



## THE CONDITION AND FUTURE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

A public event to launch the debate about the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review  
Royal Society of Arts, 19 October 2009

### THE CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW AND ITS FINAL REPORT

**Robin Alexander**  
University of Cambridge

This report is the culmination of a three-year enquiry, preceded by nearly three years of consultation and planning. The Cambridge Primary Review was launched in October 2006, and was collecting evidence up to the last possible moment, when the final report went to press a few months ago. Throughout, it has been generously funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and I wish to take this opportunity publicly to thank Tom Chandos, Dawn Austwick, Hilary Hodgson and others at Esmée Fairbairn not just for the Foundation's financial support but also for supporting us in so many other ways. The Review has been undertaken by a team based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, supported by 66 research consultants in 20 other universities, and a 20-strong Advisory Committee drawn from inside and outside education and chaired by Gillian Pugh, to whom, again, we are all hugely indebted. Together, the number of those directly involved in making the Review happen and keeping it on the road comes to about 100. I mention this not just to acknowledge their contribution, but also to rebut suggestions that our final report is merely the work of a small bunch of out-of-touch academics, or even just one out-of-touch academic. Its scope is broad, its evidence is extensive, its authorship is diverse, its participants are many, and – of critical importance in the context of the way the government has personalised its attack on the report – its conclusions and recommendations have been collectively determined and agreed, by the authors and members of the Advisory Committee. And they cover, I have to say, much more than the one issue on which everyone has fixated so far: the school starting age.

#### **How well are we doing?**

Perhaps the most reassuring finding of the Review is this. England's primary schools remain under intense pressure after two decades of continuous change and reform and a great deal of public scrutiny, but they are in good heart and in general are doing a good job. Since 1997, investment in primary education has risen dramatically, many initiatives have had a positive impact, and government deserves credit for this. Highly valued by children and parents, primary schools provide stability and positive values in a world of change and uncertainty. Contrary to myth, schools are not in constant danger of subversion by 1970s ideologues and they do not neglect the 3Rs. Of course there is room for improvement, some of it radical, and we have much to say about this. But in a large and complex system at a time of rapid change this is inevitable. However, the condition of the system as a whole is sound.

### **Three recurrent concerns**

Cutting across our evidence on specifics are three broad concerns which were voiced by many of the Review's witnesses: the condition of childhood today, the state of the society and world in which children are growing up, and the focus and impact of government policy.

#### *Childhood*

On the first of these, the report questions the conventional wisdom that childhood is in crisis, noting that children were the Review's most upbeat witnesses, and emphasising the research evidence on just how much young children know, understand and can do, given teaching that recognises their capability, heeds their voices, stimulates their interests and challenges their thinking. The real childhood crisis concerns the fate of the substantial minority of children whose lives are blighted by poverty, disadvantage, risk and discrimination, and here governments are right to intervene.

#### *Society and the wider world*

On the world in which today's children are growing up, the Review found adults and children anxious about risk, change, loss of community, global warming and much else – and let it not be forgotten that today's primary pupils will be only in their forties in 2050, when the world reaches what many predict as the tipping point for climate change. But we also found that fear turns to hope when education helps them to confront and address such challenges, and that's why the empowerment of both children and teachers and the reinvigoration of communities are such important themes of the report. In this light, it was perhaps unwise of Howard Davies of LSE to mock the report's concern with empowerment, as he did on 'Any Questions' last Friday. For if education is not about giving people the capacity to take control of their lives and make a difference, what is it about?

#### *Policy*

While the government's childhood agenda is applauded, its standards agenda is viewed less favourably – not from opposition to standards and accountability but because of the educational damage the apparatus of targets, testing, performance tables, national strategies and inspection is perceived to have caused for questionable returns. But overriding concern about specific policies is a more pervasive objection to recent trends in the policy process itself, about which the word 'centralisation' tells only part of the story. More on this in a moment.

### **Some specifics**

Let me, in the limited time available, pick out a few specific recommendations.

