



... children, their world, their education

PRIMARY REVIEW  
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS  
OVERVIEW OF  
3/1, 3/3, 9/1

## THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF ENGLISH PRIMARY EDUCATION

### International perspectives

This briefing provides an overview of the three Primary Review Research Reports to be published on 8 February 2008. The reports relate to two of the Primary Review's ten themes, *Structure and Phases* (theme 9) and *Curriculum and Assessment* (theme 3). Together they continue the exploration, initiated by reports 1/1, 1/2, 1/3 and 1/4 (published 18 January 2008) of what primary education is for, how it should be organised and on what kinds of understanding and skill it should concentrate.

A second continuity from the previous four reports is the use of international comparison to illuminate both the distinctive features of English primary education and alternatives to current thinking and provision. Reports 9/1 and 3/1 make explicit comparisons between arrangements in England and other countries in respect of system organisation, policy, school structure, school starting ages, curriculum and assessment, while Report 3/3 uses a more eclectic comparative approach, drawing on developments both within and outside the UK and from both state and private schooling, to identify alternative ways of thinking about the curriculum. Between them, Reports 9/1 and 3/3 survey aspects of primary education in over thirty countries, and five of this group's seven authors work outside England.

The publication of these three reports also provides an opportunity to take wider stock of the international dimension of the Primary Review's commissioned research surveys. To date they provide an international perspective on:

- Globalisation and the changing international context of education (report 1/4, 18 January 2008)
- Educational structures and policies (report 9/1, 8 February 2008)
- Educational aims and values (report 1/2, 18 January 2008)
- The curriculum (reports 3/1 and 3/3, 8 February 2008)
- Assessment and testing (reports 3/1, 4/2 and 3/4, 8 February 2008 and 2 November 2007)
- Standards of pupil attainment (report 4/2, 2 November 2007).

The three reports published on 8 February 2007 are among the thirty research surveys which the Primary Review has commissioned from its team of 70 academic consultants. Together with the Review's search of official data, these investigate published evidence from a wide range of sources, both official and independent. The research surveys and searches of official data are in turn complemented by the many written submissions which the Review has received since its launch in October 2006 and by the various programmes of face-to-face local, regional and national soundings. The reports and their accompanying briefings may be downloaded at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).

***The structure of Primary Education: England and other countries*, by Anna Riggall and Caroline Sharp (Primary Review Research Report 9/1)** describes the current structure of primary schooling in England, charts key changes since the publication of the Plowden Report in 1967, and then compares arrangements for primary education in six countries (England, Scotland, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and New Zealand). Its comparisons cover decision-making, the balance of control between national government, local government and schools, school starting ages, the length of the school year, the duration of primary schooling, school size and the relationship of pre-school and primary education. It notes, notwithstanding claims commonly made for distinctively English features like an early school starting age, the difficulty of proving a relationship between such features and standards of pupil attainment.

**Primary Curriculum and Assessment: England and other countries, by Kathy Hall and Kamil Øzerk (Primary Review Research Report 3/1)** first provides a general overview of primary curriculum and assessment in 22 countries including England, noting both general similarities, at least at the level of statutory requirements and formal curriculum labels, and areas where English curriculum and assessment requirements diverge from those elsewhere. It then looks more closely at curriculum and assessment arrangements in England, the rest of the UK, France, Norway and Japan, noting as key areas of difference the degree of emphasis on the 'basics' of language and mathematics, the way those 'basics' are defined, the handling of cultural diversity and the dominance of the testing culture in England and the way tests are used as instruments of school accountability.

**Primary Curriculum Futures, by James Conroy, Moira Hulme and Ian Menter (Primary Review Research Report 3/3)** draws in a more eclectic way on the published education literature to identify alternative ways of thinking about the primary curriculum to those embodied in the National Curriculum which has been a statutory requirement for all schools since the 1988 Education Reform Act. It charts political, cultural and economic changes bearing on curriculum thinking and requirements and draws on alternative curricula that have emerged in recent years from both inside and outside the maintained education system, noting the particular influence of ideas from various schools and movements not subject to state control. It also assesses the efficacy of some of these approaches and identifies their shared principles.

*In drawing attention to major issues explored in these three reports we stress that the views expressed in them are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Primary Review. They have been commissioned as evidence to the Review and the Review reserves judgement on the conclusions they reach pending its assessment of the full range of evidence from all the sources listed above.*

The parenthesised numbers below refer to the research reports in question.

### **Similarity and difference: probing below the surface**

Internationally, there are remarkable surface similarities between national systems of primary education. However, such similarities are very much at the level of officially-prescribed structures and the formal labels which are used to define what is taught, and below this level they may be more variation than is evident from a comparison of what is contained in the official literature. Yet even at the latter level, there are considerable differences in features such as the age of starting school, length of the school year, average size of school and length of primary schooling (9/1). Similarly, apparent curriculum convergence in subject labels may mask substantial differences in the way individual subjects are conceived, as well as, naturally, in the way they are taught (3/1).

