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Eight priorities to improve primary education

In a recent speech, Cambridge Primary Review Trust chair, Robin Alexander set out eight priorities for primary education. Do you share this vision?

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Priorities for primary education: the Cambridge Primary Review Trust wants to see students given a real say in their learning. Photograph: Tom Finnie

Back in 2004, a group of education practitioners and researchers from across the UK came together to examine the state of primary education in England.

In 2006 the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) was officially launched and, after three years collecting evidence from research, interviews, focus groups, submissions and official data, its 31 interim reports were followed by a final report with key findings and recommendations. This called for quick political fixes and snap reforms to be replaced by a long-term, sustainable vision for [primary schools](#) grounded in secure evidence. The review then moved into dissemination mode, building a national network with 12 regional centres and generating interest in over 150 countries as well as across the UK.

The third iteration of the project has just been launched – the Cambridge Primary Review Trust. At its inaugural event last week, Robin Alexander, CPR's founding director, outlined the trust's eight priorities – forging in the process an alternative agenda for the reform of primary education.

Below, Robin Alexander describes his ideas.

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Posted by
Robin Alexander
Friday 4 October 2013
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Guardian Professional
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1-1 of 327 for Teacher Network + Teacher's blog + Primary schools + Education + Teaching + Guardian Professional + Blogposts + Article + theguardian.com

You can also download the full speech online at the [Primary Review website](#) (PDF).

Help schools tackle educational disadvantage and close the attainment gap.

Child poverty currently affects between 17% and 26% of Britain's children, depending on whether you use the relative or absolute poverty measure, and poverty and social disadvantage impact directly on children's educational progress and attainment. Despite a long succession of government initiatives aimed at tackling the problem, most recently through the pupil premium, the challenges remain severe. There's a great deal that expert and inspirational teachers and school leaders working against the odds can do and have done and we must learn from them. But for their work to achieve its full impact, it must be supported by the country's wider economic, social and educational policies. All too often, such policies pull in different directions.

Give children a real say in their learning.

We must celebrate children's voice and rights in school and the classroom. As the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child points out, children should "have a right to be involved in decisions about their own learning". This influence should extend to pedagogy as well as school councils, for the classroom is where citizenship starts, and we know that discussion, dialogue and argument are very powerful tools for learning.

Primary education should not just be about preparing children for secondary school.

We need to sort out what primary education is for, and ensure that aims driving the curriculum and are not merely cosmetic. To say, as the government does, that the main aim of primary education is to make children 'secondary ready' is to undervalue children's huge potential for development and learning during the primary years. Education is about the here and now as well as the future, but schools should also address the wider condition and needs of children and society in today's complex world. Children leaving primary school should of course be ready for



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what follows, but what follows year 6 is life, not just year 7.

Make 'breadth and balance' more than a slogan. Take seriously the curriculum beyond the 3Rs.

While primary schools must and do insist on the importance of literacy and numeracy, they should also lay foundations in other areas – in spoken language, science, the arts, the humanities, in physical, emotional and moral development and lived experience. These are in their different ways no less important for children's future learning, choices and lives; they might actually make children more "secondary ready" than the 3Rs alone.

The CPR argues against the old two-tier curriculum – where the basic subjects are covered in depth while the rest of the curriculum is in some schools treated seriously but in others is left to chance, and where the idea of 'standards' is confined to the 3Rs. This approach undermines the cultural and economic worth of the non-core subjects and flies in the face of research that shows how learning in one area enhances learning in others. Without deflecting attention from the importance of literacy, CPRT argues for a primary curriculum whose core includes essential knowledge, skills and experience drawn from all subjects, not just three of them.

Increase the focus on evidence-based pedagogy.

It's only through [teaching](#) that the curriculum comes alive for children. And it's only through understanding the art, science and craft of teaching – from research, inspection and shared experience – that teachers can inform and refine their practice. Relying on habit or official pronouncements isn't enough. A greater focus on what evidence tells us about effective teaching and learning will enable teachers to help every child achieve the highest possible standard in all aspects of their education.

Assessment should be about more than just test results.

Where assessment and standards are concerned we need a wider

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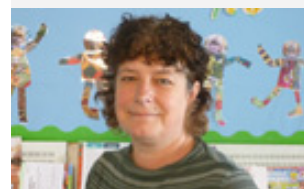


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Russell Hobby

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practical repertoire and a more sophisticated vocabulary. We must devise approaches that enhance learning as well as test it, that support the curriculum rather than distort it, and that pursue high standards in all areas of learning, not just the core subjects. It's no longer acceptable that tests at a moment in time and in a narrow spectrum of learning are treated as measures of a child's entire educational attainment or of everything that schools aim to provide. Tests have their place, but both assessment and accountability should be about much more than test results.

