

Tomorrow's primaries: 2 reviews, 1 debate



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Robin Alexander has brought forward publication of his three-year independent inquiry to coincide with Sir Jim Rose's official curriculum proposals. Helen Ward examines the issues that divide and unite the two men

It calls for the abolition of the Primary National Strategy, empowering local authorities to set local curricula, an aggressive campaign to reinstate the arts and humanities in primary schools and, of course, a transformation of testing.

The Cambridge Primary Review, led by Professor Robin Alexander, has held back on how to replace key stage 2 tests. But it has held back on little else.

The review has brought forward the publication of its curriculum ideas by four months to coincide with a similar, but government-commissioned, review being carried out by Sir Jim Rose.

There are similarities: both think the curriculum should not be built around subjects or skills but based on wider groupings. Sir Jim wants six "areas of learning"; Professor Alexander has produced eight "domains". Both say local flexibility is important. Both think there should be more stability.

But the Cambridge report is not just a response to Sir Jim Rose's consultation. Not only did it precede the Rose review and help shape it, it is a passionate, intellectual argument for far more radical change.

Kate Froom, head of Eleanor Palmer Primary, Kentish Town, London, said: "I think we need to grab this as a profession and not let it go, really demand that we have this debate. It is very hard not to juxtapose the Cambridge review with Rose, which, in my view, goes a long way to give teachers their professional freedom.

"I'm terrifically supportive of this and I hope Sir Jim will use it, welcome it and include it. They are two great men, people who have given so much over the years."

The Cambridge report identifies four main challenges to the curriculum: it is dominated by the core subjects, driven by the key stage 2 tests, it is overloaded and there is excessive prescription.

The report says that the two-tier curriculum of English and maths versus everything else has been apparent for at least 100 years. Professor Alexander argues that now it is time that ministers took notice of research showing that standards and a broad curriculum are linked. "The evidence may be politically counter-intuitive but it is also well-established, consistent and unequivocal," he said.

The existing curriculum is not inherently unmanageable, he says; it is the emphasis on high-stakes testing that makes heads feel the need to devote more than half the week to literacy and numeracy.

But it is not only the Government that must act. While there is a clear case for less central control, Professor Alexander warns that curriculum "problems... may have their roots in professional understanding, expertise and resourcefulness, not to mention school leadership."

But, he argues, before any sensible solutions can be proposed to these, a crucial question must be asked. What is it all for?

He proposes 12 aims for primary education (see panel, right). The first group are personal qualities and capabilities, the next extend these into pupils interaction with others and finally four learning aims.

He then proposes that what is taught is organised into eight "domains", such as arts and creativity (see panel). These 12 aims and eight domains are delivered in three ways: through the curriculum, through pedagogy and through the life of the school and community (which, he says, should account for 30 per cent of the work).

He wants each domain to be of equal importance, and the curriculum as a whole to be overseen by a single body - literacy and numeracy would no longer be run by the Primary National Strategy, which would cease to exist in its present form.

Despite starting with similar challenges and having similar solutions, the framework is different from that proposed by Sir Jim Rose, not only in its structure, but in the institutions and its underlying thinking.

Numeracy, for Sir Jim Rose, must stay a priority. Professor Alexander said some witnesses to his review challenged the assumption that it is as much a "basic" as language. He wants more rigour in deciding what is truly essential in primary maths.

Local flexibility is also treated very differently. Professor Alexander wants an explicit and protected allocation of 30 per cent of curriculum time. Sir Jim Rose's interim report calls for the national programmes to be flexible enough for schools to adapt content.

Not all differences are so stark. Much would depend on how things play out in the classroom. Professor Alexander, for example, stresses that all domains should be treated with equal seriousness. But he also admits language and literacy would be the "undisputed priority for primary education".

And, more importantly for teachers, neither review goes as far as setting out exactly what should be taught. Anyone wanting to know whether they can ditch Florence Nightingale resources or stop explaining why the moon is not a light source will not find the answers here.

How much influence will the Cambridge Primary Review have? It is true that this is not merely a response to Rose, but Sir Jim's review is the most direct route to change.

"What Sir Jim Rose has been asked to do is come up with a framework which is going to be implemented," says Professor Alexander, "what we have is a framework with no legal status... We have thought deeply about the nature of primary education and we hope schools will join us in exploring these issues."

Sir Jim Rose's review

Title: The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum

Launched: Dec 2007

Interim report: Dec 2008

Final report due: spring 2009

Aims: Successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve; confident individuals able to lead safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society

Curriculum:

Six areas of understanding: in English, communication and languages; maths; science and technology; human, social and environmental; physical health and wellbeing; the arts and design

Core subjects:

"Schools must continue to give priority to literacy and numeracy, whilst making sure that serious attention is paid to developing spoken language intensively..."

Local component:

"To promote flexibility, the range and content will be described in ways that allow for local interpretation rather than long lists that over-prescribe content"


Personal development:

"To strengthen provision for personal development the QCA... should set out the essential knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes for PSHE alongside PE."

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