

TOWARDS A NEW PRIMARY CURRICULUM

A report from the Cambridge Primary Review

The report to which this briefing refers (revised February 2011)

This briefing summarises key points from the chapters on the primary curriculum in *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. The chapters started life as a two-volume interim report on the curriculum which was published in February 2009 and was then revised, along with work on contingent matters like aims, pedagogy, assessment and school staffing, for incorporation into the Review's final report, published in October 2009. England's primary curriculum was also the subject of a government review, led by Sir Jim Rose, whose report was accepted by the Labour government but rejected by its coalition successors in May 2010. Following the election, the government announced that schools would be granted greater freedom in curriculum matters than under Labour, and that those schools granted academy status would be able to opt out of the National Curriculum entirely. The promise of reduced prescription was sustained in the government's launch of its national curriculum review in January 2011. These developments give schools the opportunity to consider alternative approaches such as that proposed by the Cambridge Primary Review.

Towards a New Primary Curriculum is in three parts. Part 1 (final report, chapter 12) works from extensive evidence and analysis to identify twelve core aims for primary education which, it argues, should drive curriculum, pedagogy, and the wider life of the school. Part 2 (final report, chapter 13) identifies the questions about present and future practice which need to be addressed, describes current arrangements for the primary curriculum and sets them in historical and international context. It then reveals what the Review's evidence says about existing curriculum strengths and weaknesses, and about what needs to change. Part 2 (final report, chapter 14) summarises the main points from this evidence, highlights other matters in need of resolution, and sets out a framework for reform.

The evidence base of the Cambridge Review is extensive: 1052 formal written submissions, many of them from major national organisations; thousands of emails; reports on 250 local, regional and national focus group sessions and other meetings; a reanalysis of official data; 28 surveys of published research commissioned from 66 leading academics; in 20 universities; and over 4000 published sources. In much of this evidence the curriculum has a high profile.

Current arrangements: strengths and weaknesses

Although the Review's evidence is diverse, it is positive on the following:

- There is widespread acceptance of the need for a national curriculum, and the promise of entitlement which it embodies.
- There have been significant gains from the national curriculum since its introduction in 1989, notably in science, citizenship and the handling of values and children's personal development.
- The national primary, literacy and numeracy strategies (especially the latter) have many supporters, and younger teachers in particular welcome the structure and guidance which they provide.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) areas of learning and development provide an appropriate platform for primary education.

However:

- The beginning and end of primary education - Reception and Year 6 - are particular pressure points. In Reception, the developmentally-focused EYFS collides with the national curriculum; in Year 6, breadth competes with the much narrower scope of what is to be tested.
- As children progress through the primary phase, their statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced primary education is increasingly but needlessly compromised by the 'standards' agenda.
- The most conspicuous casualties are the arts, the humanities and those kinds of learning in all subjects which require time for talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas; memorisation and recall have come to be valued over understanding and enquiry, and transmission of information over the pursuit of knowledge in its fuller sense.
- Fuelling these problems has been a policy-led belief that curriculum breadth is incompatible with the pursuit of standards in 'the basics', and that if anything gives way it must be breadth. Evidence going back many decades, including reports from HMI and Ofsted, consistently shows this belief to be unfounded. Standards and breadth are interdependent, and high-performing schools achieve both.
- This is one of several modern manifestations of the historic divide between 'the basics' (protected) and the rest of the curriculum (viewed as dispensable). Now recognised as a threat to standards as well as entitlement, this split is exacerbated by the relative neglect of the non-core curriculum in initial teacher training, school inspection and CPD. This produces a primary curriculum which is often two-tier in terms of quality as well as time.
- Separate development and management of the national strategies (by DCSF/DfE) and the national curriculum (by QCA/QCDA) seriously dislocated the teaching of English and mathematics. English is in particular and urgent need of re-conceptualisation.
- Micro-management by government, the national agencies and national strategies is widely perceived to have been excessive and to have contributed to some of the problems above.
- Curriculum debate, and thus curriculum practice, are weakened by a muddled and reductive discourse about subjects, knowledge and skills. Discussion of the place of subjects is needlessly polarised; knowledge is grossly parodied as grubbing for obsolete facts; and the undeniably important notion of skill is inflated to cover aspects of learning for which it is not appropriate. There is an urgent need for key curriculum terms to be clarified and for the level of curriculum discussion and conceptualisation to be raised. Re-naming components of the curriculum 'skills', 'themes' or 'areas of learning' does not of itself address the fundamental question of what primary education is about; nor does it necessarily make the curriculum more manageable in practice.
- A curriculum should reflect and enact educational aims and values, but during the past two decades national aims and curriculum have been separately determined, making the aims cosmetic and the true purposes of primary education opaque. In a complex and changing world there is an urgent need for proper debate about what primary education is for. This debate was pre-empted when the national curriculum was introduced in 1988-9, and again when it was reviewed in 1997-8. It happened yet again in 2008-9 when the Rose Review took an existing package of secondary aims from QCDA and added them to a predetermined primary curriculum framework, without asking the essential prior questions about values and purposes.

