



... children, their world, their education

NEWS RELEASE

Embargo: 00.01 HOURS, FRIDAY 20 FEBRUARY 2009

THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM: AN ALTERNATIVE VISION

Today, following last year's 29 interim reports and in advance of its final report, the Cambridge Primary Review publishes its findings and proposals on the primary curriculum.

Drawing on extensive evidence gathered since the Review's launch in 2006, and arguing from a position of political and financial independence, *Towards a New Primary Curriculum*:

- contributes to discussion of the interim report from the government's Rose Review, yet transcends the narrower debate prompted by Rose and offers a vision for the longer term;
- identifies strengths and weaknesses in existing curriculum arrangements, including problems which lie outside the Rose remit and have escaped earlier reviews as well;
- does not merely tidy up existing arrangements but starts where a curriculum review should start: by asking what primary education is for and by what values it should be guided, drawing on evidence about childhood and the condition of the society and world in which children are growing up;
- builds on and respects the integrity of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS);
- reinstates, after years of attrition, children's entitlement to a broad and balanced primary curriculum, disposing of the myth that breadth and standards are incompatible;
- proposes a new framework of 12 core aims and 8 domains of knowledge, skill and enquiry, all of which are essential and must therefore all be taught to the highest possible standard;
- places knowledge and skill at the heart of the curriculum, together with a much enhanced view of language, oracy and literacy; re-integrates literacy and numeracy with English and mathematics; restores science, the arts and humanities to their rightful place in young children's education; strengthens citizenship, personal and moral education;
- presents a *national* curriculum but also includes a protected *community* component which enables schools, local authorities and the communities they serve to respond to local needs and opportunities;
- requires a re-assessment and re-balancing of the roles of DCSF, QCA, the national strategies, local authorities and schools;
- urges a more rigorous curriculum discourse which dispenses with the muddle, parody and polarisation which often characterises talk of subjects, knowledge, skills and themes;
- outlines an implementation strategy which involves national panels working in parallel with community curriculum partnerships;
- has implications for the training and deployment of primary teachers, so that 'entitlement' can mean quality and standards across the whole curriculum rather than merely the number of subjects taught.

Current arrangements: successes. The report finds: support for the principle of a national curriculum and recognition of its achievements, especially in science (initially), citizenship and children's personal education; support for the EYFS as the platform on which primary schooling can build; recognition of gains from the government's national strategies, especially in numeracy (though less so in literacy); support for *Every Child Matters* and the Children's Plan as essential contexts for primary schooling.

Current arrangements: problems. The report finds: children's statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced primary curriculum compromised by the national tests and strategies; particular pressures at the start (reception) and end (year 6) of primary schooling; acute anxiety about the fate of the arts and humanities and, increasingly, science in primary schools; erosion of both entitlement overall and standards in 'the basics' by a policy-led belief that breadth and standards are incompatible, when the evidence consistently shows the opposite – that one requires the other and the best schools achieve both; a curriculum which is two-tier not just in its distribution of time but also, as a result of the relative neglect of the non-core curriculum in teacher training and inspection, in terms of quality; excessive micro-management by government and the national agencies; the dislocation of mathematics and, especially, English by the national strategies for numeracy and literacy; a muddled, reductive and damaging discourse about subjects,

knowledge, skills and themes; the detachment of curriculum from the aims which ought to inform it, so that aims become cosmetic and the true purposes of primary education remain confused.

Proposals

Starting from first principles, the Cambridge Review proposes twelve aims for 21st century primary education. Headed by wellbeing and empowerment, these balance children's needs now and in the future, encourage positive and responsible attitudes to other people, society and the wider world, and place knowledge, skill, imagination and productive interaction at the centre of classroom life. The twelve aims interlock with eight 'domains' of knowledge, skill, enquiry and disposition, at the heart of which is the revised and strengthened domain of language, oracy and literacy. The report stresses that while it is for schools to work out how to translate the framework into action, the domains should be seen neither as subjects to be timetabled as they stand nor as inviting low-grade topic work. Although time allocated to them will vary, all eight domains, not just some of them, are treated as essential, and a proper concept of entitlement demands that all must be taught to the highest standards. This contrasts with thinking about the current core/non-core division, which confines 'standards' to one part of the curriculum and displays little concern about the quality of the rest.

The proposed *national curriculum* has a protected local element, the *community curriculum*, which enables local authorities and schools to respond to distinctive local needs and opportunities, encourages innovation and flexibility, and addresses the belief of many Review witnesses in education's role in community vitality and regeneration. The domains, however, feature within both the national and the local component.

