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THE INDEPENDENT

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Alan Smithers: Keep education academics well away from running our schools please

The massive Cambridge Primary Review is a wonderful example of why we need universities to keep occupied education academics who otherwise might be tempted to try to run things and do real damage. It is a rich source of ideas, never using one word when 10 will do, but it is weak on practical solutions. Cutting to the chase of the 78 conclusions and 75 recommendations, it appears that Professor Robin Alexander and the other 13 authors think primary education would be better if there were a broader curriculum, SATs were scrapped and the school entry age were raised to six.

As good academics, the Cambridge team begin by attempting to decide what primary education is for, essentially by seeking to describe the optimally functioning 21st-century pupil. This becomes an analytical tour de force in which 12 aims such as "well-being", "engagement" and "empowerment" are meshed with eight domains including "arts and creativity", "citizenship and ethics", and "faith and belief".

The review can't quite make up its mind whether the content of the resulting 96 cells is to be specified from the centre or left to teachers, and it settles on a 70:30 national/local split. "Language, oracy and literacy" would be prioritised, but strangely not maths. As the review has found, along with those who have gone before, if you try to specify the whole curriculum you end up with complexity and overload. It is, however, possible to envisage a more radical approach in which the practical question is asked: what is absolutely essential?

Few, I think, would disagree that whatever else primary education is about it must teach children to handle words and numbers properly, and to behave well. So why not just have English and maths as the statutory primary curriculum?

The rest, including how they are taught and what else is taught, can be left to the professional expertise of schools and teachers who would create their own breadth. Leaving it to the schools and teachers is what makes British independent education so successful.

The review makes great play with the volume of evidence it has gathered. But evidence about education is very vulnerable to what people want to believe. In their treatment of testing, the team seem to be blinded by wishful thinking when they assert that there is no evidence that it drives up standards. Before SATs, over half the children were leaving primary school unable to read, write or add as they should. What made the difference was the feedback that the test results provided.

A mirror was held up to schools so they could see what they were achieving. In the three years from 1995 when SATs were first introduced to 1997 before all the paraphernalia of targets and league tables was brought in, performance leapt by 14 percentage points in English and 17 percentage points in maths.

The review is rightly concerned about the narrowing of the curriculum, but this is down to the targets and league tables not the tests themselves. Replacing independently set and marked external tests by an elaborate and extended assessment system would not free up and broaden primary education, as the Review hopes, but be even more intrusive. The key is to junk the targets and the tables and hold schools accountable through genuine inspections.

Unlike the review's deliberations on the curriculum and testing, its exploration of early years education could lead to important changes. Many children now start school before they are ready to cope with formal learning and their first experience can be of failure from which they may never recover.

The gender and social class gaps open up sharply at this stage because generally it is the girls and children from prosperous homes who can respond to the early demands. The gaps tend to be much narrower in countries with a good kindergarten education.

But it is a pity that the emphasis has been on putting back the start of formal education rather than on what goes before. I am not sure that "play-based" learning quite captures what is needed. As I understand it, what is lacking is a structured set of experiences which brings all children, irrespective of their starting points, up to some minimum level of preparedness for formal education.

Once we can see that "preparation curriculum" in action we would be in a better position to decide whether the transition to formal learning is best undertaken at age five, six or a spread of ages.

The Cambridge Review has been much publicised and will be frequently cited. It will spawn much research, and many doctoral and master's dissertations. But it is essentially an academic exercise with few proposals that can readily be put into effect. Making education happen requires an altogether more practical turn of mind.

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