*Aims.* People rarely pause to ask what primary education is for. If they do, they tend to start with the 3Rs – and then stop. The report confirms the centrality of literacy and numeracy, though it takes a much broader view of what literacy entails, and argues strongly for oracy to be given the central place in curriculum, teaching and learning that it has in many continental European countries. Further, the report argues that although the education system as a whole would benefit from having a clearer overall view of what it is for and where it is heading, the needs of children at different stages, and the imperatives of their

education at those stages, are also in certain ways quite distinct. So, arising from the Review's evidence and consultations, we propose a framework of 12 new aims for primary education. These should shape curriculum, pedagogy and the wider life of the school rather than be tacked on as an afterthought. The aims concern the individual, the individual in relation to others and the wider world, and the core experiences which schools should provide. The report provides the detail which I can't give you here.

**Structures.** Last Friday it was widely reported that we were recommending that children should not attend school until age 6. This is incorrect, but the misreading has now snowballed to the extent that all kinds of eminent people are waxing enthusiastic or indignant about the so-called proposal. What our report actually recommends is the strengthening and upward extension of the curriculum embodied in the government's Early Years Foundation Stage (the EYFS), the simplification of the EYFS/KS1/2 relationship by reducing it to two stages – foundation and primary – and then a debate about whether the actual school starting age should be raised in line with international practice. Much of the discussion since last Friday has confused *curriculum*, which is what the EYFS is about, regardless of where children are being educated, and *organisational structures* (primary schools, reception classes, nursery units, day care and so on). For us, the important issue is the nature, quality and appropriateness of the provision for young children, wherever they are. Today, the government has launched a consultation on the Rose review proposal that children should be able to start school when they reach the age of four. The timing of this announcement is interesting. It would be a great pity, in view of what I have said, if it generated a 'start at six versus start at four' slanging match, with all parties continuing to miss our central point about the nature and quality of early years provision. And it goes without saying that if children are ready to learn to read, at whatever age, that is what they should do.

**Curriculum.** The report questions the Rose review's premise that the main curriculum challenge is – in Rose's words – 'how to help primary class teachers solve the "quarts-into-pint-pots" problem of fitting 13 subjects plus RE into the limited time available.' Curriculum manageability is certainly a problem – though, significantly, not for all schools – but manageability is as much about expertise and staffing as the curriculum itself, and the Rose review appears to treat the generalist class teacher system – a legacy, after all, of the Victorian urge to deliver a narrow curriculum to the urban masses as cheaply as possible – as the natural and inevitable way to organise primary schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the fact that the curriculum has expanded and the task of the teacher is much more diverse and complex now than it was then. Curriculum manageability is also about the way the government's standards agenda of national strategies and SATs has distorted what it aims to improve and measure. We want the government *not* to presume that with the Rose review the curriculum is, as they say, 'sorted'. After all, you can move from the current 13 subjects to Rose's six areas of learning, which at first sight is an appealing simplification, but if you've not tackled the underlying problems then little will change, including the currently very uneven quality of curriculum provision beyond literacy and numeracy. We want government – and the opposition, and teachers, and parents – to give proper consideration to the Cambridge Review's more comprehensive analysis of the problems to be fixed and to its alternative proposals for a national framework of eight domains of knowledge, skill and enquiry combined with a locally-responsive 'community curriculum', all driven by the proposed 12 aims.

**Assessment.** Since last Friday some have claimed that we propose to 'scrap SATs' and leave nothing in their place. In fact, the report is adamant that children must be assessed

summatively at the end of the primary phase, that they must also be assessed formatively throughout their primary schooling, and that schools should be publicly accountable. The issue, the report says, is not *whether* children should be assessed or schools should be accountable – they should – but *how*. We propose an approach to end-of-primary summative assessment which reflects our insistence on children’s entitlement to a broad curriculum, and does not treat literacy and numeracy as proxies for the whole curriculum, or SATs as the only valid or rigorous form of assessment (though tests of some kind are not ruled out as part of the more rounded approach we encourage). We call for greater use of teacher assessment within this process, supported by external moderation. So, properly viewed, what is proposed is in many ways more rigorous than what we have now. We don’t provide a blueprint – that’s for the best assessment brains in the country to work on, and it will take time – but we do set out the broad principles. Like Barry Sheerman’s Committee, we also argue for the separation of the functions that at present the SATs have to combine – assessment of children, evaluation of schools and monitoring of the system as a whole.

