

Children deserve a broader curriculum

Primary school education has come under scrutiny from two major reviews – but why do they reach such different conclusions? *Dame Gillian Pugh* explains the Cambridge outlook

Although there have been major changes to both the early years curriculum and the secondary curriculum in the past few years, the same cannot be said for the curriculum for children aged five to 11. But now we have two sets of proposals and the opportunity to rethink what primary education is for.

The Cambridge Primary Review is a major, independent review of primary education, the first since the Plowden report was published 40 years ago. It is broad in its scope, covering the lives and needs of children and the condition of childhood today; the condition of the society and the world in which today's children are growing up; and the present state and future prospects of primary education itself.

The full Cambridge Review report will be published later in the year, but the curriculum section – one of ten themes in the report – was published last week to contribute to the consultation phase of the interim report from a Government-commissioned review of the primary curriculum led by Sir Jim Rose.

The evidence base of the Cambridge Review is extensive. It has received more than 800 written submissions, many of them from major national organisations; has held more than 200 regional and national meetings with children, parents, teachers and other professionals; and has already published 28 surveys of research commissioned from leading academics. Not surprisingly, the curriculum had a high profile in much of the evidence.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The Review's evidence found that there is widespread acceptance of the need for a national curriculum, and its promise of entitlement. There have been significant gains from the national curriculum since its introduction in 1989, notably in science, citizenship and the handling of values and children's personal development. The national primary, literacy and numeracy strategies (especially the latter) have many supporters, and younger teachers in particular welcome the structure and guidance which they provide. And the Early Years Foundation Stage areas of learning and development have been widely welcomed and provide an appropriate platform for primary education.

However, the evidence also showed that as children progress through the primary phase, their statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced primary education is being compromised by the 'standards' agenda and national testing. There is particular concern about the arts, the humanities and increasingly science – and learning in all subjects that require time for talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas. Memorisation and recall have come to be valued over understanding and enquiry, and transmission of information over the pursuit of knowledge.

There has been a belief that curriculum breadth is incompatible with the pursuit of standards in 'the basics', and that if anything gives way, it must be breadth. Yet evidence going back many decades, including reports from HMI and Ofsted, consistently shows that



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standards and breadth are interdependent, and that high-performing schools achieve both. The Review also points to a dislocation between the national strategies (managed by the DCSF) and the national curriculum (managed by QCA), and undue time and emphasis being given to numeracy and literacy.

The transitions between the Foundation Stage and primary, and between primary and secondary, are also cause for concern. In reception, the developmentally-focused EYFS collides with the national curriculum; in Year 6, breadth competes with the much narrower scope of what is to be tested.

A curriculum should reflect educational aims and values. But during the past two decades, national aims and curriculum have been separately determined. The Review argues that in a complex and changing world there is an urgent need for proper debate about what primary education is for and that this should determine the shape and content of the curriculum.

PRINCIPLES AND AIMS

Starting from first principles, the Cambridge Review proposes 12 aims for 21st century primary

education (see diagram). They balance children's needs as individuals now and in the future (well-being, engagement, empowerment and autonomy) with their relationships with others (encouraging respect and reciprocity; promoting interdependence and sustainability; empowering local, national and global citizenship; and celebrating culture and community); with the place of learning, knowing and doing within schools (knowing, understanding, exploring and making sense; fostering skill; exciting the imagination; and enacting dialogue).

These 12 aims underpin eight domains of knowledge, skill, enquiry and disposition. The term 'domains' has been chosen in preference to existing alternatives (for example, subjects, areas of learning, themes) so as to allow them to be considered without preconception. The eight domains are: arts and creativity; citizenship and ethics; faith and belief; language, oracy and literacy; mathematics; physical and emotional health; place and time; science and technology.

A domain is not intended as a named slot in the school's weekly timetable, but rather as a way of bringing together key areas of knowledge that the Review identified in its evidence.

The current core of three protected subjects is replaced by an entitlement curriculum in which all domains are essential and protected, even though time allocations for each will, of course, vary. At the heart of the new curriculum is the revised and much strengthened domain of language, oracy and literacy, which also includes ICT and a foreign language. Oracy

is considerably more rigorous than what is currently defined as 'speaking and listening', and enhances both literacy and the curriculum as a whole.

In addition to the national curriculum, the Review proposes a community component that enables schools to respond to local needs and opportunities, dividing the time between them on a 70/30 basis.

Proposals on the relationship between early years and the primary phase will be included in the final report, but the curriculum proposals build on the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

The Review proposes that nationally, the curriculum would be planned by independent expert panels, supported and resourced by QCA or another appropriate national body; and that the 30 per cent local curriculum would be undertaken by community curriculum councils convened by local authorities.

How schools implement the curriculum would be flexible, but there would be a requirement to teach



FURTHER INFORMATION

- *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: a report from the Cambridge Primary Review. Part 1: Past and Present.* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, February 2009
- *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: a report from the Cambridge Primary Review. Part 2: The future.* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, February 2009
- Both reports are available at www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/Interimreports
- The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent inquiry 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. So far it has published 31 interim reports

all eight domains to a consistently high standard, regardless of the amount of time each is allocated. Schools would determine how the domains are covered within the curriculum and how they are named, timetabled and taught.

The Review's proposals have implications for the roles of the DCSF, the QCA, the national strategies, local authorities and schools. They would require a reform of the national assessment process; a rethinking of initial training and the continuing professional development of teachers; and a new approach to staff deployment in primary schools, in order that every school has the necessary expertise to provide children with their entitlement to quality across the whole curriculum. All of these issues will be addressed in the final report.

THE ROSE REVIEW

Published during the consultation stage of the Rose Review, the Cambridge Primary Review makes an important contribution to the debate about primary education. The Cambridge Review has benefited from its independence and its

broad remit, while the Rose review is focusing only on curriculum.

The two reviews make a contrasting analyses of the problems, what has caused them and how they can be resolved. The Rose Review takes current policy frameworks, strategies and assumptions mostly as given; the Cambridge review does not – it applauds and builds on some of them, but of others it is more critical.

Rose proposes transferring the existing QCA secondary curriculum aims to the primary phase. The Cambridge Review presents new aims for primary education grounded in evidence on children's development, needs and capabilities, and an assessment of national and global conditions requiring an educational response. The resulting curriculum frameworks are in certain respects very different. Yet there is consensus on some matters, which should be welcomed and built upon. ■

Dame Gillian Pugh is chair of the Cambridge Primary Review Advisory Committee, former chief executive of Coram Family and forthcoming president of the NCMA

ELEMENTS IN A NEW PRIMARY CURRICULUM

As proposed by the Cambridge Primary Review

