



...children, their world, their education

CAMBRIDGE  
PRIMARY REVIEW  
BRIEFINGS

# THE FINAL REPORT

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## Context and content

In October 2006, with the support of Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Cambridge Primary Review began to investigate the condition and future of primary education in England. Between October 2007 and April 2010 the Review published 31 interim reports and 40 briefing papers on matters as diverse as childhood, parenting, learning, teaching, testing, educational standards, the curriculum, school organisation, teacher training and the direction and impact of national policy. Many of these provoked considerable media and public interest and have influenced both policy and the wider debate.

In October 2009, the Review presented *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. This 600-page report draws on over 4,000 published sources as well as the Review's extensive evidence from written submissions, face-to-face soundings and searches of official data. Part 1 sets the scene and tracks primary education policy since the 1960s. Part 2 examines children's development and learning, their lives outside school, and their needs, aspirations and prospects in a changing and uncertain world. Part 3 explores what goes on in primary schools, from the formative early years to aims, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, standards and school organisation. Part 4 deals with the system as a whole: ages and stages; schools and other agencies; teacher training, leadership and workforce reform; governance, funding and policy. Part 5 draws everything together with 78 formal conclusions and 75 recommendations for future policy and practice. A 600-page report is not readily telescoped into a four-page briefing, and an enquiry of this scale cannot be reduced to a few soundbites, so here, by way of taster rather than summary, are some key points from the report's concluding chapter.

## The bottom line: how good is English primary education and where is it heading?

**Primary schools: how well are they doing?** The Review finds England's primary schools under intense pressure, but in good heart and in general doing a good job. Investment in primary education has risen dramatically and many recent policies have had a positive impact. Highly valued by children and parents, primary schools represent, for many, stability and positive values in a world where much else is changing and uncertain. Contrary to populist claims, schools are not in danger of subversion by 1970s ideologues and they do not neglect the 3Rs. The real problems are rather different: on these, and on what requires reappraisal and improvement, the Cambridge report points the way.

**What is primary education for?** For too long the aims of primary education have been confused or tokenistic; and too often, aims set off grandly in one direction while the curriculum follows a much narrower path. The school system requires a coherent set of aims uniting its various phases, but each phase is developmentally and educationally so distinct that it needs its own vision too. The report proposes a framework of 12 aims grounded in its evidence on the needs and imperatives of childhood, society and the wider world today. Such aims should drive curriculum, pedagogy and the wider life of the school rather than be tagged on as an afterthought. The Review wants its proposed aims to be properly debated, and presents them as a considered alternative to the 'off the shelf' approach taken by official reports and agencies.

## Three recurrent themes: childhood, society, policy

**Empowering children, respecting childhood.** There are legitimate concerns about the quality of children's lives, and about the transient values and materialist pressures to which children are subject, but

the 'crisis' of contemporary childhood may have been overstated, and children themselves were the Review's most upbeat witnesses. The truly urgent crisis concerns not the pursuit of shallow celebrity but the fate of those children whose lives are blighted by poverty, disadvantage, risk and discrimination, and here governments are right to intervene. Meanwhile, among the many positives of modern childhood, the report celebrates the research evidence on just how much young children know, understand and can do, and argues for a primary education which heeds their voices and empowers them as both learners and citizens. But the report also argues that childhood's unique character and potential should be protected from a system apparently bent on pressing children into a uniform mould at an ever-younger age.

***A world fit to grow up in?*** While governments equivocate on global warming, parents and children do not. The condition of British society and the wider world generated considerable anxiety among the Review's witnesses, the more so as they noted that today's primary school pupils will be only in their forties when the world reaches what some predict as the tipping point for climate change. This, allied with concerns about the loss of identity, community, social cohesion and mutual respect, made many witnesses deeply pessimistic about the future. But, again, the antidote was empowerment: pessimism turned to hope when witnesses felt they could take control and make a difference, whether in relation to sustainability and active citizenship or in the face of the latest government initiative.

***Policy: solution or problem?*** The report assesses reaction to the many recent policies and initiatives for primary education and finds that while the childhood agenda is generally applauded, the standards agenda is viewed less favourably; not because of opposition to high standards – far from it – but because of the way the apparatus of targets, testing, performance tables, national strategies and inspection is believed to distort children's primary schooling for questionable returns. There is also concern about the policy *process*, and in this education appears to mirror the wider problems recorded by those who see British democracy in retreat. In common with other recent studies, the report notes the questionable evidence on which some key educational policies have been based; the disenfranchising of local voice; the rise of unelected and unaccountable groups taking key decisions behind closed doors; the 'empty rituals' of consultation; the authoritarian mindset; and the use of myth and derision to underwrite exaggerated accounts of progress and discredit alternative views.

