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Analysis: Cambridge Primary Review calls for end to central interference

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The most significant independent review of primary and early education has just concluded, yet has been virtually dismissed by the Government in favour of its own review. Wendy Scott looks deeper.

The culmination of a three-year inquiry into primary education in this country, *Children, Their World, Their Education*, was published on 19 October. This final report draws on years of thorough research, wide consultation and deep reflection (see column). The project was funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Charitable Trust, and is thus an independent study. This is significant at a time when Government has intervened in education at unprecedented levels.

Ministers commissioned a parallel review led by Sir Jim Rose, while Cambridge report editor Professor Robin Alexander and his team were collecting evidence and analysing their findings.

The Rose report, although called an independent review of primary education, complied with tight terms of reference drawn up by the DCSF which explicitly excluded any consideration of the testing regime. As the Cambridge Review points out, this has a crucial impact on what is taught throughout the primary school, and early years settings have also suffered from downward pressure and the narrow focus on targets for literacy and numeracy.

Professor Alexander and his colleagues welcome recent investment in education and the Government's focus on childhood, but criticise their standards agenda. The central targets, testing, performance tables, national strategies and inspection, have all distorted primary schooling. Some important educational policies have been underpinned by questionable evidence, consultations have been superficial, and expertise and experience have been ignored.

The Review concludes, 'Teaching should be taken out of the political arena and given back to teachers.'

Although the focus of the review is on primary education, the importance of the early years is recognised. Indeed, one of the main recommendations is that the EYFS should be strengthened and extended into Year 1, when children become six. Formal education should start after that.

This proposal has been widely misunderstood. Although the possibility of altering statutory school age from five to six is raised, there is no suggestion that children should be kept out of school; rather, provision for young children, wherever they are, should be in line with the principles underpinning the EYFS.

Unlike Rose, who pre-empts the forthcoming review of the EYFS by advocating annual entry to school for all four-year-olds, the Cambridge reviewers are respectful of pedagogical evidence and the value of building on secure foundations.

Their call for a full review of special educational needs could well include a careful assessment of the needs of disadvantaged families: they emphasise that vulnerable children most need high-quality provision, and argue for better pay and qualifications for staff working in the non-maintained sector.

They propose improvements in initial teacher training, and links between the Teaching Development Agency and the Children's Workforce Development Council.

The recommendations in this comprehensive review are grouped under 17 general headings. Nearly half have implications for the early years, and apply to the proposed Foundation Stage from birth to six, as well as to later primary education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations relevant to the early years are:

Respect and support childhood

- Respect children's experience, voices and rights, and accept the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the framework for policy;

- Build on new research on children's development, learning, needs and capabilities;
- Ensure that teacher education is fully informed by these perspectives.

Narrow the gap

- Maintain the focus of policy on reducing under-achievement;
- Intervene quickly and effectively to help disadvantaged and vulnerable children;
- Give the highest priority to eliminating child poverty.

Review Special Needs

- Institute a full SEN review which re-assesses its definitions, structures, procedures and provision.

Start with aims, values and principles

- Establish a new and coherent set of aims, values and principles for 21st century primary education, in addition to any wider aims for the schooling system as a whole.

Implement new structures for early years and primary education

- Strengthen and extend early learning provision;
- Extend the Foundation Stage to age six;
- Examine the feasibility of raising (statutory) school starting age to six.

A new curriculum, which:

- Ensures that language, literacy and oracy are paramount;
- Combines a national framework with a locally-devised community curriculum;
- Encourages greater professional flexibility and creativity.

A pedagogy of evidence and principle

- Work towards a pedagogy of repertoire rather than recipe, and of principle rather than prescription;
- Ensure that teaching and learning are informed by research;
- Uphold the principle that it is not for Government, Government agencies or local authorities to tell teachers how to teach;
- Avoid pedagogical fads and fashions, and act instead on those aspects of learning and teaching, notably spoken language, where research evidence strongly converges.

Reform assessment

- Make greater use of teacher assessment.

