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Testaments to the power of 10

Last updated 04 August 2008, created 16 May 2008, viewed 1,064

The Primary Review is already having positive effects, and the Government's hard line towards it may be softening

With today's three research surveys on teaching (see pages 10 and 11), the Primary Review completes its 30 interim reports and enters its next phase: the preparation and writin [More...](#)

After the Review's launch in October 2006, the Cambridge-based team traversed the country, talking to teachers, parents, children and community representatives. We invited written submissions and received them in abundance. We trawled official data to keep track of changing policy and demographics.

We met all manner of stakeholders. Our 70 consultants undertook surveys of published research on the Review's 10 themes, covering many thousands of sources, national and international. We contributed to public events, sometimes in collaboration with others. Latterly, sessions with practitioners and national bodies

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considered implications of our emerging evidence.

In terms of the Review's public face, 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. It was wide-ranging, but just one issue translated instantly into banner headlines: children and childhood under stress.

A few weeks later, our three surveys on standards, testing and assessment were billed as a "searing indictment" of the Government's standards drive. Thus began the Primary Review media saga. Excluding the initial launch and today, the Review has gone to press on just eight occasions. Yet no fewer than five episodes have hit the front pages 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 acknowledge that in the Primary Review they have an unfolding and vital narrative: on children's development, needs and learning, and their lives outside and inside school; parenting and caring; primary school aims, curriculum, assessment, standards and teaching; teacher training, development and leadership; and 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 say what they particularly value in the Review are persuasive alternatives to the official view. This is important, for there remain few aspects of primary education that have not become the subject of government policy.

One vivid measure of this political investment 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 inquiry such as ours.

Matters started well, for alongside the opposition parties, statutory organisations and teaching unions, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (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 government has found itself having to respond to media accounts of our reports in which government itself has been the main story. Our reports have conveyed the mixed messages about recent policy that are inevitable in a large and

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complex system undergoing great change, yet much of the press coverage has focused on the negative. It is to this negative gloss, rather than to what our reports actually say, that government has felt obliged to respond.

Presumably on the basis that attack is the best form of defence, the DCSF has opted against the engagement that 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 the reports has been dismissed as "a collection of recycled, partial or out-of-date research"; the team has been accused of "being out of touch with the concerns of parents"; and to me, the Review's director, the DCSF has attributed views of an extreme and ludicrous kind that neither I nor anyone else involved 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, 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 so intensely politicised, that a well-researched, independent finding is not the positive contribution to the cause of improving public services that in a saner world would be welcomed, but rather a political threat to be neutralised by any possible means. Far from being unique, the review's case is part of a consistent pattern of official reaction, across the full spectrum of public policy, to anything deemed to be off-message. This is hardly healthy - for education or for democracy.

Yet things are not necessarily what they seem. We have also witnessed subtle changes in tone and direction on some of the issues on which, in relation to the Review, government has been most defiant: early childhood, school starting age, curriculum, even testing. Perhaps you don't need to wait until the Review's final report: it is already making a difference, though no one cares to admit it. Policy is not all that matters. Teachers do, and must, exercise professional judgement on the basis of what only they know about their pupils; and a national education system belongs not to ministers and officials, but to all of us.

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

Robin Alexander, Director of the Primary Review.

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