



... children, their world, their education

THE FINAL REPORT OF THE CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW: COMMENTS ON THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

Robin Alexander

Published in *The Guardian*, 24 October 2009, under the title 'Ministers fail to learn lessons'

The government's instant dismissal of the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review has become as big a story as the report itself (see attached DCSF press release). The Review's email in-boxes are overflowing with messages not just about the findings that the press focused on – starting age, testing, centralisation – but with expressions of spluttering outrage shading into quiet despair at last week's statement from schools minister Vernon Coaker.

Thus is the circle of centralisation closed, sadly to the detriment of a government which has done an enormous amount for young children and primary education, as our report makes clear. If the report finds that primary schools 'are in good heart ... highly valued by children and parents and in general doing a good job ... the one point of stability and positive values in a world where everything else is changing and uncertain...' this is a tribute to government as well as teachers. But when things go wrong in a micro-managed system the finger of blame points in one direction only, and in such a situation this government allows itself only one response: lash out wildly.

So Vernon Coaker said that by virtue of having started three years ago the report was out of date. What a strange and desperate ploy. One would have thought that its length testifies to its depth and thoroughness, especially as when pressed this week by the Select Committee to justify the DCSF accusation, Ed Balls wrongly claimed that the report had ignored the Williams maths enquiry (mentioned on pages 38, 46, 49, 433, 434, 436, 506 and 575), the 'expert group' on assessment (mentioned by name on pages 47, 497 and 513, and by its findings in several other places) and the Lamb special needs review (the report argues for an SEN review with a broader and different remit).

That was not all the minister got wrong. Like many others, he (and in this matter the Conservatives) misrepresented as a bid to raise the school starting age our proposal that the government's Early Years Foundation Stage should be extended to age six, thus confusing curriculum (which is what the EYFS is about) with organisational structure. Though we said that in light of international evidence the starting age needs to be discussed, that was as far as we went. Get the early years curriculum right, we argued, and school starting age is no longer an issue.

The government claimed we wanted to scrap the English and maths tests (and by implication all assessment) and deny accountability. Here, perhaps sharing scriptwriters in hard times, Coaker's 'woolly' was matched by Gove's 'fuzzy.' We said, emphatically and repeatedly, that children must be assessed at the end of their primary schooling and that

schools should be fully accountable. Our evidence pointed to the *reform* of assessment and external school inspection, not their abolition – who in their right minds would argue for the latter? The imperative is to have a system of summative assessment which covers all aspects of the curriculum to which children are statutorily entitled, does not treat literacy and numeracy as proxies for the whole, builds on cumulative teacher assessment, does not distort the very thing it is trying to assess, and is externally moderated. The minister said the new report cards will provide the necessary breadth. In respect of matters like well-being they may, but the proposed report card measure of a child's entire primary school *attainment* remains precisely as now – test scores in the 3Rs at age 11.

On standards, the minister had us claiming that 'primary standards have not risen across the board.' Our report goes into detail on this vital matter and its conclusions are nuanced. If 'across the board' means all children, then we know that the attainment gap remains as wide as ever. If it means across the curriculum then we know about pupils' attainment only in a very narrow spectrum of their learning and the official definition of 'standards' is restricted and misleading. We looked carefully at what the national tests, international achievement surveys, school inspection and independent research tell us. We separated those claims about standards, positive and negative, which can be sustained from those which cannot, and we identified the methodological problems which get in the way of secure judgements. The true picture on standards is much more complex than the minister's rhetoric allows.

And so it goes on. What was especially rich about the DCSF response was its indignation over what our report 'failed to mention' (on which, as I've shown, it was wrong anyway). This from a government which has rejected every one of our 31 carefully-researched interim reports and now our 600-page final report, and has 'failed to mention' in its own work our evidence from over 4000 cited publications, 28 specially-commissioned research surveys and the views and experience of the thousands of individuals and organisations who through written submissions, emails and face-to-face meetings gave evidence to the Cambridge Primary Review in the hope that it would make a difference.

Nobody expects ministers to have the time to read every massive report that lands on their desks, not overnight anyway. But serious questions must now be asked about the advice on which the government's response was based, the advisers who provided the minister with such a hopeless script, and the wisdom of approaching a general election as the government which refuses to listen, engage and learn. Children, parents and teachers deserve better than this.

Published in The Guardian Online, 24 October 2009. For readers' reactions:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/oct/24/cambridge-review-primary-education>

Robin Alexander is Fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge and director of the Cambridge Primary Review. For information about the final report and linked briefing, booklet and conferences:

www.primaryreview.org.uk

The text of the Government's press release is attached.

Department for Children, Schools and Families

Full text of the Government's response to the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review

COAKER: CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW WOOLLY AND UNCLEAR ON SCHOOLS' ACCOUNTABILITY

16 October 2009

It's disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed on many major changes in primaries. The world has moved on since this review was started. If every child making progress and reaching their potential is what matters then Professor Alexander's proposals are a backward step.

We're already putting in place the most fundamental reforms for decades following Sir Jim Rose's primary review – to make the curriculum less prescriptive and free it up for teachers. He suggests a school starting age of six but this would be a completely counterproductive – we want to make sure children are playing and learning from an early age and to give parents the choice for their child to start in the September following their fourth birthday.

Our expert group on testing said it would be a backward step to scrap English and maths tests at 11 and we are piloting a School Report Card, which will give parents a far broader picture of how schools are doing.

The report is at best woolly and unclear on how schools should be accountable to the public – we're clear that it would be a retrograde step to return to days when the real achievements of schools were hidden.

And he completely fails to mention our own major review to transform SEN education and support for parents.

We completely refute the claim that primary standards have not risen across the board. Independent Ofsted inspections shows there have never been so many outstanding and good primary schools, and Key Stage 2 results show huge progress over the last decade – a tribute to the outstanding quality of teaching, training and heads.