

REVIEW OF TEACHERS' STANDARDS

Note from Professor Robin Alexander, University of Cambridge Director of the Cambridge Primary Review

I am writing, as invited in your letter of 31 March 2011, to offer for the consideration of the DfE Review Group some comments on the Teachers' Standards. I write on behalf of the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) and in my capacity as its Director. The CPR, as I am sure you are aware, remains the most comprehensive and extensively documented enquiry into English primary education since the Plowden Report of 1967. It is also financially and politically independent. Launched in 2006 after nearly three years of planning and consultation, it published 31 interim reports between 2007 and 2009 and its final report and companion research volume in October 2009. It is now in a three-year phase of dissemination, policy engagement and network-building. Because of its phase-specific focus, the comments below relate specifically to the primary phase, though some of them have wider application.

The CPR itself received evidence on, and undertook enquiries into, professional standards for teachers. Because it had an exceptionally broad remit it was able to discuss not just the standards *per se* but also their broader contexts of policy, educational aims, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, initial teacher education, continuing professional development and school leadership. This wider context is extremely important: standards for teaching must relate to a coherent and properly-researched view of (i) the nature of a sound education (ii) the characteristics of effective teaching (iii) the process of professional development. **One of our chief reservations about the current standards is that they do not fulfil these elementary criteria, being too closely tied to particular policies and lacking in both vision and the necessary evidence about teaching and professional development.**

In view of the proper scope of the debate, as we have just defined it, your request that comments be confined to two sides of A4 presents a review like ours with an obvious difficulty. You have kindly offered the possibility of an informal face-to-face conversation, and we hope that during this we can fill out some of the detail. All we can do here is to summarise our main concerns, though we have also taken the liberty of attaching to our prescribed two sides of A4 chapter 21 of the CPR's final report and we ask you to refer to this also (DfE possesses several copies of the full report).¹ The bare essentials of the CPR's view on this matter are as follows.

1. Primary schools now have a wide range of differentiated roles - the CPR, drawing on TDA evidence, lists nine to do with teaching and at least seven others. **Professional standards for teaching must acknowledge and accommodate this diversity of roles**, or at least those in the first category. **In the primary phase the standards should also pay particular attention to the fact that the generalist class teacher default makes teachers' curriculum-related expertise a potential though not inevitable point of vulnerability.**
2. The current professional standards differentiate *professional attributes*, *professional knowledge and understanding* and *professional skills*. Despite this apparent balance of characteristics, they tend to conceive of teaching as more about skill than knowledge and not at all about vision or the exercise of critical faculties.
3. There are three reasons why our earlier criticism of this imbalance is even more pertinent now than in 2009. First, the current Secretary of State wishes to give culturally-shaped disciplinary knowledge and understanding a more prominent place in the school curriculum than hitherto; second, teachers' curriculum-related capacities now feature within the remits of both the National Curriculum Review and the internal DfE enquiry into primary schools' curriculum capacity launched in January 2011, so they are clearly understood to be an important issue by others than ourselves; third, the government has promised to reduce central prescription and direction on classroom matters and give teaching back to teachers. All of these changes, as it happens, are in line with CPR recommendations. **The last of them, it is essential to note, increases rather than diminishes teachers' responsibilities.**
4. The CPR goes even further. Drawing heavily on Ofsted evidence, it shows how we have in the primary phase what a former HMCI (and now Permanent Secretary at DfE) called a 'two tier curriculum' in which those subjects allocated less time also often lose out in terms of quality of teaching. One of the main reasons for this, in our judgement, is the fact that the non-core subjects tend to be neglected in initial teacher training, CPD, Ofsted inspection, school leadership and the various forms of curriculum resourcing and support to which schools have access. **We argue, and the point is surely incontrovertible as a basis for defining standards for teaching, that 'Children have a right to a curriculum which is consistently well taught**

regardless of the perceived significance of its various elements or the amount of time devoted to them.' (CPR final report, p 505).

5. It follows that three aspects of teaching need now to feature much more prominently within the revised standards framework:
 - what Lee Shulman calls '**pedagogical content knowledge**' (PCK), or the knowledge a teacher needs both of what is to be taught at an extended professional level and how it can best be translated into viable learning experiences in the classroom;
 - **knowledge and understanding of the evidential basis of effective teaching**, to replace compliance with others' definitions of 'best practice', the test of this being that a teacher, like a doctor, should be able to cite the evidence and other justifications for his or her professional decisions;
 - **the judgement, evaluative and self-evaluative capacities which a teacher needs if he/she is to become a genuinely autonomous professional**, voluntarily engaging with evidence and ideas rather than waiting to be told by others what to do.
6. Further, to be consistent with the government's stated intentions, the new version of the standards must be uncoupled from particular policies, which, as we all know, have a limited life span. **The standards must highlight the true fundamentals of teaching, and this means that they should be grounded in research rather than the policy of the moment.**
7. On the specific matter of research, **there is a serious mismatch between the standards as currently presented and what we know about the way teachers actually develop as they progress from the stage of novice or NQT to expert.** We particularly draw to your group's attention the American research summarised in the attached chapter from the CPR final report, and the fact that the five-stage developmental process posited by Berliner and the 13 prototypical measures of expert teaching listed by the United States National Board for Professional Standards have been validated against comprehensive measures of student learning outcomes. In the conclusions to the CPR final report we add (p 505):

Research shows expert teachers not only acting differently from novices but also thinking in fundamentally different ways. These advanced modes of professional thinking are also tacit and less readily codified and generalised. Just as many novices need the security of rules and a bounded repertoire (hence their greater support for the national strategies introduced in 2008-9), so experts need to be freed from rules and prescriptions and given the liberty to operate autonomously, creatively and instinctively. What emerges ... is the worrying possibility that the TDA standards for teachers aimed at raising standards of pupil learning may actually depress them: first, by so constraining experienced and talented teachers that they may not operate as effectively as they are able; second, by allowing the unique talent of some of our very best teachers to go unrecognised because its idiosyncrasy places it beyond the reach of the approved narrow account of professional excellence.

8. In addition to the need to enable the talent of our best teachers to flower for the benefit of other teachers as well as their students, we draw to your attention what we might call the 'bottom line' in research evidence about what differentiates expert teachers from the rest. Taking for granted their ability to manage time, space and behaviour, to develop sound relations with their students, to plan lessons and assess both student progress and their own performance (on all of which the more basic standard levels certainly need to concentrate), expert teachers in addition are notable for (i) their real **depth of engagement in, and infectious enthusiasm for, what they teach** (i.e. curriculum mastery which goes far beyond basic PCK for the lesson or topic in hand); (ii) **the quality and cognitive challenge of the interaction which they orchestrate** and through which learning is mediated, both between teacher and student and among students themselves; (iii) **their skill in assessing students on an ongoing basis and providing feedback** which probes students' thinking and takes their understanding forward – that is to say, assessment for learning properly conceived.
9. These brief notes do not make proposals about specific standards, still less about their wording. Rather, they seek to identify the generic problems of the current standards and to raise the sights of the entire standards-setting enterprise so that while providing the necessary security for beginning teachers it provides a goal towards which the development of professional competence and the celebration of true professional talent can be directed. Our notes also seek to remind your group of the need to make standard-setting a research-informed exercise and together with the attached extract they highlight some of the core features of teaching expertise that the research reveals. I hope that we will be able to discuss these matters face to face.

¹ Chapter 21 of the CPR final report is not attached to this online version of our submission. Those interested in the CPR's detailed evidence and proposals on primary teachers, their training and development, should read *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, pp 406-436 and 504-506.