



... children, their world, their education

NEWS RELEASE

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WHAT IS PRIMARY EDUCATION FOR? FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS FROM THE PRIMARY REVIEW'S LATEST RESEARCH REPORTS

Today, independently commissioned but coincidentally contributing to the Rose review of the primary curriculum which the government announced in December, the Primary Review publishes four reports which it hopes will stimulate debate about three fundamental questions: what is primary education for, what aims should it pursue and by what values should it be underpinned?

The reports have been commissioned from eight of the Review's team of 70 academic consultants. They draw on historical, contemporary and international sources, and on both academic research and government policy - some 280 published sources in all. Report 1/1 tracks changing official views of English primary education over the past century and draws lessons for current policy. Report 1/2 compares the official aims of primary education in England with those of other countries and identifies what we can learn from such international comparisons. Report 1/3 examines major economic and social trends in Britain which bear, or ought to bear, on discussion about the aims and curriculum of primary education. Report 1/4 looks at English primary education in a global context and discusses the global trends to which national education systems in the 21st century most need to respond and the tensions in educational goals which these may produce.

Among the many issues raised by these reports are the absence to date of a clear rationale for the various official lists of education aims which have been published, and possible contradictions in these specifications; the lifelong social and economic premium of well-taught basic skills at the primary stage yet the need for primary schools to lay a much broader foundation than the 'basics' alone; the necessity to balance the perceived needs of society and the economy with the needs and aspirations of the individual; the danger that detailed, centrally-prescribed educational aims will over-politicise young children's education; the risk that the prevailing values of instrumentality, marketisation and competition exacerbate rather than reduce inequality and distort the entire education debate; the tension between globalisation viewed as economic supremacy and humanity's need for interdependence and sustainability.

Today's reports have been commissioned as evidence to the Primary Review, which however reserves judgement on their findings pending its assessment of the full range of evidence. They are:

- ***Aims as Policy in English Primary Education***, by John White (Primary Review Research Survey 1/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-12-4.
- ***Aims and Values in Primary Education: England and other countries***, by Maha Shuayb and Sharon O'Donnell (Primary Review Research Survey 1/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-13-1.
- ***Aims for Primary Education: the changing national context***, by Stephen Machin and Sandra McNally (Primary Review Research Survey 1/3), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-14-8.
- ***Aims for Primary Education: changing global contexts***, by Rita Chawla-Duggan and John Lowe (Primary Review Research Survey 1/4), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-15-5.

See next page for selected quotations from these reports and notes on the Primary Review.

FOR BRIEFINGS/SUMMARIES AND COPIES OF THE FULL REPORTS: email richard@margrave.co.uk or cd372@cam.ac.uk (before 18 January) or download at www.primaryreview.org.uk (from 9 am on 18 January)

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FURTHER NOTES FOR EDITORS

Selected quotations from the four commissioned research reports published today:

'Over the last 40 years, the aims, purposes and values of primary education in the six surveyed countries appear to have passed through distinct phases. In the first phase, the child was the main focus ... In the second, social and economic concerns began to come to the fore; whilst today's aims focus on raising standards of achievement, and on preparing children for life in a multicultural society and in an ever-changing economic and work environment in which they will require a wide range of skills ... In England, the 2003 Primary National Strategy emphasised that at the same time as focusing on excellence, attainment and standards, primary education should also be concerned with enjoyment and a child's individual needs ... Many commentators have difficulty with today's hybrid, viewing it as contradictory.' (Research briefing 1/2)

'A big drawback of the 2007 QCA aims statement ... is that it is nothing but an ordered list. There is ... no indication of why the list has been constructed as it has, no stated rationale for it. Why is a rationale important? We need it in order to see how the items cohere together within a larger framework. Such a framework has been hinted at in many of the items, but not made explicit ... The problem for the QCA aims statement is that it is taken for granted, not argued-for. Not only this. Half-hidden behind the text, the picture is incomplete. Only a few features of the flourishing life have been sketched in. We need something more rounded, more satisfying to the understanding.' (Research report 1/1)

'For as long as the basic skills of literacy and numeracy remain far from universal they carry a high premium in terms of an individual's economic prospects ... If basic numeracy skills were universal, there would be no special "wage premium" attached to them in the labour market, but the economy as a whole would perform better ... Wage inequality, educational inequality and social immobility are all inter-related and are all affected by education, and the rising wage returns to education seem to be a likely mechanism in generating or at least exacerbating these inequalities. If the overall level of education were to improve substantially (such that the "long tail of underachievers" no longer existed, wage and income differentials between people with different levels of education would reduce and some of these social inequalities would be mitigated.' (Research briefing 1/3)

'Developed nations typically operate within both a strong sense of globalisation as an imperative and a particular view of what globalisation entails: international competition and the use of education to enable one national economy to outsmart another. In fact, there is less consensus about the meaning and impact of globalisation than may be apparent from this policy convergence, and a growing awareness that the inequalities it fuels may be intra-national as well as international, not least in the UK where the wealth gap is especially wide. Globalisation thus may lead to tensions and even contradictions in national education policy as 'social justice' competes with 'social cohesion for the sake of stability' and 'individualism, the market and meritocracy' ... Understandably, the goal of national global competitiveness has given considerable impetus to the drive to raise educational standards. But it has also led to standards being defined largely and relatively unquestioningly in terms of what is most marketable, even though what constitute standards and quality in education ought to be a matter for debate ... The consequent narrowing of the entire discourse of education is recognised only in some quarters as a risk.' (Research briefing 1/4)

The Primary Review interim reports

These four research surveys have been commissioned as expert evidence to the Review. Together with others in an interim report series which will eventually number 32, they are being published now in order to encourage discussion and debate. **However, the Primary Review reserves its own judgement on the matters with which these interim reports deal pending its assessment of the full range of evidence** (see 'focus and evidence' below). Once published, each interim report is available on the Review website both in full and in the form of a 3-4 page briefing. The interim reports are being published in thematic groups, with a single press release covering each group. So far, 16 interim reports have been published, on the Review's regional community soundings (12 October 2007), educational standards and testing (2 November 2007), children's lives outside school (23 November 2007), children's development and learning (14 December 2007). Earlier reports provoked considerable interest and comment. All are available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.

The Primary Review

Based at the University of Cambridge, supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and directed by Professor Robin Alexander, the Primary Review was launched in October 2006 and will run for two years. It aims to gather evidence from a wide range of sources, sift facts from rhetoric, and stimulate debate about the future

of this vital phase of education. The Review will culminate in a report containing recommendations for future policy and practice. The most comprehensive such enquiry since the Plowden Report of 1967, the Primary Review is examining how well the current English system of primary education is doing, how it can be improved and how primary schools should respond to the national and global challenges which lie ahead. Along the way, the Review is assessing the impact of government primary education initiatives of the past 20 years.

Focus and evidence

The Review is focusing on ten broad themes: (i) educational purposes and values, (ii) learning and teaching, (iii) curriculum and assessment, (iv) quality and standards, (v) diversity and inclusion, (vi) settings and professionals, (vii) parenting, caring and educating, (viii) children's lives beyond the school, (ix) school structures and phases, (x) educational funding and governance.

The Review draws on four kinds of evidence: (i) written submissions, of which a large number have been received, and on which a report will be issued early in 2008; (ii) oral soundings taken from schools and communities locally (the 'Community Soundings' reported on 12 October 2007) and from national groups and organisations; (iii) systematic searches of official national and international data; (iv) surveys of relevant published research - as in the present case - commissioned from leading national and international experts.

Direction and consultation

The Review is directed by Professor Robin Alexander, Fellow of Wolfson College at the University of Cambridge and Professor of Education Emeritus at the University of Warwick. The work of the Review's Cambridge-based central team is supported by 70 research consultants from universities across the UK and a 20-strong Advisory Committee, chaired by Dame Gillian Pugh, whose members come from both inside and outside education.

The Primary Review's launch last autumn followed nearly three years of planning and consultation involving the government, opposition parties, statutory national educational agencies, teaching unions, and representatives from local authorities, schools, educational research, parents' groups, business and religious communities. The consultations showed strong support for the Review and helped shape the way it is being undertaken. The Review is fully independent, but it is committed to constructive engagement with government, opposition, national agencies and the teaching unions, and it has already had the first of several planned sessions with the House of Commons Education Committee.

FOR FURTHER DETAILS: www.primaryreview.org.uk

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