; and to provoke discussion which will feed back into the Review as we synthesise our findings and prepare to publish our final report at the end of 2008.

Our first interim report (*TES*, 12 October) was an account of the 'community soundings' undertaken earlier this year at 87 regionally-based witness sessions with teachers, parents, children, governors and community representatives. Today's three reports are different. While the community soundings ranged far and wide over education, childhood and society, today's reports concentrate on one area: standards of pupil achievement in primary schools, the way achievement is assessed and the uses to which the resulting information is put. Whereas the community soundings comprised new data collected by the Primary Review team, today's reports re-assess material, from both official and independent sources, which is already in the public domain. Further, the reports come not from ourselves but from six acknowledged experts in the field of educational assessment: Wynne Harlen, Peter Tymms, Christine Merrell, Chris Whetton, Graham Ruddock and Liz Twist. These specially-commissioned studies are detailed and searching as well as authoritative: between them they cover some 240 published sources of evidence.

The messages from this exhaustive analysis are mixed. There is good news about improvements over time in primary pupils' attainment in literacy, numeracy and mathematics, for which both teachers and government must take credit. Less impressive is the apparently modest extent of that improvement. The evidence about test-induced stress (confirmed in our community soundings) is worrying. The stubborn persistence of a yawning gap between high and low-attaining pupils - bigger than in most comparable countries and surely beyond dispute - is downright disturbing.

Inevitably, the authors of these reports raise questions: about whether the billion-pound literacy, numeracy and primary strategies and the elaborate apparatus of Key Stage tests have given value for money; about the reliability of the test evidence on which claims about national standards and 'world class' performance are based; about the imbalance of summative and formative assessment - which itself may militate against further improvement - and about the extreme narrowness of the received definition of 'standards'.

Some of this will not make comfortable reading for government, national agencies and the national strategies, and the evidence-based conclusion that high-stakes testing does not of itself 'drive up standards' constitutes a pretty direct challenge to official thinking. Yet the tenor of the three studies is constructive, and each ends with useful recommendations about what needs to change in order that the identified problems

can be addressed. Of these perhaps the most important are a shift in emphasis towards assessment for learning, and the separation of the assessment of individual pupils from mechanisms for school accountability.

Where does the Primary Review stand in relation to these three illuminating and thought-provoking reports? We believe they deserve to be closely studied and carefully discussed. At the same time, the Review must reserve final judgement on their findings for they constitute only one part, albeit a powerful part, of the total body of evidence.

Yet the consensus which these reports reinforce is now so commanding that it is hard to resist the view that sooner rather than later the apparatus of national testing must change radically and that we should entertain very different views of both classroom assessment and what 'standards' at the primary stage should entail.

Meanwhile, we urge *TES* readers to ignore the sensationalising to which news about testing and standards invariably falls prey. If you want to know what these three reports really say, download them from our website. And having done so, tell us what you think.

Professor Robin Alexander directs the Primary Review, which is supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and is based at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.
www.primaryreview.org.uk.

Read Robin Alexander's earlier TES article about the Primary Review, published on the day the Review was launched, 13 October 2006.