### **Change, standardisation and flexibility**

'Since the 1967 Plowden Report there have been a number of significant structural changes in English primary education, many of them initiated by or as a consequence of the 1988 Education Reform Act. These have resulted in an increased standardisation of primary school curriculum, teaching, assessment and inspection arrangements across the country' (9/1). Yet 'education should become more fluid, with a greater emphasis on the dispositions of the learner than exclusively on what is to be known ... Despite a changing landscape it is not easy to shift existing paradigms and long established practices' (3/3).

### **When should children start primary school?**

English children, as is well known, start compulsory schooling at a younger age than in many other countries. Notwithstanding the fact that in international achievement surveys (as shown in an earlier Primary Review Research Report, 4/2 by Chris Whetton, Graham Ruddock and Liz Twist) pupils in some countries starting school as late as age 7 may outperform those in English primary schools by age 11, it is generally presumed that the earlier children start school the higher the educational standards they will achieve. However, 'the assumption that an early starting age is beneficial for children's later attainment is not well supported in the research and therefore remains open to

question, while there are particular concerns about provision for four year olds in school reception classes' (9/1).

### **Versions of the 'basics'**

The international evidence shows that the 'basics' of language and mathematics are a consistently prominent feature of primary schooling. However, beyond that unanimity of commitment there are significant variations. Some countries treat language and literacy as pre-eminent rather than, as in the English '3Rs' tradition, giving literacy and numeracy parity. England includes science in the core curriculum alongside language and maths; many other countries do not, preferring to give more equal attention to science, humanities and the arts. Informing such differences are variations in the emphasis given to instrumental, developmental and cultural goals at the primary stage. (3/1, and see also the previous group of reports in this series, especially 1/1, 1/2 and 1/3).

### **What about the rest of the curriculum?**

The emphasis given to information technology varies, and England remains unusual in not - or not yet - making a modern foreign language compulsory at the primary stage. Another key difference is in the handling of culture, difference and identity. England's official curriculum documentation emphasises pluralism, diversity, tolerance and multi-culturalism. In many other countries these are given relatively less emphasis than common values and shared national identity. (3/1)

### **Testing pupils and monitoring schools**

'The scale of assessment for monitoring and accountability is of a quite different order in England compared to other countries' (3/1). In England, there is more external, standard testing; it happens more frequently; it starts at a younger age; it occurs in more subjects; its outcomes are published in league tables ... Formal assessment in England, compared to our other review countries, is pervasive, highly consequential, and taken by officialdom to portray the actual quality of schools ... What distinguishes assessment policy in England is the degree to which it is used as a tool (a) to control what is taught, (b) to police how well it is taught, and (c) to encourage parents to use assessment information to select schools for their children.' (3/1)

### **Changing culture, changing curriculum**

As shown in previous reports in this series (notably 1/3 and 1/4), reform of the primary curriculum cannot be separated from changes in the fabric of national life. 'We have seen a radical move away from a dependence on the historic resources of industrialization and towards a knowledge-based economy ... Migration has created new ways of looking at education which depend less than in previous ages on the transmission of a homogeneous culture, though this remains under review ... There is a perception that these shifts in population demography, together with the growing influence of mass media, have left youth bereft of the emotional resources to deal with an ever more complex culture (3/3).'

### **Educational alternatives and pupil performance**

'Educational alternatives range widely in their origins and motivations from the pragmatic to the principled and from left to right of the political and educational centres ... What appears to characterise all alternatives is that children's academic success in them is markedly better than in mainstream schooling ... These better than average performances are not simply explained by economic advantage ... However, they do share some tendencies, including ... less time spent using televisions and computers, more time spent on reading with and to children, greater emphasis on the life of the imagination, closer relationships between student and teacher ... continuing emphasis on literacy and numeracy, though interpreted more broadly than at present, more emphasis on generic teacher dispositions and skills than particular teaching methods, genuine partnership between student and teachers, a more intimate institutional - as opposed to class - environment' (3/3).

## Rethinking the primary curriculum

From this and the previous group of Primary Review Research Reports - 1/1, 1/2, 1/3, 1/4, 3/1, 3/3, 9/1 - it is clear that many cherished beliefs and unquestioned assumptions about the structure, goals and content of English primary education are open to question, and that the radical agenda of the Primary Review is justified.

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### FURTHER INFORMATION

The reports on which this briefing is based:

Hall, K. and Øzerk, K. (2008) *Primary Curriculum and Assessment: England and other countries* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-18-6.

Conroy, J., Hulme, M. and Menter I. (2008) *Primary Curriculum Futures* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/3), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-19-3.

Riggall, A and Sharp, C. (2008) *The Structure of Primary Education: England and other countries* (Primary Review Research Survey 9/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-17-9.

These reports are available at [www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/Interimreports](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/Interimreports) and form part of the Primary Review's series of interim reports. Two of the 32 interim reports deal with the opinion-gathering strands of the Review's evidence base. The remainder report on the thirty surveys of published research which the Review has commissioned from its 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education and to stimulate debate during the period leading up to the publication of the Review's final report in late 2008. Separate briefings are available for each report in addition to this briefing overview.

The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Review has ten themes and four strands of evidence (submissions, community and national soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data). The reports summarised in this briefing relate to the **Research Survey** strand and to Theme 9, **Structures and Phases**, and Theme 3, **Curriculum and Assessment**.

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**Note: the views expressed in the Primary Review Research Reports are those of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Primary Review, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge.**