

Primary source

The Primary Review is the largest inquiry into primary education in 40 years. Nick Blackmore discovers that Professor Robin Alexander is eager that nothing should stand before its success – including himself



Here's a riddle: what has the wisdom of more than 60 academics but is barely three months old, lives in Cambridge but is based all over England, and has thousands of eyes and ears but just one head?

The answer is the Primary Review, the biggest independent review into English primary education in 40 years. The 'head', albeit metaphorically, is Professor Robin Alexander, its director and initiator.

This landmark Review will run for two years, gathering evidence and stimulating

debate, before making recommendations on policy and practice. A Cambridge-based central team and advisory committee will be directed by an educationalist of considerable expertise.

In "the education business" since leaving university in 1964, Professor Alexander has made primary education his particular concern through teaching, training, researching, and engagement with policy makers. The size and scope of the Primary Review is an appropriate complement to the breadth of his

experience, as he himself acknowledges: "I started my career teaching in primary schools, and I'm ending it heading a review dealing with the future of primary education."

When pressed on why primary education compels him so, he cites a combination of pragmatism and passion: "Twenty years ago, people tended to pay lip service to primary but concentrated more on secondary. Latterly, they've come to understand that, unless the appropriate foundations are

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He attributes the timing of the Primary Review to the fact that the current English system is the result of two decades of non-stop educational reform and lasting social change. The Review’s holistic approach is ambitious, with information being sought for 10 varied themes, from ‘core’ concerns like purposes and values to ‘contingent’ ones such as funding and governance.

As apposite as its timing is, the genesis of the Review can be attributed to the 1997-8 review of the national curriculum,

in Professor Alexander’s opinion, “an opportunity missed”. The Labour government, in focusing on its newly minted primary and literacy strategies, steered that review away from analysing what kind of primary curriculum was needed for the 21st century.

But *this* Primary Review is the definition of exhaustive, with submissions being solicited from schools, local authorities, parents, national figures and professional associations like ATL. Meanwhile, a small army of academics will undertake “the biggest sweep of published research relating to primary education that has ever been done”.

Professor Alexander is clearly proud of how his brainchild has grown, pointing out bullet-pointed themes and ticking off evidential ‘strands’ on his fingers. Yet, despite possessing a C.V. of qualifications, committee memberships and educational publications that is largely without peer, he is reticent even to discuss his own school days, let alone speculate on the possible outcomes of the Review. “This isn’t a vehicle for my own opinions,” he protests. “I won’t let it taint it; my view is irrelevant in this exercise.” Despite this, the occasional opinion does sneak out: centralisation may have gone too far; classrooms might benefit from a greater emphasis on oracy.

Among those whose opinions *are* considered important to the Review are children in primary education. Questions could reasonably be asked about whether children should determine the kind of education they receive, but Professor Alexander counters that children are “the most important stakeholders in the whole enterprise” and that they, along with their parents, are often left out of enquiries. “Children who understand what their education is ‘about’ are more effective learners,” he argues.

The children’s submissions, along with the rest of the Review’s findings, will be published in waves, and ATL members are encouraged to get involved in the process. The first findings will arrive in spring 2007 and will define a second stage of debate, which will be followed by the final report.

The last review of a comparable size was the 1967 Plowden Report, the message and impact of which is still debated by educationalists nearly 40 years on. For Professor Alexander, the problem then was not the report but what was done in its name. “It almost immediately nurtured a mythology,” he

explains. “There’s an awful lesson there – it was not properly read and digested by many people. I hope this doesn’t happen with the report that comes from this enquiry.” Falling prey to “the ‘Chinese whispers’ problem” is something he hopes to avoid through the judicious use of ICT. Posting the findings of the Primary Review online will give readers “access to what we’ve actually said, rather than what someone else has said that we said.”

Professor Alexander remains uncomfortably familiar with the problems of misrepresentation, thanks to his part in the controversial 1992 ‘Three Wise Men’ report into primary teaching. “It’s not a document I like or have any great affection for,” he says, remembering a difficult climate with “political strings being pulled behind the scenes” as the Conservative government prepared for a general election. Nevertheless, the central message of the report is one that he believes still has value: “The talented teacher is the one that can select from a repertoire of strategies and techniques in a discriminating way, rather than someone who applies a formula, regardless of the context.”

He rues the way in which a “frenzied, unhelpful, highly polarised” media helped to confuse the message of the report, but acknowledges that this problem remains a fact of life: “There are always going to be mischievous people who look for the soundbite and nothing else or who actually distort the message.”

The desire to control the message seems to contribute to his attitude at interview: he is self-effacing (“I’d like to depersonalise this”) and precise (“I’ll just give two examples. No – *three*”). Persistent pressure yields only a fleeting view of the man behind the initiative.

What I can tell you is that Robin Alexander lives in the remote countryside miles from anywhere; he has travelled from North Yorkshire to Kursk in Southern Russia entirely by train; and he plays a harpsichord of his own construction. These briefly glimpsed eccentricities may represent the tip of the iceberg but, as far as Professor Alexander is concerned, that is as nothing compared to the grand vistas waiting to be mapped by the Primary Review. ☞

To find out about the Review’s remit, themes, and reports, visit www.primaryreview.org.uk. To submit evidence, ideas, suggestions or queries, email evidence@primaryreview.org.uk or phone 01223 767523