

Editorial - Intrepid prof takes on The Primary Code

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Politicians may dismiss the Cambridge review, but it is a must-read for teachers

Dan Brown's position at the top of the international bestseller lists is, sadly, unlikely to be unsettled by a new book published today. Like Brown's latest work, *The Lost Symbol*, this book is around 520 pages long and concerns a globe-trotting professor who seeks to solve an enduring mystery with help from a series of uncannily well-informed assistants, while dodging attacks from powerful figures.

The key difference is that the mystery Professor Robin Alexander attempts to solve is infinitely more important than some occult hokum: it is how England's primary schools can best meet the needs of today's children. In the process, he has edited one of the boldest and most staggeringly ambitious books about education in 40 years. And, unlike Dan Brown, Professor Alexander and his team can write.

Children, their World, their Education, the final report from the three-year Cambridge Primary Review, will inevitably be compared to Lady Plowden's 1967 report, the last inquiry of a similar scale and remit. But, as Professor Alexander notes, while Plowden "spoke to an optimistic consensus" and was welcomed by all parties, his more independent review "has been undertaken against a backdrop of political bitterness, public anxiety, national recession and global economic crisis".

A myth-buster, not a blockbuster, it tears apart much of the received wisdom about primary education repeated by politicians and headline writers. Childhood in England is not in crisis and nor are primary schools, which instead may be "the one point of stability and positive values in a world where everything else is changing and uncertain". Primary teachers have never neglected the 3Rs, and it is similarly a myth that they have been controlled by a cabal of 1970s ideologues.

Instead, the crisis that needs to be addressed is the fate of children blighted by poverty and disadvantage who still leave education far behind their classmates.

The review team is also scathing about the politicisation of primary education, and the way government has imposed a "state theory of learning" on schools in the past dozen years, enforced by national tests and inspections.

The report is not perfect. While his bitter humour is a bonus, Professor Alexander can seem unnecessarily harsh about his rivals. So Sir Jim Rose's government-sanctioned review of the primary curriculum is aggressively dismissed, even though primary schools might find Sir Jim's six areas of learning more practical to introduce (and easier to explain to parents) than the Cambridge Primary Review's more fiddly grid of 12 aims and eight domains.

But most of the report's recommendations will strike a chord in staffrooms, especially that professional empowerment should be returned to teachers and that "standards" should no longer simply mean test results.

Professor Alexander knows how politicians will respond to the report: they will cherry-pick it, deride it or dismiss it. But, as he states, it was not written for the "transient architects and agents of policy". It is for those who can make a difference to primary schools no matter who is in power: the teachers.

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Gerard Kelly is away.