

WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR?

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Submission to the House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into
The Quality and Purpose of Education in England

Background

I present this submission as Chair of the [Cambridge Primary Review Trust](#), successor to the [Cambridge Primary Review](#), which I directed from 2006-12.

Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Review remains the UK's most comprehensive enquiry into English primary education. It gathered oral and written evidence from thousands of witnesses, commissioned 28 surveys of published research and interrogated over 4000 published sources. It published 31 interim reports, 41 briefings, a final report with conclusions and recommendations, and a companion research volume. It was the subject of three sessions with the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (predecessor of the current Education Committee), and the Committee's then Chairman was a keynote speaker at the launch of the Review's [final report](#) in October 2009.¹ It is on all this work that the Cambridge Primary Review Trust has been building since 2012.

Resonating with the focus of the Committee's inquiry, the Review's remit began thus:

With respect to public provision in England, the Review will seek to identify the purposes which the primary phase of education should serve, the values which it should espouse, the curriculum and learning environment which it should provide, and the conditions which are necessary in order to ensure both that these are of the highest and most consistent quality possible, and that they address the needs of children and society over the coming decades.

Aims as rhetoric

The Review's exploration of educational aims appears in chapter 12 of the final report. It followed discussion with a wide range of stakeholders, a comparative analysis of the stated aims of other education systems and a historical check on the evolving aims of public education in England since the nineteenth century. This revealed remarkable continuity in educational sentiment but also a tendency for public statements of aims to bear little relation to the purposes manifested by other policies, especially on the curriculum. Indeed, it can readily be demonstrated that official statements of educational aims tend to be largely decorative.

¹ Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge. We are sending a copy of the report to the Committee secretariat.

In contrast, the aims presented by the Cambridge Primary Review have been adopted by many schools and are regarded by them as an essential basis for curriculum planning and a touchstone for school life as a whole. I am therefore confident that these aims are as apposite in 2016 as they were in 2009 and that they have genuine practical purchase. They are therefore endorsed by the Trust's directors and presented below for the Committee's consideration.

However, in light of the tokenistic tendencies alluded to above, the Committee should consider carefully how such aims can best be translated into practice. There is little point in their spending time on this exercise if aims march in one direction and the curriculum in another.

There is a further problem: the tendency for discussion about aims to be couched as a conflict between irreconcilable values. When he launched the present inquiry, the Chair of the Education Committee said:

In this inquiry we want to ask the question, what is education for? ... Is it, for example, to prepare our young people for the world of work? Is it to ready our children for adulthood and provide them with the skills to lead fulfilling lives? Is it to provide them all with broad academic knowledge, based on a shared culture and values?

To these questions we would respond: education can and should pursue *all* of these purposes and in so doing eschew the common tendency to treat them as mutually exclusive. The country needs a skilled workforce. It also needs active and critically-minded citizens, strong and compassionate communities, and individuals who 'lead fulfilling lives' whether they are in employment or not.

It is an abiding weakness of recent policy, especially in relation to the National Curriculum, that it has concentrated on the first of these purposes at the expense of the others. It is true that ministers routinely commend a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, but this phrase, originating in a 1970s HMI report and still deployed in Ofsted inspections, has now become utterly devalued by casual overuse in government rhetoric and by tokenistic application in practice - as has ministers' somewhat disingenuous coining of Matthew Arnold's 'best that has been thought and said.' For, with rather greater force and frequency, ministers tell us that the true job of (primary) schools is to get children 'to read, write and add up' (or as an occasional variant 'do their times tables') while one minister has gone so far as to assert that the job of primary education is to make pupils 'secondary ready' - as if the longest phase of compulsory schooling, during children's vital formative years, has no imperatives of its own.

This attitude produces a curriculum that rightly prioritises literacy and numeracy, but is ambivalent about science while treating the arts and humanities as desirable but inessential; that elevates the basic skills of reading, writing and calculating over those of orally communicating, relating successfully to others, solving problems and striving for the common good; that pays more attention to children's test performance in a limited range of capacities than their development as rounded individuals; and that has little to say about education's role in addressing pressing national and global challenges such as cultural diversity, poverty, inequality, social fragmentation, climate change and sustainability.

The Trust, like the Review before it, rejects this needlessly narrow, polarised and parochial view of education's purposes, and is deeply concerned about its impact on the learning experiences of those children who are in schools whose leaders capitulate to such minimalism because they fear the consequences of the government's regimes of testing and inspection. We

are pleased that by asking for evidence on this matter the Committee has tacitly allowed for the possibility that the official account is inadequate. No less important, evidence from the Cambridge Primary Review and Ofsted shows that the narrower account of purposes is, in relation to the standards agenda by which it is usually justified, counter-productive; for there that is a clear and proven association between breadth of purpose, the quality of the wider curriculum and standards in ‘the basics.’ This evidence has been common knowledge since the 1970s and was approvingly cited in a Conservative government White Paper all of thirty years ago, in 1986. The Committee might remind the government of that. We have, many times.