Towards a new primary curriculum

The curriculum framework proposed by the Cambridge Primary Review:

- seeks to resolve the problems summarised above;
- starts from, and is driven by, a clear statement of the aims of primary education grounded in analysis of children's present and future needs and the condition of the society and world in which children are growing up;
- has regard to principles of procedure which highlight entitlement, quality, equity, breadth, balance, local engagement, and guidance rather than prescription;
- rejects ambivalence and fudge about the place of knowledge in primary education and makes it central to the proposed framework;
- respects and builds on the EYFS curriculum (structural proposals on the EYFS/primary relationship and the reconfiguring of the primary phase are also in the Review's final report);
- is conceived as a matrix of 12 educational aims and 8 domains of knowledge, skill, enquiry and disposition, with the aims locked firmly into the framework from the outset;
- dispenses with the notion of the curriculum core as a small number of subjects and places all eight domains within the curriculum on the principle that although teaching time will continue to be

differentially allocated, all the domains are essential to young children's education and all must be taught to the highest standards;

- at the same time insists on the centrality of language, oracy and literacy, both in their own right and as enabling learning across a curriculum in which breadth and standards go hand in hand;
- reconceptualises key curriculum areas, notably language/oracy/literacy, citizenship, faith and belief, ICT and personal/wellbeing education;
- provides for a strong local component, differentiates the *national* and *community* curriculum, and divides time between them on the notional basis of 70/30 per cent of the yearly teaching total;
- offers schools much greater flexibility than at present, subject to the need to safeguard children's entitlement to a curriculum which is broad, balanced and coherent and which secures continuity and progression within and between school years and educational phases.

The framework: aims (elaborated in the final report, pp 197-200)

The 12 aims for primary education are in three groups.

- *The needs and capacities of the individual* ♦ **wellbeing** ♦ **engagement** ♦ **empowerment** ♦ **autonomy**
- *The individual in relation to others and the wider world* ♦ **encouraging respect and reciprocity** ♦ **promoting interdependence and sustainability** ♦ **empowering local, national and global citizenship** ♦ **celebrating culture and community**
- *Learning, knowing and doing* ♦ **knowing, understanding, exploring and making sense** ♦ **fostering skill** ♦ **exciting the imagination** ♦ **enacting dialogue**

The framework: domains (elaborated and explained in the final report, pp 265-272)

The term 'domains' has been chosen in preference to existing alternatives (e.g. subjects, areas of learning, themes) so as to allow them to be considered without preconception. A domain has coherence, integrity and an essential core of knowledge, skill and/or enquiry; capacity to contribute to the achievement of one or more of the 12 proposed aims for primary education; potential to build on the EYFS and bridge to the secondary curriculum while respecting the distinctiveness of the primary phase of children's education. A domain is not merely a named slot in the school's weekly timetable: how the domains are translated and organised in practice is for schools to decide. Nor is it an invitation to the kind of topic work in which thematic serendipity counts for more than advancing children's knowledge, understanding and skill.