Schools should connect with the community.

Britain has immense demographic, economic, cultural and linguistic diversity, which creates a vast array of educational circumstances and needs. The best of our schools don't just work closely with their local communities but make the curriculum responsive to local needs and opportunities and live the very idea of community in their everyday work and relationships.

The discourse of educational policy must change, and radically

As recent events have shown, policymakers tend to be interested only in evidence that fits their ideology or prejudice, and they may ignore or even abuse those who provide evidence that doesn't fit the political bill. Deep and lasting improvements in our education system will be achieved only when policymakers are even-handed rather than selective in their use of evidence and when they speak about education in a way that exemplifies the educated mind rather than demeans it.

What do you think of these priorities? Share what you would change about primary education with us below.

Robin Alexander is chair of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, fellow of Wolfson College at the University of Cambridge and professor of education at the University of York. A primary teacher turned researcher and writer, he initiated the Cambridge Primary Review in 2004 and directed it from 2006 to 2012.

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Ubergeekian

04 October 2013 4:59pm

1

It's only through teaching that the curriculum comes alive for children.

This could not be more wrong. It is only through *learning* that subjects come alive. We should be aspiring to enable children to learn better, and that means recognising that very often learning happens without teaching and that very often learning happens better without teaching. It is Mr Gove's fallacy to believe that only more teaching can lead to better education.



Richard Galloway ▶ Ubergeekian

06 October 2013 1:04pm

I do not disagree that students learn continually but it is how they learn and the most effective way for them to learn that concerns us here. You seem to suggest that we would be better off without schools and let our children learn without guidance. I wonder how that would work out.



miketodd143

04 October 2013 10:39pm

Would it be possible to avoid the "I am right, you are wrong" party political approach and perhaps start with what we agree with and then move on to the differences of

opinion.

So would it be fair to say that good teaching can indeed bring a curriculum alive for children, but that does not exclude children's ability to discover this "coming alive" experience for themselves.



jakedog

05 October 2013 5:43pm

4

The key issue in the report is the first priority - educational disadvantage and the attainment gap.

Unless governments are serious about reducing the impact of deprivation on the intellectual and linguistic development of young, pre-school children, then such children will always be playing catch-up with their more fortunate peers.

Poverty reduces life chances in so many ways, so that by the time such children go to school they are already at least one year behind middle class children. Their linguistic skills, range of vocabulary, motor skills and self confidence are way behind average, and teachers have to work very hard to start the process of developing these to an age related level.

Even getting such children to have a conversation is difficult - they respond to questions in monosyllables, lacking the vocabulary and confidence to respond in an articulate way.

Tackle poverty, both material and aspirational, to give these children a chance.



CottageGarden

06 October 2013 7:07am

4

Like others born in the mid 60s, I took part in what I assume was an educational experiment in the early 70s. I went to an open plan junior school, with mixed age groups, home corners, little formal teaching, work diaries and lots of child-directed learning. Now, I'm the first to admit there were massive holes in this model. However, what it did create was children who were self-motivated, who were interested in finding out new things, who knew how to challenge themselves and who were always busy. The only place where this happens in lots of primary schools is in Early Years. And even that seems to be disappearing.

Penguin_M001

06 October 2013 11:17am

I think the detail about 'teaching' or 'learning' is a misunderstanding. Of course we are all aiming for good learning in the classroom, but surely that is achieved by good teaching. That does not necessarily mean any particular style of teaching - it requires practitioners to use their expertise to know when to tell, support, stand back, encourage etc.

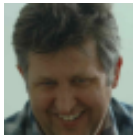
Overall, the list of priorities is very welcome. It seems to me that governments spend too much time specifying details that should be determined by evidence and experience, while ignoring the level they should be working at, which is to decide what the system should be aiming for.



Richard Galloway

06 October 2013 1:14pm

As a teacher who left the profession fifteen years ago I'm excited by this document. (I'm in the process of returning to teaching, all be it in different country) Unfortunately, the question is how many of these excellent ideas can be implemented and measured easily? The current trend of assessing everything that is done, is I believe, the main stumbling block to improving our primary schools. Unless the political will is there, this report, like the original before it will remain aspirational, which is IMHO doing our children a massive disservice.



