



... children, their world, their education

PRIMARY REVIEW  
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS  
3/1

## PRIMARY CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT: ENGLAND AND OTHER COUNTRIES

Kathy Hall, National University of Ireland, Cork  
Kamil Øzerk, University of Oslo

---

This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 3/1, *Primary Curriculum and Assessment: England and other countries*, by Kathy Hall and Kamil Øzerk. The report was commissioned to compare curriculum and assessment policies for primary education in England with those in other countries in order to focus discussion and debate about current arrangements and future possibilities. **The full report, including details of sources consulted, is available at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).**

Drawing mainly on secondary sources, the report first provides a comparative overview of curriculum and assessment arrangements in England and 21 other countries. Then, by focusing on primary sources, the report looks in rather greater detail at curriculum and assessment policy in England, other parts of the UK, France, Norway and Japan.

Note that this study deals with the curriculum as officially stated and/or prescribed, not with the curriculum as taught, and with national assessment arrangements rather than the day-to-day assessment undertaken by individual schools and teachers. Depending in the degree of external control which is exercised on such matters, and the level of professional consensus which government requirements are able to secure, national requirements and school practice may or may not be closely aligned.

### **Overview of primary curriculum and assessment in 22 countries, including England**

There is strong convergence in officially-stated curriculum provision across all the countries surveyed. England is in line with international trends in its provision of the following: first language, mathematics, science, information technology, history, geography, art and craft, music, physical education and sport and religious education. All of these areas of study are now standard in the primary curriculum of the vast majority of the countries in the survey. England differs from many other countries in not (as yet) making PSHE, citizenship and a modern foreign language compulsory at the primary stage. There is also a grey area where matters like education for global awareness are concerned: they are increasingly encouraged though not obligatory. Presumably the balance of statutory and non-statutory, and the logistical implications of the entire curriculum package, will be investigated by the Government's Rose review of the primary curriculum, announced in December 2007.

All the countries claim to adapt their curricula to fit their changing social, economic and political circumstances. More recent reforms in most countries, including England, pertain to the higher status attributed to literacy and mathematics, but also, more recently, to the emphasis on application of knowledge and understanding, and on learning how to learn.

In all of the countries surveyed teachers are expected to assess and report routinely on their pupils' progress. Assessment is expected to fulfil several purposes. England is in line with the majority of countries insofar as a standard assessment system or end of phase/stage testing occurs in primary school.

However, the pattern of arrangements for assessment is considerably more diverse than it is for curriculum. England is unusual in its high incidence of assessment, and is exceptional in its emphasis on statutory external standard assessment for children at ages 7 and 11.

## **Primary Curriculum requirements in England, the rest of the UK, France, Norway and Japan**

There is considerable commonality across the UK and the other three countries in the stated goals and aims of the curriculum. Recurring in the various curriculum policy texts are all of the following foci:

- the development of children's potential;
- the promotion of the rounded individual;
- the fostering of the good citizen;
- the cultivation of the lifelong learner; and
- the shaping of the flexible individual for life in a rapidly changing globalized world.

In the UK in particular there is an official push to promote 'excellence' in learning, and in a way that combines cognitive and affective aspects and that prepares the learner for a changing future. England deviates from the other countries, however, in the frequency of its explicit references to raising standards. None of the other countries in this part of the survey appears to be so preoccupied with national standards.

The curriculum documentation in England differs from that of Japan and France in two key respects. First in relation to the promotion of a shared common culture - England's official documentation places more emphasis on pluralism, diversity, tolerance, and multiculturalism. Second in relation to the promotion of basic skills, especially language, in the early years of compulsory primary schooling: France, Norway and Japan expect that the curriculum, particularly in the early years of compulsory primary education, should attend to the basic skills of language and maths, but these are a much more explicit feature in the policy texts of these countries than in England or in any other part of the UK.

England structures the curriculum in terms of subjects while other parts of the UK, specifically Northern Ireland and Scotland, have moved in their current reforms to broader domains of learning.

England differs from the other countries in the status attributed to various areas of knowledge, and specifically in the relative status accorded to language, science, citizenship, and the status attributed to different language modes within the study of language. The emphasis given to the National Curriculum core subjects of English, maths and science as core subjects is not matched elsewhere in the UK - Wales and Northern Ireland having deviated from this model in their recent reforms. In England, maths and science are given parity with English. In all of our other countries surveyed, language is pre-eminent.

