

# Disadvantage lies at heart of primary review

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Robin Alexander praises schools as ‘the centre that holds when things fall apart’, but while rejecting media ‘myths’ of a generation in crisis he argues that more must be done to narrow the gap between vulnerable children and the rest. Helen Ward reports

Forty years ago, the Plowden report declared that at the heart of the educational process lies the child.

Now, the most comprehensive inquiry into primary schooling in Britain since then has laid out its vision of education. And central to its vision is the disadvantaged child.

“For this is our bottom line,” the Cambridge Primary Review states. “The education of young children matters immeasurably - to them both now and in the future and to our society. It matters to all children but especially to those who, in our divided society, lack the massively compensating advantages of financial wealth, emotional harmony and a home life that is linguistically, intellectually, culturally and spiritually rich.”

The review, which set out to examine how primary education can best meet the needs of today’s children, is indignant about the politicisation of education.

In the final report, edited by Professor Robin Alexander, the review’s leader, rails against media myths of failure and politicians’ ill-founded claims of success.

The report’s prevailing mood is underlined by its headline conclusions: reform Sats and scrap league tables, extend the early-years foundation stage to Year 1, rebalance the curriculum, train teachers to become educators not deliverers of ready-made lessons and carry out a full review of special educational needs provision.

The report is more than another shot in one of the many battlegrounds of education. It is deeply serious, foreseeing that “sensationalising headlines will do nothing like justice” to the breadth, weight and authority of the evidence. But it is readable and not without humour (among the 88 historical milestones it lists are 1969’s “back to basics”, 1992’s “back to basics again” and 1998’s “back to basics yet again”).

It is an ambitious attempt to go beyond governments, override spats and appeal directly to “all those interested in primary education”. It concludes with 75 recommendations that the 14 authors believe would provide the education and the childhood that all children deserve.

It begins by exploring the state of childhood, noting one father’s complaints about his son’s alleged truancy and failure to do his homework - comments made in Mesopotamia 3,500 years ago. Is the modern “crisis in childhood” real? What is the evidence?

Start by listening to children, suggests the report; 72 per cent say their peers are “kind and helpful”.

Health, education and respect for children have improved vastly. There are genuine concerns about equity, but the distorted picture of “blighted” childhoods prevents change where it is needed.

The review praises primary schools as “the centre that holds when things fall apart”. It praises the Government’s efforts to narrow gaps in educational attainment.

Mick Brookes, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said the review was correct to draw attention to disadvantaged pupils and the inequality in the education system.

“There are children who leave schools with nothing to show for the experience while increasing numbers get A\* to C at GCSE and A\* at A-level - it is quite obvious the gap has widened,” he said.

“There is a lot of money in the system and the children who are able to access education are doing better. There is a need to focus on children who are struggling with it, and we need to have a sensible debate about how to do it.”

The report is independent, but it is responsive to the political landscape in which it finds itself. It advocates change in a system that seems to be constantly changing. This term, the Government is due to announce its final decision on the recommendations of Sir Jim Rose’s review, which was limited to the primary curriculum.

The Rose review recommendations, which have been widely welcomed in the profession, call for the national curriculum to be rearranged into six areas of learning and six essential skills, in an attempt to give teachers more flexibility. The new curriculum is due to be introduced by 2010.

But the Cambridge review calls for the process to be suspended. Sir Jim’s review has fundamentally missed the point, it argues. The problem is not curriculum overload, but a mismatch between what schools have to do and the skills of their staff. Primaries need more teachers and more specialist teachers in addition to generalist class teachers.

But how seriously will politicians treat its proposals?

As the review notes, some of its recommendations have already been taken up - including scrapping National Strategies - though ministers dismissed them when they were made in its earlier interim reports.

Professor Alexander knows only too well the risks that the final report’s calls may be ignored or even attacked as “off message”.

It concludes: “The Cambridge Primary Review is for the longer term, not the next election... its final report is not just for transient architects and agents of policy. It is for all who invest daily, deeply and for life in this vital phase of education, especially children, parents and teachers.”

In other words, it is for you.

## Key recommendations

End the “state theory of learning”. The Government should not tell teachers how to teach.

- Extend the foundation stage to age six. Have a single primary key stage.
- Prioritise narrowing the gap between vulnerable children and the rest.
- Undertake a full review of special educational needs.
- Follow Professor Alexander’s curriculum recommendations, including the creation of 12 aims and eight domains.
- Reform assessment; stop current Sats; scrap league tables; assess all areas of the curriculum and use sampling to monitor national standards.
- Undertake a full review of primary school staffing.
- Reform initial teacher training.
- Protect rural and middle schools.
- Protect and expand school libraries.
- End primary/secondary funding differential.

## FAQ

Q. What is the Cambridge Primary Review?

A. A three-year inquiry into the state and future of English primary education.

Q. Who is Robin Alexander

(pictured left)?

