

Monday February 23rd 2009

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Feb 20th 2009

From *The Economist* print edition**Academics and ministers differ on what is to be done**

LIKE buses, not just one but two reviews of primary education in Britain are arriving at the same time. Their titles may be similar but they could hardly differ more.

The Cambridge Primary Review was independently conceived and financed, has been years in the planning and execution, and draws on international evidence and scores of experts. Its final conclusions, due later this year, will synthesise 30 research surveys on all aspects of primary education. The Primary Curriculum Review, by contrast, was commissioned and paid for by the government and is the sole work of a serial government-report writer, Sir Jim Rose. He was asked to look at only the curriculum—not standards, testing or funding—and within that limited remit he was constrained by a tight brief and heavy hints as to the desired conclusions.

On February 20th the Cambridge-led team abandoned their publishing schedule and released the part of their final report that looks at the curriculum. It hopes, somewhat forlornly, to influence government policy. That seems unlikely. The official curriculum agency is already far advanced in creating teaching material along the lines Sir Jim recommends—even though only his interim report has appeared, and that is supposed to be open for consultation until February 28th.

The two reviews set out competing visions of how to improve primary education. For Sir Jim, the main problem is curriculum overload, generated by empire-building subject specialists and a repeated reluctance to remove old material when adding new. His solution is twofold: to reaffirm the primacy of a “core curriculum”, adding computer skills to the literacy and numeracy now granted this status, and to replace the 12 subjects now taught, plus the foreign language soon to be added, by six cross-cutting “areas of learning”.

The Cambridge team offers a different diagnosis of the problem, and therefore quite different medicine. The problem, they think, is not so much curricular overcrowding, but that a narrow diet of literacy and numeracy has pushed pretty much everything else to the sidelines. School inspections, teacher training, pupil assessment and political populism all reinforce the message that only these “basics” count. That means they are allocated most time and that little attention is paid to the quality of teaching in other subjects. Such dumbing-down is self-defeating, they say: studies show again and again that a broad, rich and balanced curriculum, far from distracting from the basics, is actually a prerequisite for high standards in them.

The independent team are particularly scathing about their rival's “areas of learning”, in which they detect a deplorable educational trendiness. “Children do not need to know lots of dates. They can look up information on Google and store it on their mobile phones,” said Sir Jim. Not so, say the Cambridge academics. They take his contention as their starting-point for a passionate defence of knowledge as more than facts and information, to be stored or downloaded, but not absorbed, questioned or created. Obvious enough, perhaps, but is anyone listening?

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The Cambridge Primary Review has released its report on the curriculum which is also the area on which the Primary Curriculum Review is focusing.

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