



... children, their world, their education

PRIMARY REVIEW
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS
OVERVIEW OF
1/1, 1/2, 1/3, 1/4

AIMS AND VALUES IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

National and international perspectives

This briefing provides an overview of the four Primary Review Research Reports to be published on 18 January 2008. The reports relate to the first of the Primary Review's ten themes, *Purposes and Values*. Together they offer historical, contemporary and international perspectives on the question of what in a fast-changing and uncertain world the central aims of England's system of primary education should be, and by what values that system might be underpinned.

The international focus of two of the four reports is consistent with the stance taken by the Primary Review as a whole. In this respect the Review makes an important break with the more inward-looking discourse which has tended to dominate English primary education for much of the past half-century. However, to say that national education systems can no longer afford to be exclusively national in outlook implies no reduction in the pre-eminence which this Review is giving to children and childhood, and indeed this provided the focus for the previous eight reports in this series (23 November 2007 and 14 December 2007). Nor does an international outlook mean that local conditions and needs are ignored: they too have already featured prominently in this series (12 October 2007). It is more a question of balance, of how we can do justice, simultaneously and in due measure, to individual, local, national and international considerations when formulating aims and curriculum for England's public system of primary education in the 21st century. There are other considerations and imperatives to be balanced - ethical as well as instrumental, cultural as well as economic. All this remains central to the Primary Review's re-assessment of the proper character of England's system of primary education.

The four reports 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 issues covered by these four reports are complex and in some instances contested, and we would encourage readers to read the full reports and briefings rather than rely on this overview alone. *We would also stress that the views expressed in the reports and briefings 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.*

It is also important to note that the question of educational aims and values requires measured and informed discussion rather than instant judgement. For that reason, this particular overview briefing departs from earlier practice by adopting an explicitly interrogative format in drawing out selected issues from the four reports.

The reports and their accompanying briefings may be downloaded at www.primaryreview.org.uk. Between them they draw on over 280 published evidential sources, both official and independent.

Aims and values in primary education: the four reports

***Aims as policy in English primary education*, by John White (Primary Review Research Report 1/1)** tracks changing official views of the aims of English primary education over the past century or

so, up to and including those recently promulgated by QCA and the values underpinning the 2004 Children's Act and the 2007 Children's Plan. It compares these with official statements of aims for primary education from Scotland and Northern Ireland, and sets them alongside critical consideration of aims and values from the theoretical literature. It finds the recent official aims statements more convincing than the 1980s and 1990s versions, though still lacking the vital ingredient of a clear rationale.

***Aims and Values in Primary Education: England and other countries*, by Maha Shuayb and Sharon O'Donnell (Primary Review Research Report 1/2)** expands the geographical frame of reference to include a detailed and systematic analysis of policy and published research on the aims and values of primary education from England, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland and Sweden. It notes a recurrent and unresolved tension between goals to do with individual self-fulfilment and those which seek to address national economic need; it charts increasing commitment to citizenship and, more recently, to healthy, safe and sustainable living; and it finds that despite variation in national emphasis there are more similarities than differences between the countries concerned in the way primary education is viewed.

***Aims for Primary Education: the changing national context*, by Stephen Machin and Sandra McNally (Primary Review Research Report 1/3)** examines major economic and social trends in Britain which bear, or ought to bear, on discussion about educational aims and the future character of the curriculum. Working from a predominantly economic perspective the report concentrates on three key issues: (i) the labour and broader social impacts of education, and their implications for educational standards, with particular reference to the question of the economic returns of education at different levels, including primary; (ii) recent trends in wage inequality, educational inequality and social mobility, and the relationship between them; (iii) the impact and viability in the educational context of the market theories and disciplines which since the 1980s have featured prominently in political discourse and government policy.

***Aims for Primary Education: changing global contexts*, by Rita Chawla-Duggan and John Lowe (Primary Review Research Report 1/4)** reviews the growing international prominence of primary education following the 1990 Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), current efforts to achieve universal primary education (UPE) and the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It considers key tenets in the new international vocabulary of education: globalisation, the knowledge-based economy, lifelong learning and the benchmarking of standards, noting tensions between competition and equity and the growing international divergence of public and private schooling. The survey adds brief case studies of recent systemic primary education reforms in India and China, the world's two largest countries by population and two of its fastest-growing economies.

