



... children, their world, their education

Times Educational Supplement, Friday 16 May 2008

TESTAMENTS TO THE POWER OF 10

Robin Alexander

Director of the Primary Review

With today's three research surveys on teaching, the Primary Review completes dissemination of its 30 interim reports and enters its next phase: the preparation of its main and final report.

After the Review's launch in October 2006, the Cambridge team traversed the country, talking to teachers, parents, children and community representatives. We invited written submissions and received them in abundance and detail. We trawled official data to keep track of changing policy and demographics. We met all manner of stakeholders. Our 70 academic consultants undertook exhaustive surveys of published research on the Review's 10 themes, between them covering many thousands of published sources, national and international. We contributed to public events, sometimes - as with the GTC and the Children's Society - in collaboration with others. Latterly, sessions with practitioners and national organisations considered implications of our emerging evidence.

As far as the Review's public face was concerned, the first year, though busy for us, was quiet. All that changed in October 2007, when we published our report on the 87 regional community soundings. The report was wide-ranging, but just one issue translated instantly into banner headlines: children and childhood under stress. A few weeks later our three commissioned research surveys on standards, testing and assessment were billed as a 'searing indictment' of the government's standards drive and SATs regime, matters seldom out of the news since then. Thus began the Primary Review media saga. Excluding the

initial launch and today, the Primary Review has gone to press on just eight occasions. Yet no fewer than five episodes have hit the front page and two of them have provided the top UK news story overall.

We might cavil at distorted findings and the sensationalising of complex issues, but we are grateful that the media have acknowledged that in the Primary Review they have not an ephemeral event but an unfolding and important narrative: about children's development, needs and learning, and their lives outside as well as inside school; about parenting and caring; about primary school aims, curriculum, assessment, standards and teaching; about teacher training, development and leadership; and about educational structures, funding, governance, policy and reform. All of these have been placed in the context of larger questions about the economy, the fabric of national life and the condition of the world in which our children are growing up.

Some teachers tell us that what they particularly value in the Primary Review's reports and briefings are persuasive alternatives to the official view. This is important, for there now remain few aspects of primary education which have not become the subject of government policy. One vivid measure of this political investment or takeover is the 459 government documents on literacy teaching alone which, according to London's Institute of Education, were issued between 1996 and 2004. Another is how government chooses to respond to an independent enquiry like ours.

Matters started well, for alongside the opposition parties, statutory organisations and teaching unions DCSF agreed to co-operate with the Review and in that spirit joined us in fruitful meetings and exchanges. We worked hard for this, not just for pragmatic reasons but because we respected the seriousness of the government's commitment to improving primary education.

But the Review's contentious media profile has put the relationship under undeniable strain, for DCSF has found itself having to respond to media accounts of our reports in which government itself has been the main story. Further, though our reports have conveyed the mixed messages about recent policy that are inevitable in a large and complex system undergoing substantial change, much of the press coverage has concentrated on the negative. In turn, it is to this negative gloss, rather than to what our reports actually say, that government has felt obliged to respond.

Presumably on the principle that attack is the best form of defence, DCSF has opted against the engagement which our reports warrant and the nation's children and teachers deserve. Instead, in a three-pronged assault on the Review's probity the work of the 70 leading academics who have written these reports has been summarily dismissed as 'a collection of recycled, partial or out of date research'; the Review's Cambridge team has been accused of 'being out of touch with the concerns of parents'; and to the Review's director DCSF has attributed views of an extreme and ludicrous kind which neither he nor anyone else involved in the Review actually holds or has expressed.

Conspiracy theorists go further, questioning the government's motives for launching its own primary (curriculum) review with an email address almost identical to ours. Be

that as it may - I couldn't possibly comment - what started as one press story, the Primary Review, has now spawned a second: the Government and the Primary Review.

The difficulty is this. Policy is now so all-pervasive, and education has become so intensely politicised, that a well-researched independent finding is not the positive contribution to the cause of improving public services which in a saner world would be welcomed with open arms, but a political threat to be neutralised by whatever means possible, fair or foul. Far from being unique, the Primary Review's case is part of a consistent pattern of official reaction, across the full spectrum of public policy, to anything deemed off-message. This is hardly healthy, for education or for democracy.

Yet things are not necessarily what they seem, for we have also witnessed subtle changes in tone and direction on some of those very issues on which in relation to the Primary Review government has been most defiant: early childhood, school starting age, curriculum - even testing. It could be that you don't need to wait until the Primary Review's final report: it is already making a difference, though nobody cares to admit it.

Equally, policy, even in a centralised system, is not all that matters. Teachers do, and must, exercise professional judgement on the basis of what only they know about the children they teach; and a national education system belongs not to ministers and officials but to all of us.

The Primary Review is supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and based at Cambridge University's Faculty of Education.
www.primaryreview.org.uk