TimTaylor4

08 October 2013 1:07pm

It is easy to loose track of our priorities with all the pressures and political motivated rhetoric that disseminates from the DfE currently. Never, in all my time as a teacher and a student, can I remember a more antipathetic stance from the establishment to the education of young people. The government's priorities are purely and simply to drive up standards in a thin range of subjects for quick political gain.

I welcome the CPR Trust and its report and believe it might be the last real and genuine opportunity we have left to shift the argument back round to a genuine focus on the purpose of primary education other than as a preparation for secondary school.

I believe we must back the Trust and make our voices heard. There will be no support from politicians on either side, who have their own agendas, no support from Ofsted, who are fundamentally compromised, and no support from the establishment media, who are only after a quick sensational story (with one or two notable exceptions).

I believe the CPR Trust are organising a series of conferences starting in the new year, let us all attend and make our opposition heard - <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk>



MichaelRosen

08 October 2013 6:27pm

I think it's a shame that this doesn't focus on educational principles based on what we know about learning ie investigation, invention, co-operation and freedom to interpret.



InEducation

08 October 2013 7:18pm

All CPR proposals are soundly documented and relevant. However, research has consistently shown only two factors ultimately influence outcomes- for better or worse- namely home background and quality of teaching. Both are lotteries and the first is seriously neglected and/or misunderstood, even in the profession. Hard evidence shows how positive and effective education is, including for children in disadvantage and poverty, when parents and teachers are on the same wavelength. It most happens in small schools or human-scale organisation elsewhere. Research has also well defined what makes learning long-term effective. The general experience of schooling as we know it progressively provides almost the opposite of what this needs, however "well" by conventional standards we do it. Hence the widespread complaint we do not produce enough people who can think for themselves, make decisions, take responsibility, work in teams and solve problems. Those are the challenges. CPR thinking starts the process.



larag123

10 October 2013 9:46pm

One of the points that caught my attention was Alexander's call for a greater connection between school and community. The idea of encouraging students to be responsive to the needs of their community, while also acting as a community of learners within the classroom, is very much in line with the goals of multicultural education. Students should feel empowered to work hard in school so that they can become educated individuals who can use the knowledge and skills they learn to

strengthen the cultural capital of their community in the future, rather than striving to escape the very communities that shaped them. This can be accomplished, in part, by involving students in the life of the community (by bringing together different members of the community, for example), and through vigorous engagement in everyday living. In line with the philosophy of Dewey, I propose that raw material from everyday life outside of school should be what we use to teach in school, since this will inevitably better prepare students for life, and will allow children to become more invested in their learning.

As I look back at some of Alexander's other suggestions—which at first I found to be too daunting to transition easily from pedagogy into practice—I realize that incorporating students' funds of knowledge into all aspects of classroom life through culturally relevant, multicultural education is a change that could trigger the shift towards Alexander's vision. Children from different cultural backgrounds and with different SES bring with them unique social and cultural capital, some of which is more valued in the school system than others. It is only when teachers acknowledge that there is a difference in capital between students of different backgrounds that they are able to provide students outside of the culture of power with the same opportunities for success as the middle class student. For example, the use of test results as the sole form of assessment leads some students to be labeled as failures, when in reality students whose cultural capital is not valued, or who have less access to social and economic resources, are ultimately at a disadvantage compared to students in the culture of power. Teachers who acknowledge such problems are able to shift the blame of failure from the student to the test. They are also more likely to create an assessment that will better measure the progress of all of their students, and to foster a learning environment better suited to those students' needs.

Teachers should not deny students their own expertise and cultural knowledge, but instead must help students realize that they play a role in their own learning process and that the skills and knowledge they bring to the table are valid and valued. A multicultural approach to education takes into account the different funds of knowledge that students of different upbringings acquire from their cultural and historical backgrounds, and creates an environment that supports and values each students' cultural capital. In addition, teachers should get involved in the communities of their students and should educate themselves on each students' cultural beliefs and expectations, as well as each individual student's funds of knowledge. This would allow them to make the changes that are needed to reduce the divide between students' cultural expectations and school expectations, thus creating an environment in which all students can succeed and feel valued. Teachers should also help students to appreciate funds of knowledge different than their own, since this will broaden their perspective and prepare them for active engagement in a diverse world.

Such an emphasis on culturally relevant teaching would help to address the ideas suggested by Alexander; it would place a greater value on all children's social and cultural capital, acknowledge the lack of fairness in tests designed for a narrow range

of students, and prepare students to become active members of their communities and lifelong learners who can capitalize on their knowledge and skills—as well as the diverse funds of knowledge of their peers—to help their communities flourish.

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