BBC NEWS

All change for primary schools?

By Mike Baker

'This book will change your life'. That is the sort of blurb you often read on the dust jackets of self-help books.

It is usually overblown. But the report of the Cambridge Primary Review should carry a similar testimonial: "this book should change English primary schools forever".

This is the most thorough, research-based analysis of primary schools I have seen in over two decades of reporting on education.

The point is not whether every one of its 75 recommendations is right, but rather that it is just so refreshing to read a discussion of primary schools that is neither ideological nor obsessed with the short-term.

Some recommendations have already been dismissed by the government as "woolly thinking" or "retrograde".

Well, I think we should have a minute's silence to consider the wisdom of a dismissive, knee-jerk response to a 580-page report that has taken six years to compile and which draws on a solid research foundation.

'3Rs versus progressive'

If this is what we get from genuinely independent reviews into education - as opposed to those hurriedly commissioned by government - let's have more of them.

The most fundamental point the report makes is that we must end the absurd polarity that dominates so much political and media discussion about primary schools.

Too much debate is framed in terms of the 3Rs versus progressive, play-based learning as if these have to be opposites.

Anyone who says that schools could do more to encourage creativity or to teach a broader curriculum is quickly shot down for ignoring the basics.

Yet, as the report shows, the evidence is clear: primary schools that get the best results in the maths and English also teach a broader curriculum.

Nor does suggesting that children should start the formal curriculum at age six rather than five mean that the Cambridge Review is against teaching the basics of numeracy and literacy.

'Against testing?'

It is rather a question of when, not whether, to start formal teaching of the basics. Nor is anyone suggesting that a four-year-old who can already read should be held back.

Another absurd simplification the report deals with is the notion that you are either for testing or against it.

The report wants to scrap school league tables and sweep away the current Sats at age 11 in England (as has already happened in Wales).

But that does not mean it is against testing children.

Indeed, its proposals would probably mean more testing, but in a form that covers the full range of the curriculum, that does not bring high-stakes judgements for schools and teacher, and that neither narrows the curriculum nor constrains teaching.

A second broad theme behind the report is that we need to rethink many of the assumptions about primary schools that are rooted in their Victorian past.

These Victorian legacies include: reliance on the generalist class teacher rather than specialist subject teachers, lower per pupil funding than in secondary schools, lower status for primary school teachers, a formal education starting age of five, and long summer holidays which are left over from the days when children were needed to bring in the harvest.

Another legacy of primary education's origins is the relatively low emphasis given to the spoken language, compared to reading and writing.

Of course, today's primary schools no longer treat pupils as small people who should be seen and not heard, but the report suggests that in many classrooms "talk remains far from achieving its true potential".

Speaking aloud, to both individuals and to groups, is such a big part of our adult lives, both working and social, that we could do with more early help to do it effectively and well.

The third broad theme of the Cambridge Review is that the "politicisation" of primary education has gone too far.

Indeed this is where it uses its strongest language, at one point talking about "Stalinist" control of the curriculum.

> " **It is time to stop being obsessed with the shortcoming of 30 years ago.** "

This is where knowledge of the history of primary education helps understand why we got to this level of political intervention.

In the 1970s and 1980s a small minority of primary schools - most infamously the William Tyndale Junior School in London - went to extremes of allowing pupils to do as they wished, without the structure of formal education.

Most primary schools were not like this and most - as the Cambridge Review says - never abandoned the 3Rs.

However, there were problems in this period as the balanced recommendations of the 1967 Plowden Report were misinterpreted to mean an excessive focus on learning through activity.

The backlash that this triggered is what drove the introduction of the national curriculum, Sats and the Numeracy and Literacy Hours.

There was much that was good in all of these reforms. But primary schools have moved on.

I have never seen a school where (as at William Tyndale) children can come and go as they please or can play table tennis in lessons.

So, in 2009, it is time to stop being obsessed with the shortcoming of 30 years ago. It is time, now, to trust the professional judgement of teachers again.

That does not mean that the elected government of the day should have no say in setting the broad aims and purposes of primary education.

But the details of the teaching methods, classroom organisation and curriculum should be for teachers.

And, providing there are clear mechanisms for parents to know what is going on in the classroom and to be able to shape and contribute to what happens in schools - or, if necessary, to be free to choose an alternative state school - then it is time to shift the balance back to trusting the professionals who are in primary education for the long-term.

Mike Baker is an education writer and broadcaster. BBC Radio 4 recently broadcast his three-part history of primary schools.

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