Achieving genuine reform

The big risks in educational reform are of superficial change masking underlying inertia, and regression to the status quo after initial progress. The report's proposals are not an exercise in mere curriculum re-branding. The identified problems are serious and the required changes are substantial. The report argues that success depends on (i) a review of the roles of the relevant national agencies (ii) capacity-building in schools and local authorities to achieve the necessary re-invigoration and re-skilling. It proposes specific changes in, for example, the role of the national strategies; and to achieve the goal of a genuine entitlement curriculum, in which every aspect is well taught, it calls for changes in teacher training and in the way primary schools are staffed. These larger matters will be dealt with in more detail in the Review's final report.

Cambridge and Rose

The Cambridge report identifies areas of convergence with the interim Rose report but also important differences which reflect the reviews' contrasting remits, scope, evidence and degrees of independence. The Cambridge review is rather less sanguine about the problems of the existing primary curriculum, and does not exempt current policies from comment. It asks whether the Rose review is more about curriculum re-arrangement than reform, with educational aims added after the event rather than argued from first principles. It expresses concern that QCA's detailed work on the programmes of study for Rose's six 'areas of learning' has pre-empted a consultation process which is officially still open and to which people are still contributing in good faith. Nevertheless, the Cambridge report expresses the hope that the two reviews can be seen as complementary.

The report

Towards a New Primary Curriculum: a report from the Cambridge Primary Review. Part 1: Past and Present, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, 47 pp, ISBN 978-1-906478-31-5.

Towards a New Primary Curriculum: a report from the Cambridge Primary Review. Part 2: The Future, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, 70 pp, ISBN 978-1-906478-32-2.

Towards a New Primary Curriculum: Cambridge Primary Review Briefing, 4 pp.

FOR THE 4-PAGE BRIEFING AND/OR COPIES OF THE FULL REPORTS: email richard@margrave.co.uk or cd372@cam.ac.uk (before 20 February 2009) or download at www.primaryreview.org.uk (from 9 am on 20 February).

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FURTHER NOTES FOR EDITORS

The Cambridge Primary Review

Based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and directed by Professor Robin Alexander, the Cambridge Primary Review was launched in October 2006 and will issue its final report later in 2009. It aims to gather evidence from a wide range of sources, sift facts from rhetoric, and stimulate debate about the future of this vital phase of education. The most comprehensive such enquiry since the Plowden Report of 1967, the Review is examining how well the current English system of primary education is doing, how it can be improved and how primary schools should respond to the national and global challenges which lie ahead. Along the way, the Review is assessing the impact of government primary education initiatives of the past 20 years.

Focus and evidence

The Review focuses on ten broad themes: (i) educational purposes and values, (ii) learning and teaching, (iii) curriculum and assessment, (iv) quality and standards, (v) diversity and inclusion, (vi) settings and professionals, (vii) parenting, caring and educating, (viii) children's lives beyond the school, (ix) school structures and phases, (x) educational funding and governance. The Review draws on four kinds of evidence: (a) written submissions; (b) regional and national soundings; (c) systematic searches of official national and international data; (d) surveys of relevant published research.

Direction and consultation

The Review's director, Professor Robin Alexander, is Fellow of Wolfson College at the University of Cambridge, Professor of Education Emeritus at the University of Warwick, and past member of CATE, the QCA and the 1991-2 'three wise men' government enquiry into primary education, of which Sir Jim Rose was also a member. The work of the Review's Cambridge-based central team is supported by 70 research consultants from universities across the UK and a 20-strong Advisory Committee.

The Review's launch in autumn 2006 followed nearly three years of planning and consultation involving the government, opposition parties, statutory national educational agencies, teaching unions, and representatives from local authorities, schools, educational research, parents' groups, business and religious communities. The consultations showed strong support for the Review and helped shape the way it is being undertaken. The Review is financially, politically and professionally independent, but it is committed to constructive engagement with government, opposition, national agencies and the teaching unions.

The interim reports

Between October 2007 and May 2008 the Cambridge Primary Review published 29 interim reports. These provoked considerable media interest and public controversy, especially in relation to the condition of childhood today, assessment and testing, the curriculum, and the impact of recent reforms. All these reports, together with short briefings and press releases, may be downloaded from the Primary Review website, www.primaryreview.org.uk.

FOR FURTHER DETAILS: www.primaryreview.org.uk

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