Eight domains are identified from the Review's evidence and consultation as being essential to the pursuit of the proposed aims for the primary phase. The domains – here listed alphabetically to preclude assumptions about hierarchy – are:

♦ **arts and creativity** ♦ **citizenship and ethics** ♦ **faith and belief** ♦ **language, oracy and literacy** ♦ **mathematics** ♦ **physical and emotional health** ♦ **place and time** ♦ **science and technology**

The current core of three protected subjects (in which the non-core subjects have often lost out and vital opportunities for extending and applying 'the basics' have been restricted) is replaced by an entitlement curriculum in which *all* eight domains are essential and protected, even though time allocations for each will of course vary. At the heart of the new curriculum is the revised and much strengthened domain of language, oracy and literacy, which also includes ICT and a foreign language. Oracy is considerably more rigorous than what is currently defined as 'speaking and listening' and enhances both literacy and the curriculum as a whole. Several other domains entail no less radical change, for this is no mere exercise in mere curriculum re-arrangement. Detailed domain descriptions, for which there is insufficient space here, are provided in the report.

Implementation and conditions for success (final report, pp 275-277)

For the purposes of planning, implementation and professional support the new curriculum has three segments: ♦ a nationally-determined description and rationale for the curriculum as a whole and for each domain (*statutory*) ♦ nationally-proposed programmes of study for the national component of each

domain (*non-statutory*); ♦ locally-proposed programmes of study for the community component of each domain (where applicable) which also identify local needs and opportunities across the curriculum as a whole (*non-statutory*). The shift, then, is towards local discretion and school flexibility within an agreed national framework.

Nationally, the curriculum framework would be planned by independent expert panels, supported and resourced by the appropriate national body; *locally*, the task would be undertaken by community curriculum partnerships (CCPs) convened and serviced (though not controlled) by local authorities or by groups of schools. *School-level* implementation would be flexible, but schools would be required to teach all eight domains to a consistently high standard regardless of the amount of time each is allocated. The national panels would consider how each domain is most appropriately elaborated by reference to the twelve aim and eight domain descriptions. The CCPs would identify local needs and opportunities within and across the domains. Schools would determine how, thus elaborated, the domains are reconstructed as a viable school curriculum and are named, timetabled and taught, with the aims providing a constant point of reference throughout. Success is conditional on:

Reforming institutions, procedures and requirements ♦ re-assessing the statutory and advisory functions, in respect of the curriculum, of government, national bodies, local authorities and schools ♦ re-invigorating local authorities and communities as agents of curriculum thinking, development and support ♦ winding up the primary national strategy, re-integrating literacy with English and extending the concern with standards to cover the whole curriculum rather than just ‘the basics’ ♦ making what is non-statutory genuinely so ♦ reforming national assessment, especially at age 11, so that it does its job without compromising children’s legal entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Building professional capacity ♦ re-thinking primary ITT and CPD to ensure that all eight domains are properly attended to and that curriculum matters are treated more rigorously than hitherto ♦ re-thinking teaching roles and staff deployment in primary schools, in order that every school has the necessary expertise to advance the 12 aims and teach all 8 domains well ♦ encouraging local collaboration between professionals in primary, early years and secondary settings in order to ensure smooth transition from foundation to primary and from primary to secondary, and in order to share curriculum expertise and develop the community curriculum ♦ strengthening local capacity so that LAs or school clusters can take the envisaged lead role in co-ordinating the development of the community curriculum ♦ making the pursuit and proper use of evidence central to each of the above.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review, 608 pp, Routledge, October 2009. ISBN 978-0-415-54871-7 (pb), 978-0-415-54870-0 (hb). Editor: Robin Alexander. Authorial team: Robin Alexander, Michael Armstrong, Julia Flutter, Linda Hargreaves, Wynne Harlen, David Harrison, Elizabeth-Hartley-Brewer, Ruth Kershner, John MacBeath, Berry Mayall, Stephanie Northen, Gillian Pugh, Colin Richards and David Utting. Order a copy at <http://www.routledge.com/9780415548717>.

The Cambridge 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. From September 2010 it entered a new phase with the establishment of a national network of teachers and other professionals committed to exploring and building on the Review’s ideas and proposals. The network has a national leader, nine regional centres and various national liaison groups.

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Note: the views expressed in Cambridge Primary Review reports do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge.