



... children, their world, their education

NEWS RELEASE

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OTHER PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND OURS: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON?

THREE MORE RESEARCH REPORTS FROM THE PRIMARY REVIEW

When should children start compulsory schooling? What should they be taught? What is the impact on children's learning of different schooling structures? Is the English system too uniform and insufficiently flexible? What can be learned not just from education in other countries but also from practices outside the educational mainstream in Britain?

On 2 November 2007, the Primary Review used international pupil test data to raise questions about national standards in English primary education. Its reports on that occasion provoked considerable media, political and public interest. On 18 January 2008 the Primary Review once again brought international perspectives into the educational debate, this time in relation to the vital question of what, in a rapidly changing world, primary education is for, what aims it should pursue and by what values it should be underpinned. Today's reports use international comparison to consider the structure of the national primary system and the content of the primary school curriculum.

The reports have been commissioned from seven of the Review's team of 70 academic consultants. Reports 9/1 and 3/1 make comparisons between arrangements in England and other countries in respect of system organisation, policy, school structure, school starting ages, curriculum and assessment; Report 3/3 draws on developments both within and outside the UK, and on examples from both state and private schooling, to identify alternative ways of thinking about the curriculum. Between them, the three reports survey aspects of primary education in over thirty countries.

SEE NEXT PAGE FOR SOME KEY FINDINGS FROM THESE REPORTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE PRIMARY REVIEW.

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:

- *The Structure of Primary Education: England and other countries*, by Anna Riggall and Caroline Sharp, National Foundation for Educational Research (Primary Review Research Survey 9/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-17-9.
- *Primary Curriculum and Assessment: England and other countries*, by Kathy Hall and Kamil Øzerk, National University of Ireland at Cork and University of Oslo (Primary Review Research Survey 3/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-18-6.
- *Primary Curriculum Futures*, by James Conroy, Moira Hulme and Ian Menter, University of Glasgow (Primary Review Research Survey 3/3), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-19-3.

FOR BRIEFINGS/SUMMARIES AND COPIES OF THE FULL REPORTS: email richard@margrave.co.uk or cd372@cam.ac.uk (before 8 February 2008) or download at www.primaryreview.org.uk (from 9 am on 8 February).

ENDS

FURTHER NOTES FOR EDITORS

- **When should children start primary school?** Children in England start their formal schooling one year and in some cases two years earlier than in many other countries, including some countries whose pupils later outperform their English peers in international surveys of educational achievement (see also Primary Review Research Survey 4/2). Report 9/1 shows that while the value of high-quality pre-school education is beyond dispute, the assumption that an early *primary* school starting age is beneficial for children's later attainment is not well supported by the research evidence. Meanwhile, there are concerns about the nature of what is provided for four-year olds - the youngest pupils - in primary school reception classes.
- **Standardisation, flexibility and quality.** Reports 3/3 and 9/1 chart major changes in primary education since the 1960s, showing how the pace of change increased markedly after 1988 (the Education Reform Act) and even more so after New Labour's arrival in 1997. However, much of the change has been in the direction of increased standardisation and uniformity, especially in curriculum, teaching methods, assessment, inspection and teacher training, and the desirability of this trend is open to question. This is particularly the case if, as earlier reports in this series show, the educational efficacy of some of the recent initiatives may also be disputed.
- **Back to basics?** The international evidence cited by Report 3/1 shows that the 'basics' of language and mathematics are a consistently prominent feature of national primary education curricula. However, this does not mean that they are conceived, let alone taught, identically. Some countries give language and literacy absolute pre-eminence rather than, as in England, parity with numeracy. Others apply a more comprehensive concept of literacy than is generally advocated in England.
- **The rest of the curriculum: what should be taught?** Internationally, there is considerable variation in the emphasis given at the primary stage to science, information technology, foreign languages, the humanities and the arts. Informing these variations are differences in educational values, with countries like England pursuing an increasingly instrumental and skills-based primary curriculum while others show a greater interest in the child's all-round development and understanding.
- **Citizenship and social education: diversity, identity and cohesion.** England's official curriculum documentation emphasises pluralism, diversity and multi-culturalism. In many other countries these are given relatively less emphasis than common values and shared national identity.
- **Testing and monitoring.** In England (Report 3/1) there is more external, standard testing than in many comparable countries; it happens more frequently; it starts at a younger age; it occurs in more subjects; its outcomes are published in league tables; it is used for both pupil assessment and school accountability. International evidence confirms the prominence of the testing culture in England's primary schools - a culture which has been critically examined in earlier reports in this series - e.g. *Community Soundings*, reports 4/1, 4/2, 3/4 and 5/3.
- **Educational alternatives.** Report 3/3 looks at alternative ways of thinking about the curriculum that have emerged in recent years from outside as well as inside the state-maintained primary education system. It cites evidence to show that such alternatives can be at least as effective as mainstream approaches, and that while there is no 'best buy' they share certain tendencies: more time spent on reading with and to children, less time with computers and television; greater emphasis on the life of the imagination; continuing emphasis on literacy, though more broadly interpreted than at present; genuine partnership between teacher and taught; a more intimate institutional - as opposed to class - environment.

The Primary Review interim reports

These three research surveys have been commissioned as expert evidence to the Primary 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, 19 interim reports have been published: on the Review's regional community soundings (12 October 2007); on educational standards, testing and assessment (2 November 2007); on children's lives outside

school, and on parenting, caring, educating and the work of schools and other agencies (23 November 2007); on children's development, learning and special educational needs (14 December 2007); and on aims, values and the national and international context (18 January 2008). All are available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.

The Primary Review

Based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, 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), from teachers 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's director, Professor Robin Alexander, is Fellow of Wolfson College at the University of Cambridge, Professor of Education Emeritus at the University of Warwick and former Professor of Education at the University of Leeds. 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 in autumn 2006 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 financially, politically and professionally independent, but it is committed to constructive engagement with government, opposition, national agencies and the teaching unions.

FOR FURTHER DETAILS: www.primaryreview.org.uk

MEDIA ENQUIRIES ONLY: Richard Margrave, Primary Review Director of Communications:
T: 01277 214 219 or 07789 692 360 E: richard@margrave.co.uk