

What is primary education for?



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Section: Comment

Robin Alexander, director of the Cambridge Primary Review, introduces an alternative primary curriculum

There's little point in reviewing the primary curriculum unless one asks what it is for. Start from first principles. Take a fresh look at the world in which today's children are growing up. Look again at their lives and needs. Treat no practice or policy as sacrosanct.

A curriculum review which does not do these things tinkers at the margins. It re-shuffles rather than reviews. Worse, while it may provide the stability that teachers understandably crave, it entrenches for yet another decade what is wrong with the current curriculum as well as what is right. Adding aims after the event, as in 1988 and 1998, merely ensures that aims march cosmetically in one direction while the curriculum slinks pragmatically in another.

The Cambridge Primary Review has brought forward its proposals on the curriculum to contribute to the debate about the government's Rose Review. Yet *Towards a New Primary Curriculum* is no mere knee-jerk reaction to Rose. It is part of a three-year enquiry into primary education as a whole, the most comprehensive for 40 years. It draws on its own considerable evidence, provides its own analysis, proposes its own solutions, and above all keeps in view that basic question: what is primary education for? Rose says that the problem is 'quarts-into-pint-pots': finding ways to cram 14 subjects into a finite week or year. We say that this is a problem only if we assume, in the absence of clarity about aims, that we must continue to teach, albeit repackaged, the unargued accretion of decades without genuine reform.

Logistics are certainly a challenge, but the Cambridge report is more worried about the erosion of children's entitlement to a balanced education; about the persistence of the discredited official belief that you can have standards or breadth but not both; about the distortion of the curriculum by testing and the national strategies; about the way for years primary children have had not one curriculum but two - the 'basics' and the rest - with the latter stunted and trivialised by their neglect in teacher training, inspection and CPD. In each case, policies aimed at raising standards have compromised the quality of children's education more broadly conceived.

Also frustrating improvement is the way curriculum is talked about. Populists play safe with 'read, write and add up', too blinkered or timid to ask whether, for the 21st century, this hallowed mantra is enough. Discussion of subjects is needlessly polarised. Knowledge is grossly parodied as trading obsolete facts. 'Skill' is reduced from curriculum essential to fashion accessory through profligate over-use.

So, what is it for? The Cambridge report proposes twelve new aims for 21st century primary education. These balance children's present and future needs, encourage positive and responsible attitudes to other people, society and the wider world, and place knowledge, skill, imagination and productive interaction at the heart of classroom life. Their vocabulary - well-being, engagement, empowerment, autonomy, respect, reciprocity, interdependence, sustainability, global citizenship, the celebration of culture and community - speaks to concerns repeatedly expressed in the Review's evidence about priorities for a good childhood, a fulfilled adult life and a more equitable society and world. The knowledge, skill, imagination and dialogue with which the aims culminate provide the means that these can be achieved.

The aims interlock with eight 'domains', at the heart of which, strengthened and reaching across the entire curriculum, are language, literacy and oracy, the latter much more challenging than 'speaking and listening'. The arts, humanities and science are re-invigorated. Citizenship and personal education are re-conceived. The damaging division between core and non-core disappears, for though time allocations will of course vary, all eight domains are essential and all must therefore be taught to the highest standard. A domain, incidentally, is a *professional* concept, to be translated by schools and not necessarily timetabled exactly as it stands. Overall, within a clear statutory framework, there is an emphasis on guidance and support rather than prescription. As for 'quarts-into-pint-pots', priorities are determined not by subject committee free-for-all, but by the aims.

This is a national curriculum, but it also has a protected local component, 30 per cent of the whole. This - the 'community curriculum' - encourages innovation, responds to local needs and opportunities, and addresses our witnesses' concerns about the place of the primary school in community life and regeneration.

In the Cambridge curriculum report readers will find both the familiar and the new. But, overall, this is a radical vision because without giving an inch on standards its aims for young children's education reach far beyond the 3Rs. Indeed, it's more demanding, because 'standards' are now defined as quality in learning and teaching across the board.

We know the risks in educational reform: superficial change masking inertia; initial progress regressing to the status quo; political calculation obstructing honest appraisal. Our proposals spell out what must happen for change to be positive and lasting: re-balance the roles of DCSF, QCA, local authorities and schools; reform national assessment; re-integrate the national strategies into the curriculum; re-assess curriculum expertise and the way in schools it is deployed; shift the focus of initial teacher training; raise the level of curriculum understanding and debate; strengthen professional capacity; replace compliance and dependence by informed autonomy. These essential systemic changes will be discussed in our final report. Here, first, is an alternative vision.

Download *Towards a New Primary Curriculum* at www.primaryreview.org.uk. The Cambridge Primary Review is directed by Robin Alexander, based at Cambridge University and supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Its final report is due later in 2009.

Robin Alexander's inquiry

The Cambridge Primary Review
Launched: Oct 2006;
Curriculum report: Feb 2009; ~
Final report: due summer 2009

Twelve aims:

Wellbeing; Engagement; Empowerment; Autonomy; Encouraging respect and reciprocity; Promoting interdependence and sustainability; Empowering local, national and global citizenship; Celebrating culture and community; Exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense; Fostering skill; Exciting the imagination; Enacting dialogue.

Curriculum:

Eight domains: arts and creativity; citizenship and ethics; faith and belief; language, oracy and literacy; mathematics; physical and emotional health; place and time; science and technology.

Core subjects:

"The core curriculum is redefined as requirements for all the specified domains, not just some, so 'core' disappears."

Local component:

"A local element in the curriculum is appropriate, essential and therefore required, but making it mandatory in each domain would make little sense... Setting the expected allocation at 30 per cent overall allows schools to make some domains more local than others."

Personal development:

This is not a separate domain. "The child's personal development is a constant, and is pursued through most or all of the domains..."

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