### **Specifics: equity, standards, structures, curriculum, teaching, assessment, staffing, governance**

***Standards: beyond the rhetoric.*** For over two decades the word 'standards' has dominated educational politics. The report re-assesses both the prevailing concept of standards, finding it restricted, restrictive and misleading, and the national and international evidence on what has happened to primary school standards in recent years. The picture is neither as rosy nor as bleak as opposing camps tend to claim. Subject to the limitations of the conventional definition, many of the positive claims about standards can be sustained, but so too can some of the negatives. There are methodological problems with some of the test procedures and data; and several of the more spectacular assertions (such as that in 1997 English primary education was at a 'low state', or that testing of itself drives up standards, or that tests are the only way to hold schools to account) have little or no basis in evidence.

***Children's needs: equalising provision in an unequal society.*** The Review supports initiatives like Every Child Matters, the Children's Plan and Narrowing the Gap, which seek to make the lives of all children more secure and to reduce the gap in outcomes between vulnerable children and the rest. But England remains a country of massive inequality, and the persistent 'long tail' of underachievement, in which Britain compares unfavourably with many other countries, maps closely onto gross disparities in income, health, housing, risk, discrimination and well-being. Reducing these gaps must remain a priority for social and economic policy generally, not just for education. There is also excessive local variation in provision for children with special educational needs, and the report calls for a full SEN review.

***Matching ages, stages and structures.*** The English insistence on the earliest possible start to formal schooling, against the grain of international evidence and practice, is educationally counter-productive. However, the Early Years Foundation Stage, which the Review endorses, should be extended to age six, and early years provision should be strengthened so as to ensure that children are properly prepared - socially, linguistically and experientially - for formal learning. The Key Stage 1/2 division should be replaced by a single primary phase, yielding Foundation (0-6) and Primary (6-11). The desirability of raising the school starting age in line with these changes might then be examined. However, the key issue in respect of early years education is not its location but its character.

**The curriculum: not there yet.** There is much unfinished business from previous national curriculum reviews. The report disputes the Rose review's claim that the central problem is 'quarts into pint pots' and shows how the quality of the curriculum, as well as its manageability, reflect patterns of staffing and notions of professional expertise which have survived since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and have skewed the entire discourse of curriculum. The report also rejects the claim that schools can deliver standards in the 'basics', or a broad curriculum, but not both, and argues for a re-assessment of 'basics' in line with 21<sup>st</sup> century needs. It proposes a curriculum which is driven the proposed 12 aims (see this briefing, page 1) and is realised through eight domains of knowledge, skill and enquiry, central to which are language, oracy and literacy. This also guarantees entitlement to breadth, balance and quality; combines a national framework with an innovative and locally-responsive 'community curriculum'; encourages greater professional flexibility and creativity; demands a more sophisticated debate about subjects, knowledge and skill than currently obtains; and requires a re-thinking of teaching roles, expertise and training.

**Assessment: reform, not tinkering.** The report unequivocally supports both public accountability and the raising of standards, but - like several others - it is critical of prevailing approaches to testing in primary schools and the collateral damage they are perceived to have caused. The issue is not *whether* children should be assessed or schools should be accountable, but *how*, and here the report commends not the marginal adjustment of recent proposals but a total re-think. Summative assessment at the end of the primary phase should be retained, but assessment for accountability should be uncoupled from assessment for learning. The narrow focus of SATs, which treat literacy and numeracy as proxies for the whole of primary education, should be replaced by a system which reports on children's attainment in all areas of their education, with minimal disruption and greater use of moderated teacher assessment. School and system performance should be monitored through sample testing and an improved model of inspection.

**A pedagogy of evidence and principle, not prescription.** The report finds strong support for the claim that national tests, national teaching strategies, inspection, centrally-determined teacher training and ring-fenced finance have together produced a 'state theory of learning'; and it views as evidentially suspect some of what has been imposed. The report argues for a pedagogy of repertoire and principle rather than recipe and prescription, and proposes reforms in teacher training to match. It wants teaching to be fully rather than selectively informed by research, especially by recent pedagogical, psychological, and neuroscientific evidence that clarifies the conditions for effective learning and teaching. The long-standing principle that it is not for government or government agencies to tell teachers how to teach, summarily abandoned in 1997, should be reinstated.

**Expertise for entitlement: re-thinking school staffing.** The report commends recent increases in the numbers of teachers and teaching assistants (TAs), and efforts to give teachers career incentives and support. But there is a historic and growing mismatch between the tasks primary schools are required to undertake and the professional resources available to them. TAs are no substitute for teachers, or for the expertise which a modern curriculum requires. At issue is the viability of a system that continues to treat the generalist class teacher role as the default and the report calls for a full review of primary school staffing which properly assesses the nature of the expertise which a modern primary education requires. It underlines the importance of teachers' subject and pedagogical content knowledge - the point at which the class teacher system is most vulnerable - because research shows that it is this, allied to the cognitive power of classroom interaction and the teacher's skill in providing feedback on which children's learning and understanding can build, that separates the best teachers from the rest. The report argues for training and resources which enable schools to mix the role of class teacher with those of semi-specialist and specialist, so that every school can meet give children access to the highest possible standards of teaching in all curriculum domains, not just the 'basics'. The report supports moves to distributed school leadership, but urges that heads be given more support, especially in their non-educational tasks, and that they should be helped to concentrate on the job for which they are most needed: leading learning.