In Norway and Japan, as well as in Scotland and Northern Ireland, natural science and social studies/humanities have equal status, while in France science is incorporated into the broad domain 'discovering the world'. England is exceptional in its strong emphasis on natural science relative to the humanities. The emphasis in England on science and maths, together with the attribution of equal status to English, maths and science, represents an orientation in English curriculum policy towards essentially instrumental and economic goals from the earliest phase of compulsory schooling. This orientation is further underlined when one notes that in England, unlike Northern Ireland or Scotland, citizenship does not have equal value with other subjects. The civic dimension appears to be comparatively weak in England.

All of the countries surveyed are promoting information technology (IT) in their curricula but Japan places far less emphasis on it than Western countries. The introduction of a modern foreign language into England's Key Stage 2 curriculum from 2006, albeit non-statutory, represents a significant shift in curriculum policy towards a closer alignment with our European neighbours. The Rose review of the English primary curriculum, announced in December 2007, is required by its remit to make a modern foreign language compulsory at the primary stage.

## **Assessment requirements in England, the rest of the UK, France, Norway and Japan**

All parts of the UK, and France, Norway and Japan seek to monitor the quality of learning of primary school pupils at national level through assessment of pupil achievement against national norms or competencies within specific subjects. By doing so, national governments may also hold schools to account. In some countries, national monitoring is achieved through assessing the achievement of representative samples of pupils from a given population. In England this system, which was used by

the APU during the 1980s, was abandoned in favour of using universal national testing as a measure of school performance. The scale of assessment for the purpose of monitoring and accountability is of quite a different order in England compared to the other countries included in this survey. Although its curriculum and assessment regimes remain very different from those in England, Norway appears to be gradually converging on English policy with regard to national assessment and the publishing of league tables. However, these receive significantly less emphasis in other parts of the UK and in France and Japan. The uniqueness of England's assessment policy is demonstrated by the following:

- there is more external, standard testing in England;
- external, standard testing occurs more frequently;
- external, standard testing begins at a younger age;
- external testing occurs in more subjects/subject areas, including science;
- external test results are published in league tables that rank schools according to the success of their pupils in the tests;
- testing is 'high stakes'; and
- external, standard testing is accompanied by obligatory summative teacher assessments at the end of each key stage, the results of which are reported to parents, and at KS2 are also reported to Government agencies and are used to hold schools to account.

In summary, formal assessment in England, compared to our review countries, is pervasive, highly consequential, and taken by officialdom to portray objectively the actual quality of primary education in schools. Wales and Northern have significantly tempered their emphasis on testing in recent reforms such that they are now (along with Scotland) as different from England as are other European countries. What distinguishes assessment policy in England then is the degree to which it is used as a tool a) to control what is taught, b) to police how well it is taught, and c) to encourage parents to use assessment information to select schools for their children.

All countries, including England, refer to the procedures that they have in place to address assessment for the purpose of supporting pupil learning and, whatever the nature and format of its assessments, the importance of using assessments to feed back into teaching and learning is highlighted.

There is limited emphasis in France and Japan on pupils as self and peer assessors or on qualitative, prose-descriptive accounts of learning and learning contexts. There is some evidence of this in Norway. Policy in the UK in general explicitly recognises the role of the learner in the assessment enterprise, giving much attention in its guidance material to what is commonly called 'assessment for learning'. Northern Ireland and Wales have scaled down their use of testing and now, like Scotland, prioritise assessment for learning. England also emphasises assessment for learning, but in the context of an undiminished emphasis on summative testing. The official policy documents of all parts of the UK offer much guidance to teachers on the conduct of this kind of assessment.

While policy in England promotes assessment for learning purposes, the high stakes nature of the assessments designed to make the system accountable may compromise its potential benefits.

---

## FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Hall, K. and Øzerk, K. (2008) *Primary Curriculum and Assessment: England and other countries* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-18-6.

The report is available at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk) and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these deal with the opinion-gathering strands of the Review's evidence base. The remainder report on the thirty surveys of published research which the Review has commissioned from its 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education and to stimulate debate during the period leading up to the publication of the Review's final report in late 2008.

The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Review has ten themes and four strands of evidence (submissions, community and national soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data). The report summarised in this briefing relates to the **Research Survey** strand and the theme **Curriculum and Assessment**.

**Enquiries: The Administrator, The Primary Review, Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ. Phone: 01223 767523.**

**Email: [enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk) Website: [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)**

**Press enquiries: [richard@margrave.co.uk](mailto:richard@margrave.co.uk) (Richard Margrave, Communications Director).**

**Note: the views expressed in the Primary Review Research Reports are those of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Primary Review, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge.**