Children, their world, their education

The aims below are in three groups. They echo the triumvirate of concerns captured in the Cambridge Primary Review’s strapline *Children, their World, their Education*, and remind us that education must attend both to the development and needs of pupils and to the condition of the society and world in which they are growing up.

Thus the first group identifies those qualities and capacities that schools should foster in every child, and the personal needs to which teachers should attend. The second group includes four critically important orientations to other people and the wider world, reflecting witnesses’ concerns about the opportunities, challenges and responsibilities of life in the 21st century. The third group focuses on the content, processes and outcomes of learning itself.

These aims arose from an enquiry into primary education. Mindful of the Committee’s interest in the education of children of all ages, we mention that we have been frequently told that they apply no less to early years education and the secondary phase. It is in that spirit that we commend them for the Committee’s consideration.

AIMS OF EDUCATION: THE INDIVIDUAL

1. **Well-being.** To attend to children’s capabilities, needs, hopes and anxieties here and now, and promote their mental, emotional and physical wellbeing and welfare. Happiness, a strong sense of self and a positive outlook on life are not only desirable in themselves: they are also conducive to engagement and learning. But wellbeing goes further than this, and ‘happiness’ on its own looks merely self-indulgent. Caring for children’s wellbeing is about attending to their physical and emotional welfare. It is about inducting them into a life where they will be wholeheartedly engaged in all kinds of worthwhile activities and relationships, defined generously rather than narrowly. It is about maximising children’s learning potential through good teaching and the proper application of evidence about how children develop and learn and how teachers most effectively teach. Fostering children’s wellbeing requires us to attend to their future fulfilment as well as their present needs and capabilities. Wellbeing thus defined is both a *precondition* and an *outcome* of successful schooling.
2. **Engagement.** To secure children’s active, willing and enthusiastic engagement in their learning. This too is a precondition for learning. It is also a manifestation and test of successful teaching.
3. **Empowerment.** To excite, promote and sustain children’s agency, empowering them through knowledge, understanding, skill and personal qualities to profit from their present and later learning, to discover and lead rewarding lives, and to manage life and find new

meaning in a changing world.

4. Autonomy. To foster children's autonomy and sense of self through a growing understanding of the world present and past, and through productive relationships with others. Autonomy enables individuals to establish who they are and to what they might aspire; it enables the child to translate knowledge into meaning; it encourages that critical independence of thought which is essential both to the growth of knowledge and to citizenship; it enables children to discriminate in their choice of activities and relationships; and it helps them to see beyond the surface appeal of appearance, fashion and celebrity to what is of abiding value.

AIMS OF EDUCATION: SELF, OTHERS AND THE WIDER WORLD

5. Encouraging respect and reciprocity. To promote respect for self, for peers and adults, for other generations, for diversity and difference, for language, culture and custom, for ideas and values, and for those habits of willing courtesy between persons on which civilised relations depend. To ensure that respect is mutual: between adult and child as well as between child and adult. To understand the essential reciprocity of learning and human relations.

6. Promoting interdependence and sustainability. To develop children's understanding of humanity's dependence for well-being and survival on equitable relationships between individuals, groups, communities and nations, and on a sustainable relationship with the natural world, and help children to move from understanding to positive action in order that they can make a difference and know that they have the power to do so.

7. Empowering local, national and global citizenship. To help children to become active citizens by encouraging their full participation in decision-making within the classroom and school, especially where their own learning is concerned, and to advance their understanding of human rights, democratic engagement, diversity, conflict resolution and social justice. To develop a sense that human interdependence and the fragility of the world order require a concept of citizenship which is global as well as local and national.

8. Celebrating culture and community. To establish the school as a cultural site, a focal point of community life and thought. To enact within the school the behaviours and relationships on which community most directly depends, and in so doing to counter the loss of community outside the school. To appreciate that 'education is an embodiment of a culture's way of life, not just as a preparation for it.'

AIMS OF EDUCATION: LEARNING, KNOWING AND DOING

9. Exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense. To enable children to encounter and begin to explore the wealth of human experience through induction into, and active engagement in, the different ways through which humans make sense of their world and act upon it: intellectual, moral, spiritual, aesthetic, social, emotional and physical; through language, mathematics, science, the humanities, the arts, religion and other ways of knowing and understanding. *Induction* acknowledges and respects our membership of a culture with its own deeply-embedded ways of thinking and acting which can make sense of complexity and through which human understanding constantly changes and advances. Education is necessarily a process of acculturation. *Exploration* is grounded in that distinctive mixture of amazement, perplexity and curiosity which constitutes childhood wonder; a commitment to

discovery, invention, experiment, speculation, fantasy, play and growing linguistic agility which are the essence of childhood.