**From novice to expert: reforming initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD).** While applauding the dedication of the primary teaching force, the report contests the often-repeated claim that England's teachers are 'the best-trained ever' on the grounds that it cannot be proved and encourages complacency, and that government ITE requirements have neglected certain vital aspects of teaching. In line with its recommendations on school staffing, the report wants ITE to prepare teachers for a greater variety of roles. It rejects training for mere 'delivery' or 'compliance' and urges that greater attention be given to evidence-based pedagogy, subject and pedagogical content expertise and the open exploration of questions of value and purpose. It questions the value and validity of government standards for professional certification and advancement, finding them out of line with research as well as too generalised to discriminate securely between different professional levels, and recommends their

replacement by a framework which is properly validated against research and pupil learning outcomes. It urges the end of 'one-size-fits-all' CPD and commends an approach which balances support for inexperienced and less secure teachers with freedom and respect for the experienced and talented.

**Schools in communities, schools as communities.** The report supports government initiatives to encourage multi-agency working across the boundaries of education and care, but argues for greater use of mutual professional support through clustering, federation, all-through schools and the exchange of specialist expertise. It highlights the considerable communal potential of schools, and wants this to be enacted through curriculum and pedagogy as well as through 'joined-up' relations with parents, carers and community groups. The report's proposed community curriculum partnerships could be catalysts for this activity. With their strong educational record and vital community role in mind, the report urges that small and rural schools be safeguarded against cost-cutting closure. It also warns against the closure of middle schools, commending attention to witnesses' arguments for their retention at a time of anxiety that children are growing up too soon. In the matter of funding, too, the report believes that the historic primary-secondary funding differential, which has defied the recommendations of official enquiries since 1931, and from which 7-11 schools suffer particular disadvantage, should finally be eliminated.

**Decentralising control, redirecting funds, raising standards.** The report finds a widespread perception that notwithstanding the delegation of school budgets and staffing, the centralisation of the core educational activities of curriculum, assessment, teaching, inspection and teacher training has gone too far. The report calls for the responsibilities of government, national bodies, local authorities and schools to be re-balanced; and for top-down control and edict to be replaced by professional empowerment, mutual accountability and proper respect for research and experience.

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## TO FIND OUT MORE

The Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation from 2006-12, it was based at the University of Cambridge and directed by Professor Robin Alexander. In 2012 it was superseded by the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, a not-for-profit company dedicated to building on and extending the Review's evidence and advancing the cause of high-quality primary education for every child. Since 2013 the Trust has received core funding from Pearson.

**THE FINAL REPORT.** *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, 608 pp, Routledge, 2010. ISBN 978-0-415-54871-7 (pb), 978-0-415-54870-0 (hb). Editor: Robin Alexander. Authorial team: Robin Alexander, Michael Armstrong, Julia Flutter, Linda Hargreaves, Wynne Harlen, David Harrison, Elizabeth-Hartley-Brewer, Ruth Kershner, John MacBeath, Berry Mayall, Stephanie Northen, Gillian Pugh, Colin Richards and David Utting. Order at <http://www.routledge.com/9780415548717>. Royalties from the final report are being used to support the education of some of the country's most marginalised and disadvantaged children.

**COMPANION RESEARCH VOLUME.** *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, 850 pp, Routledge, 2010. ISBN 978-0-415-54869-4 (hb), 978-0-415-846332 (pb). Editors: Robin Alexander, with Christine Doddington, John Gray, Linda Hargreaves and Ruth Kershner. 66 contributing authors from 21 university departments. Order at <http://www.routledge.com/9780415548717>.

**BOOKLET AND LEAFLET.** 42-page illustrated booklet, *Introducing the Cambridge Primary Review*, 42pp, 2009, ISBN 978-1-906478-9. Edited by Diane Hofkins and Stephanie Northen. This 4 page briefing, *The Final Report*. Download both at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).

**INTERIM REPORTS, BRIEFINGS, MEDIA RELEASES AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS.** 31 interim reports were published between October 2007 and February 2009. Those which were not been revised for inclusion in *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys* may be downloaded from the Review website, as may briefings on every report published to date and a range of other publications.

**POLICY PRIORITIES.** Following widespread consultation on the final report, the Review presented 14 *Policy Priorities for Primary Education* to the parties contesting the 2010 general election. These will be revisited for the 2015 election. Download from the website.

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**Note: the views expressed in Cambridge Primary Review reports and briefings do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge.**