A. Director of the review and fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge University. He was one of the “three wise men” who led a government inquiry into primary education in 1991. He has long advocated a more central place for oracy in primary education.

Q. How is this review different from Sir Jim Rose’s?

A. Sir Jim was commissioned and paid by the Government to look at the primary curriculum. Professor Alexander’s review has been funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and looks at the whole of primary education.

Q. What does Professor Alexander think about primary schools?

A. Primary schools appear to be under intense pressure but in good heart. They are highly valued by children and parents and in general are doing a good job. They do not neglect and

never have neglected the 3Rs... For many, schools are the centre that holds when things fall apart.

Q. How can I find out more?

A. Every school in the country should receive a pack containing information and a special booklet about the report next week and a series of regional conferences is being held for leaders in schools, local authorities and teacher education.

[www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)

What the report says...

...about teaching staff

England has 198,200 primary teachers and 172,600 primary school support staff - one adult for every 11 primary pupils. This is investment on a remarkable scale.

The class teacher system is taken for granted, but does it best serve primary pupils' needs?

It arose because it combined cheapness and efficiency in the context of large classes, a basic curriculum and view of teaching as little more than drilling of facts and skills. But subject knowledge is the elephant in the room.

A national review of staffing and funding policy is required. And more specialist teachers are needed, especially in upper primary.

A two-year PGCE should be considered to help to achieve this. Initial teacher training should move away from compliance culture. The Training and Development Agency for Schools' professional standards need changing as they encourage conformity rather than originality and do not recognise that experienced teachers need autonomy to be effective. Continuing professional development is often patronising.

Headteachers need to be supported so they can focus on leading learning. The current model in which the head is burdened with a proliferating range of responsibilities is no longer tenable for a single person.

Teaching assistants have liberated teachers from tasks that diminish time with children, but the use of TAs as teachers is not acceptable. They need training for working with small groups and children with SEN.

...about pupils

Legitimate concerns exist about children's lives today, but the "crisis" of modern childhood has been grossly overstated.

For most children, perceived risk is much greater than actual risk. But for a significant minority the risks and deprivations are at least as severe as they are portrayed and it is here that attention needs to be focused. Social disadvantage blights the early lives of a larger proportion of children in Britain than in many other countries.

Britain is very diverse - and to an extent which at the time of Plowden would have been unimaginable. The transience and unpredictability of migration and the inadequacy of local information adds to pressure on schools. The review encountered evidence of discrimination against marginalised groups, within the education system as well as in society.

...about government

Assumptions and formulas for funding primary education should be reviewed. The staffing of primary schools should be led by the curriculum and the needs of pupils. A new funding formula is needed, preceded by a national staffing review. Excessive funding variation between local authorities and key stages should be eliminated.

The National Strategies have cost £2 billion. Savings arising from terminating them should be shifted from government and local authorities to schools.

Centralised reform has produced important and necessary changes in children's services, but has gone too far in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. The role of government should revert to providing the administrative and financial framework, setting the goals and scope of the national curriculum and the broad standards primary schools should achieve.

Assessment should be reviewed and league tables stopped. Children's learning should be assessed formatively throughout the primary phase and summatively before the transfer to secondary school. A separate system should be used to evaluate schools and monitor national standards externally, using sample testing.

Comments

- The upshot is, whilst schools and teachers are measured using SATs results, investing time and money in vulnerable children makes no sense. If I have a bunch of children that I need to provide an intervention for to get up to the "required" level, it is a better bet for me to give the intervention to the children with supportive families. They are more likely to succeed and I am therefore more likely to get the "numbers" that I need. Of course, the teacher in me wants to help these kids and help their families and get all sorts of support in place. But if I want to get my bonus, I need to hit my numbers. Sorry.

[leapyearbaby64](#)

I applaud many of the main recommendations of this review. In particular the diverting of funds away from National Strategies and pumping this money into schools who know the needs of their pupils and can thus get far better value from the investment.

In reply to leapyearbaby64, what 'bonus' do you get for hitting numbers?

Personally, I support every child whatever their background and possible future prospects. If you're talking about groups targeted for intervention, if these groups are going to be too big, I make 2 groups. I've never heard of being paid extra for results, though.

- Eer, sorry. I was being sarky to make a point. But if you have limited resources, you do have to make choices. Sometimes our choices are driven by how we are measured. Take the current 1:1 investment for example. I'll bet no school got all the money it asked for. So how were choices made about which children to give 1:1 time to? The criteria for entry seem to eliminate vulnerable children. In my LA we are told the intervention is probably not suitable for children with high rates of absence or with difficulties at home. The Government (presumably) is setting the programme up to be a howling success (announcement shortly before election) because it is eliminating the children who are the least likely to succeed.