

Cambridge review team, take heart – your ideas may yet triumph

All political parties have failed to appreciate the findings of the primary review team, but their day will come, believes Peter Mortimore



Peter Mortimore

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The final report of the Cambridge primary review (CPR) posed a significant test for political parties. Would their spokespeople appreciate its scope, study its research findings and rationally debate its ideas?

For those unfamiliar with the review, it is a large-scale independent inquiry, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, undertaken by a team of researchers and policy analysts from Cambridge University.

It commissioned 28 pieces of research and promoted 87 regional consultative meetings. As its director, Robin Alexander, suggests, it is the most comprehensive investigation of primary education since the 1967 Plowden report.

Among its treasure trove of ideas, analyses and proposals is the formulation of a set of coherent aims to drive both the primary curriculum and its pedagogy. These have been designed to foster skills, excite imaginations and promote dialogue. In contrast, the 1988 national curriculum began with prescribed subjects and then scabbled around for aims.

It recommends testing children for the sake of their progress, rather than for the league table culture and national monitoring.

The review proposes that the foundation stage (age three) be extended until the age of six, so that formal teaching can be postponed for a year. This would bring us into line with many of our European neighbours and would limit the disabling effects of early failure. The additional proposal to "examine the feasibility of raising the school starting age" has excited much attention. Commentators have lamented the problems this might cause working parents. Nordic countries' solution to this lies in state supervised and subsidised nursery provision with more parent-friendly opening hours than schools.

So how well did the politicians respond? Liberal Democrat education spokesperson David Laws was probably the most positive, noting "anybody interested in improving primary education should take notice of this report". Conservative shadow schools secretary Michael Gove saw it as "thought-provoking and provocative" and used the review as an excuse to batter government policies, but added that "its recommendations do not always convince".

Schools minister Vernon Coaker, however, found it "disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed". In his view, "Professor Alexander's proposals are a backward step" – brusquely dismissing three years of intensive work – including detailed consultations with practitioners, evidential reviews and international comparisons undertaken by some of the most knowledgeable university researchers in the country.

Weep, Cambridge team. Your efforts to produce clear analyses and innovative ideas in the interest of fostering something better than political point-scoring, repetitive myths and ideological rigidity have been strangled at birth. Console yourselves, however, for

good ideas are seldom so easily dismissed. Twice I have seen work I have been involved with rejected, only for much of it eventually to be incorporated into official policy.

The pity is that politicians, who pollsters tell us are only trusted by 13% of the population, can so easily make such fools of themselves by endeavouring to close down all thinking outside their own. How much wiser to welcome new ideas and give civil society, including teachers – who are trusted by 82% of the population – the chance to debate how best to improve the education of our youngest learners.

- Peter Mortimore is former director of the Institute of Education