

# Editorial - Historic report offers vision for teachers in Wales



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## **Bold and ambitious inquiry into primary schools has much to say to teachers here**

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 potboiler, *The Lost Symbol*, it's 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 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".

The report is aimed at schools in England, but the Cambridge Primary Review has clearly learnt from the experience of teachers in Wales and reaches conclusions relevant to them. Its recommendation that schools start their primary phase at six is partly inspired by the Welsh Assembly's decision to develop the foundation stage for three- to seven-year-olds, which it praises for trying to "import best European practice into the UK". "Despite disputes about funding and concerns about consistency across the settings, practitioners in Wales remain committed to the phase and reported that boys in particular were benefiting," it notes.

Similarly, it uses Wales to show the benefits of ending national tests and league tables and relying more on teachers' professional judgements. But it is the report's broader conclusions that may prove more useful for teachers here. A myth-buster instead of a blockbuster, it tears apart much of the received wisdom about primary education. Childhood 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".

Instead, the crisis that needs to be addressed urgently is the fate of those children whose lives are blighted by poverty and disadvantage and who still leave the education system far behind their classmates. Teachers need to be trusted further and small schools protected from closure, an argument strengthened by Estyn's support for reduced class sizes. Politicians may pay the report little attention or at best cherry-pick the sections that match the policies they like. But that does not matter. As Professor Alexander states, the report 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.

Michael Shaw, TES Opinion Editor, E [michael.shaw@tes.co.uk](mailto:michael.shaw@tes.co.uk).

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