

Where now after damning indictment of education?

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The Cambridge review of primary education has been three years in the making. More than 70 academics have produced 29 reports with thousands of children, parents, teachers and headteachers taking part in surveys across the country. It presents a damning view of the primary curriculum, which it suggests has failed generations of children, as well as a blueprint for a radical new kind of schooling.

What is wrong with the curriculum?

There is an over-emphasis on the skills of reading, writing and maths at the expense of other subjects, the report claims. This limits children's enjoyment of school and risks severely compromising their natural curiosity, imagination and love of learning, it says.

National testing at 11 has meant schools focus on short-term learning at the cost of children's long-term development. The most "conspicuous casualties" are arts and the humanities. Learning that requires time for talking, problem solving and exploring ideas is sacrificed for what it describes as a "memorisation and recall" style of learning.

There is a false belief, it claims, that a focus on basic skills combined with a breadth of learning covering a full range of subjects cannot be achieved. This is a false debate, according to the report's lead author, Robin Alexander, of Cambridge University, who cites evidence that schools that blend literacy and numeracy into the wider teaching of other subjects often get the best results.

He insists some schools are making the current curriculum work but that it is an obstacle rather than an aid to the success of their children.

How did it happen?

For decades there has been a divide between the "basics" - reading, writing, maths and science - and the broader subjects of arts, humanities, music and PE. In 1904 pupils learned 10 subjects including those basics, PE, drawing and manual work for the boys, housewifery for the girls. By 1967 there were 12 subjects after religious education and sex education were added.

Today there are 15 subjects. The report points out the longstanding nature of the problem, but says that this government has made it worse with the introduction of the national strategies for literacy and numeracy putting ever more emphasis on the "basic skills".

The fact that the national strategies are managed within the Department for Children, Schools and Families separately from the national curriculum, which currently sits within the Qualification and Curriculum Authority, has meant they are disjointed. Literacy and numeracy has come to dominate nearly 50% of classroom time.

The report is critical of what it claims has been the politicisation of basic skills whereby the government saw the measures of skills as an annex to a party political agenda to prove standards are improving, rather than an integral part of the curriculum. The DCSF has attempted to micro-manage schools, giving them little freedom to respond to their pupils' particular needs and other agencies such as Ofsted have restricted what they can do by rewarding specific practices.

What does the review propose?

First it says that curriculum changes cannot exist with the current system of Sats and league tables in place. How the review will suggest they be scrapped and replaced will be the subject of its final report, later this year.

Today's report sets out plans for a new curriculum which includes 12 aims for each pupil. They are: wellbeing, engagement, empowerment, autonomy, encouraging respect and reciprocity, promoting interdependence, citizenship, celebrating culture, exploring, fostering skills, exciting imagination and enacting dialogue. Their learning should cover eight domains, including arts and creativity, language, oracy and literacy, and science and technology which would replace the current narrower subject areas.

Every lesson should work towards the aims and sit within the eight domains, but it should be left to schools to decide the content of classes. The national curriculum would only cover 70% of lesson time and in the other 30%, schools would develop their own "community curriculums" to give them more autonomy and freedom. Alexander said: "We recognise that there are local issues that can't be addressed through the national curriculum. A school in central Birmingham and a rural school in North Yorkshire operate in very different ways."

The model attempts to fundamentally shift responsibility for designing how children learn back from the government and its agencies to teachers in schools. It says that in a "utilitarian and philistine" age there is pressure to make an economic case for creativity in education, but conclude that it is fundamental to children's happiness and wellbeing, as well as raising their job prospects in the future.

Will it happen?

Shortly after the Cambridge review was announced in 2006, the government launched its own review led by Sir Jim Rose. Alexander, Rose and Chris Woodhead, the former Ofsted chief inspector, made up the three wise men who reviewed the curriculum for the government in 1991. The government's deployment of Rose was seen by many as a rival to the Cambridge review.

Ministers are under no obligation to respond to today's study but issued a statement last night saying it would be considered as part of Rose's review. But with much of the educational establishment firmly behind the Cambridge review, ignoring it could set the government on a collision course with schools.

One influential teachers' union source said last night that the government had deliberately divided Rose and Alexander and given Rose a narrow remit to prevent severe criticisms. Rose responded that such accusations were "rubbish", and that although his review was narrower with a remit set by ministers, it was independent. He said he would study the Cambridge review closely.