Strengthen accountability and redefine standards

- Move forward from debating whether schools and teachers should be accountable (they should) and concentrate instead on how;
- Develop a model of inspection which is in line with the aims and principles proposed in Chapter 12 (What is primary education for?).

Review primary school staffing

- Ensure schools have the teacher numbers, expertise and flexibility to deliver high standards across the whole curriculum.

Provide leadership for learning

- Provide time and support for heads to do the job for which they are most needed - leading learning.

Reform teacher education

- Align teacher education with new aims, curriculum and approaches to pedagogy;
- Refocus initial training on childhood, learning, teaching, curriculum and subject knowledge;
- Balance support for inexperienced and less able teachers with freedom and respect for the experienced and talented.

Create schools for the community

- Build on recent initiatives encouraging multi-agency working, and increase support for schools to help them ensure that the growing range of children's services professionals work in partnership with each other and with parents;

- Strengthen mutual professional support through the pooling of expertise.

Create schools for the future

- Take an innovative approach to school design and timetabling that marries design and function and properly reflects the proposed aims for primary education.

Reform school funding

- Eliminate the primary/secondary funding differential;

- Ensure primary school funding is determined by educational and curricular needs;

- Set increased costs against savings from terminating the national strategy, transferring its budget to schools, and otherwise reducing government control and infrastructure.

Reform the policy process

- Rebalance the responsibilities of the DCSF, local authorities and schools;

- Replace top-down control and prescription by professional empowerment, mutual accountability and respect for research evidence and professional experience;

- Make good the wider democratic deficit.

Open up a new educational discourse

- Abandon the discourses of derision, false dichotomy and myth and strive to ensure that the education debate at last exemplifies what education should be about.

Important Points

Having conducted a rigorous review of the evidence, Professor Alexander endorses the view of early years experts, and the practice in almost all other countries, that formal schooling should not start before children are six. This should build on high-quality early education, which is currently variable.

The emphasis on oracy is particularly welcome, as a counterpoint to the premature introduction of literacy skills. His comments on the limiting effects of tests and targets regrettably apply to the EYFS Profile now that local authorities are charged with the Outcomes Duty.

Recommendations on funding are also relevant; there is a need to acknowledge the real cost of high-quality early education, and to address the problems presented by the Single Funding Formula to allow for the teachers required in children's centres as well as schools.

Responses

The dismissive response of the Government to this major scholarly inquiry reveals the authoritarian mindset noted by the Review's authors. Its simplistic consultation on the age of admission to school illustrates its lack of commitment to engage in serious debate.

The Conservative response, indicating a reduction of central interference, addresses significant aspects of the concerns, but other pronouncements from the party indicate a poor understanding of young children's learning.

Professor Alexander himself is under no illusions. He writes, 'The Cambridge Primary Review is for the longer term, not the next election; and as an exercise in democratic engagement as well as empirical enquiry and visionary effort, its final report is not just for transient architects and agents of policy. It is for all who invest daily, deeply and for life in this vital phase of education, especially children, parents and teachers.'

We in the early years will find much to support our advocacy for young children and families in this rigorous and thought-provoking study.

REFERENCES

Alexander, R (Ed) (2010) *Children, Their World, Their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge

A summary of the Review is being sent to all primary schools and other interested parties. Full details are available on www.primaryreview.org.uk

HARD EVIDENCE

The final report of the Cambridge Primary Review draws on more than 4,000 published sources, both national and international, together with 28 specially-commissioned research surveys; 1,052 written submissions from leading organisations and individuals; nearly 250 soundings, seminars, conferences and other meetings in different parts of the country; thousands of e-mails; and an extensive trawl of official data.

The report has been written by a team of 14 authors, supported by 66 research consultants and a 20-strong advisory committee, under the editorship of the Director of the Review, Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University. Its 608 pages and 24 chapters end with 78 formal conclusions and 75 recommendations for future policy and practice, all endorsed by the report's authors and the Review's advisory committee of eminent experts.