10. Fostering skill. To foster children's skills in those domains on which learning, employment and a rewarding life most critically depend: in oracy and literacy, in mathematics, science, information technology, the creative and performing arts, the humanities and financial management; but also and no less in practical activities, communication, creativity, invention, problem-solving, critical practice and human relations. To ally skills to knowledge and a sense of purpose in order that they do not become empty formulae devoid of significance.

11. Exciting the imagination. To excite children's imagination in order that they can advance beyond present understanding, extend the boundaries of their lives, contemplate worlds possible as well as actual, understand cause and consequence, develop the capacity for empathy, and reflect on and regulate their behaviour; to explore and test language, ideas and arguments in every activity and form of thought. We assert the need to emphasise the intrinsic value of exciting children's imagination. To experience the delights – and pains – of imagining, and of entering into the imaginative worlds of others, is to become a more rounded and capable person.

12. Enacting dialogue. To help children grasp that learning is an interactive process and that understanding builds through joint activity between teacher and pupil and among pupils in collaboration, and thereby to develop pupils' increasing sense of responsibility for what and how they learn. To help children recognise that knowledge is not only transmitted but also negotiated and re-created; and that each of us in the end makes our own sense out of the meeting of knowledge both personal and collective. To advance a pedagogy in which dialogue is central: between self and others, between personal and collective knowledge, between present and past, between different ways of making sense.

The Committee has posed two further questions:

- What measures should be used to evaluate the quality of education against these purposes?
- How well does the current education system perform against these measures?

I suggest that it would be sensible to address the Committee's first question 'What should be the purpose of education in England?' before considering the other two, because existing performance measures relate, as I have indicated, to a somewhat restricted view of education's purposes and priorities. However, there are some preliminary ground-clearing comments to be made.

First, if the actual purposes of education in England, as manifested in government policy and much educational practice, are narrower than the vision espoused by the Cambridge Primary Review, it follows that the current education system does not in general perform well in relation to aims such as those the Review has proposed; though there are, as I have noted, many schools that successfully resist pressure to reduce education to what is tested and inspected.

Second, the Committee's use of the word 'quality' is ambiguous. Quality relates to education both as experienced and as achieved, but the prevailing rhetoric and formal requirements relating to quality are exclusively about *outcomes*. But quality and outcomes must on no

account be treated as synonymous because – if we consider the primary phase by way of example - to do so would be to presume that an education that produces good test results in a limited range of outcomes in just two subjects is by extension of good quality in the remaining twelve. Quality in education is about more than what is tested, and what is tested cannot be treated as a proxy for the whole.

Third, the Committee asks about ‘measures’ but a glance at the aims proposed above shows that many of them are not amenable to measurement. Which is not to say that they should not be assessed. They should, for if an aim is worth pursuing then we need to know whether and to what degree it has been successfully achieved, and how it has impacted on children’s learning and lives.

I therefore suggest that one of the tasks of this inquiry is to extend the vocabulary of assessment and evaluation in order to allow proper consideration of the achievement of aims. First, the notion of *quality*, which is about both process and product, needs to be disentangled from *outcomes*, which are about the latter. Second, and consequently, the Committee should be prepared to investigate quality in this wider sense. Third, it must accept that some of education’s most vital purposes, processes and outcomes are beyond the reach of measurement and other evaluation approaches are needed.

Here it is useful to introduce a further term: *indicators*.

Measures measure, indicators indicate: they do different jobs. A measure is a procedure, device or unit for measuring and is irrevocably tied to quantity. An indicator is a more complex and variable clue about whether something is happening and if so to what extent. Approaching clouds indicate the imminence of rain but they don’t guarantee it and they certainly don’t measure rainfall. A noisy classroom may indicate lack of student concentration but it doesn’t conclusively prove it, still less measure the precise balance of student attention and inattention.²

If we are validly to evaluate the performance of schools in relation to the complex spectrum of human learning and behaviour encapsulated in aims such as those proposed above, then we must make enlarge the evaluation options to include indicators as well as measures and understand that subjective judgement in relation to some outcomes is inescapable. That is not a weakness: the weakness lies in insisting that evaluation starts and ends with metrics, and that metrics alone define what is educationally important.

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² Alexander, R.J. (2015) ‘Teaching and learning for all? The quality imperative revisited’, *International Journal of Educational Development*, 41(1).
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