Although these research surveys were independently conceived and undertaken, collectively they raise some important generic issues. As we proceed further with the process of publishing these interim reports an increasing number of these resonate with issues already identified. Readers should study the individual reports and briefings rather than rely on this overview, but here are some tasters. The parenthesised numbers refer to the reports in question.

Determining aims for a national education system is a complex and sensitive task

- At the time of the last major report on English primary education (Plowden, in 1967) primary schools exercised considerable autonomy in the matter of educational aims and values. Now they are determined by central government and its agencies and are likely soon to have statutory force (1/1). How viable is a single set of centrally-determined educational aims and values for a large and complex educational system - encompassing 17,300 primary schools and over 4 million children - in a country of such exceptional cultural diversity?
- Recent official statements of educational aims have become increasingly lengthy and comprehensive, yet they continue to lack a clear rationale and beg all kinds of questions about the society and world today's children will inherit and the lives they will lead (1/1). Do aims presented without argument or justification have educational validity or practical use?

- In the matters of how educational aims should be determined and what they might be, how might England usefully emulate Scotland and/or Northern Ireland, or indeed other countries? (1/1, 1/2, 1/4).

Priorities and balance

- There is an often-noted tension between supposedly 'child-centred' aims to do with the development and needs of the individual and 'societally-centred' aims concerned with the economy and social cohesion (1/1, 1/2, 1/4). How real is this tension? How in a state education system can both kinds of aim be effectively pursued? Do centrally-determined aims tend to put the perceived needs of the state before those of the individual? Is there a risk that the entire process may become over-politicised?
- For the primary stage, the 'basics' of literacy and numeracy have always been regarded as pre-eminent, and this continues to hold not just in England but internationally (1/1, 1/2). Even for the young child who is still many years from adulthood and the workplace, numeracy and - especially - literacy can be shown to carry a lifelong premium which is economic as well as cognitive and social (1/3). However, does this evident consensus once and for all settle the debate about the aims of primary education? With growing concern about equity (1/3, 1/4) and childhood well-being (1/1 and previous reports, especially *Community Soundings*), not to mention creativity, citizenship, the sense of place and time, global understanding, moral development and spiritual awareness (report on the submissions, forthcoming), how can a view of aims be arrived at which is not only educationally balanced but also viable as school and classroom practice?

Aims and equity

- The English education system now has aims which are expected to inform the work of all of its schools and are presumed to meet the needs of all the children who attend them (1/1). Yet not all children are equally well served by what is provided (1/2); the well-documented gap in pupil attainment at the top of the primary school conforms closely with social and economic inequalities and with measures of disadvantage and deprivation (previous reports, especially 4/3, 5/1, 5/2 and 7/1); and some educational policies and practices may themselves even aggravate inequality (1/3 and previous reports, especially 8/1 and 8/2).
- Marketisation, 'choice' and inter-school competition appear to be among the policies which exacerbate educational inequality because not all parents are equal in their capacity to access and interpret the information on which choice is based, or indeed to act on that information (1/3 and earlier reports, notably 7/1) ... Parental inability to exercise choice may lead to the educational segregation of their children ... There are strong reasons to question the efficacy and fairness of 'choice and competition' as a school improvement strategy (1/3).
- The no less pervasive notion of the 'knowledge-based economy' ... may lead to an overly instrumental view of education, elevating efficiency above equity and pursuing social cohesion without addressing the root causes of inequality (1/4).
- In light of the above, is the pursuit of greater equity a matter of strategy alone, or does it imply a need to re-think schools' core purposes, values and priorities as well?

Educate locally, think globally

- Developed nations operate within ... a particular view of what globalisation entails: international competition and the use of education to enable one national economy to outsmart another (1/4) ... Globalisation 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' (1/4).
- 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 marketable, even though what constitute standards and quality in education ought to be a matter for debate (1/4).

- Has the prevailing view of globalisation produced the educational tensions and distortions claimed in Report 1/4? How far is this view compatible with the concern, now voiced with an increasing sense of urgency, that schools should educate for global awareness, interdependence and sustainability (1/1, 1/2 and previous reports, notably *Community Soundings*)?

FURTHER INFORMATION

The reports on which this briefing is based:

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.

These reports are available at 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 1, **Purposes and Values**.

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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.