



... children, their world, their education

Times Educational Supplement 'Platform', Friday 13 October 2006

A comprehensive study, launched today,
aims to put the life of the child back on top of the agenda,
writes **Robin Alexander**

ALTERNATIVE VISION FOR PRIMARY CHILDREN?

Today, supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, we launch the Primary Review, the most comprehensive enquiry for 40 years into England's system of primary education.

The approaching anniversary of the Plowden Report, published in 1967, should give us pause for thought. Now remembered mainly by primary teachers approaching retirement, though still routinely maligned by commentators who haven't read it, Plowden's 1,189-page report had three abiding virtues: it was firmly grounded in evidence; it offered a vision; and - well worth emphasising when childhood itself seems under threat - it was deeply committed to children, their lives and their primary education.

Times, values and the fabric of national life have changed almost beyond recognition, and the evidence base for a reassessment of primary education is now vastly more extensive than in the 1960s, but the Primary Review will try to emulate those virtues, at least.

But is it really needed? Hasn't the government, with its endless parade of initiatives culminating in a national strategy for primary education, cracked it? Is there anything left to say or do?

Actually, yes. Such is the grip of official thinking on the work of primary schools that it's assumed that policy alone sets the boundaries of what is and what might be.

But Britain is a maelstrom of competing values, and in the 2005 general election only 22 per cent of the electorate actually voted for the government whose own values daily penetrate the lives of every child and teacher in the land. So this, in one sense, is an exercise in democracy, for as well as assessing a vast array of published evidence, the Primary Review invites everyone and anyone to voice their ideas and join in the debate.

It follows that the debate should dwell in part on the two decades of government intervention to which schools have been subject - national curriculum, testing and inspection, national literacy, numeracy and primary strategies, workforce reform, targets, personalised learning, and much more. Are standards really rising? Are today's teachers truly 'the best ever'? Are they genuinely behind the reforms? Do they indeed operate within a framework of evidence-based 'best practice'? Does the curriculum at last balance 3Rs excellence with breadth, balance and enjoyment? Are schools inclusively reaching children and families at the margins? Is centralised reform the best way? Such claims must be independently tested.

But the Review isn't an audit of government policy. That would be needlessly limiting and unhelpfully adversarial. Take values again. Our system of primary education was created on the basis of a clear view of society and people's place within it. But

Britain today is unsure of itself. Some still pursue the vision of a pluralist multi-culture. Others deplore the loss of shared identity and civic commitment, or warn of a country sleepwalking into communal division and strife. It's time to reopen discussion about primary education's place in the good society.

In the era of globalisation, this Review must have an international outlook too. But global economic competitiveness is only part of the story. The gap between the world's rich and poor continues to widen, while there's a fast-growing consensus that escalating climate change may make this the make-or-break century for humanity as a whole. What are the prospects for our children, and for their children? What are the implications for education? Do we continue tacitly to endorse a culture predicated on individualism, consumerism and ungoverned economic growth? Or educate for interdependence, sustainability and perhaps even survival?

Moving to the classroom, our understanding of human development and learning, and of the conditions needed for teaching which engages and advances children's thinking and understanding, have been much boosted by developments in cognitive, neurological, linguistic and pedagogical research. The evidence base for effective teaching is vastly stronger now than it was 40 years ago. But research also shows that the radical implications of this evidence may not yet be fully understood, still less reflected in the classroom. 'What works' may jingle politically, but it hardly captures this work's more exacting potential.

These are just examples from the Review's ten broad themes, which range from aims through learning, teaching, curriculum, standards and school organisation to funding and governance, taking in vital matters like parenting, caring and inclusion. The Review is tackling the themes by triangulating four kinds of evidence: submissions from all who wish to contribute; soundings from leading national figures and, through meetings around the country, from parents, teachers and children; searches of official data; and surveys of published research.

We've already commissioned 60 leading academics to undertake the 31 surveys – itself the biggest sweep yet of primary education research. We shall publish these as they appear, starting next spring, and they in their turn will prompt further debate. Then, in 2008, when all the evidence from the four sources is gathered in and thoroughly mulled over, we shall publish our final report.

We want the Primary Review to make a positive and lasting difference to children, their education and their lives. It can do so only if it is informed by those at the cutting edge of education, many of whom read *TES*. So please take part. Log onto our website to find out more. Join in the debate. Submit your evidence. Tell us what you think.

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