**Standards.** The report contains a careful analysis of the vital matter of educational standards. It finds the current definition of standards – as test performance in literacy and numeracy, and in those alone – narrow and misleading. Subject to that considerable limitation it goes on to look at the national and international evidence, identifying the claims about standards – both positive and negative – which can be sustained, drawing attention to methodological problems with the current approach, and assessing the validity of a whole range of claims by which the political rhetoric of ‘standards’ is flavoured: for example – testing of itself drives up standards ... until 1997 English primary education was at a ‘low state’ and primary teachers were ‘professionally uninformed’ ... the way to raise standards in the basics is to concentrate only on the basics ... and so on. The report argues that standards and entitlement should be precisely aligned, that children are entitled to the highest possible standards of teaching across the whole curriculum, regardless of how much or how little time a subject is allocated, and it repeats the recurrent finding of HMI, Ofsted and at least one government white paper that standards in the basics and the breadth and quality of the rest of the curriculum are intimately related. This broader definition of standards, we say, should inform aims, curriculum, assessment, teaching, inspection and accountability.

Incidentally, the Schools Minister said last Friday that the government’s new school report card will solve the problem. It won’t: for while it includes welcome attention to pupils’ wellbeing and personal and social development, the measure of *pupil attainment* at age 11 remains exactly as now, test performance in literacy and numeracy.

**Teaching.** It is of course teaching, not testing, that drives up standards, and pedagogy is a major theme of the Review. The report finds that the highly prescriptive national literacy, numeracy and primary strategies introduced from 1998 onwards, which tell teachers not just what to teach but how, combined with testing and the focus of inspection, initial teacher training, continuing professional development and local authority school improvement strategies – all of which seek to secure compliance with the strategies – add up to what one of our commissioned research surveys called a ‘state theory of learning’. We want that to end, and – to quote a much earlier secretary of state – we want the principle that ‘questions about how to teach are not for government to determine’ to be reinstated. We want teaching to be grounded in repertoire, evidence and principle rather than recipe. We want to strengthen what, according to international research, separates the best teachers from the rest: their depth of knowledge of and engagement with what is to be taught, the quality and cognitive power of the classroom interaction they orchestrate, and their skill in assessing and providing feedback on pupils’ learning – all day, every day, not just in Year 6.

***Undertake full review of primary school staffing.*** In order to ensure that every school has access to the expertise that a modern primary education requires, and can deliver both our broader account of educational entitlement and its more rigorous concept of standards, the report calls for a full review of primary school staffing which assesses the match between the tasks of primary schools and the available expertise, roles and numbers of teachers and support staff. It anticipates the extension of teaching roles to include specialists and semi-specialists as well as generalist class teachers, especially for older children, but wants schools to be staffed with sufficient flexibility so that they can make their own decisions on how such specialist expertise should be deployed. This review and re-thinking of primary school staffing will have implications for teacher training, on which the report also makes major recommendations.

***The balance of national and local.*** In common with other studies, the Review finds England's system of primary education over-centralised, over-controlled and subject to excessive micro-management by government and the national agencies. The Review's evidence was collected between 2006 and 2009, but it yields few signs that the decentralisation promised in 2001 for the second stage of Public Service Reform has got as far as the primary education sector. Mindful of this, the report is sceptical about the renewed claim of decentralisation in the June 2009 white paper. The report argues for the tide of centralisation to be reversed, especially in the vital domain of teaching, and for the roles and relationships of national government, the non-departmental public bodies, local authorities and schools to be re-configured, leading to a greatly strengthened role in educational decision-making for schools, local authorities and local communities. This will simultaneously advance the causes of re-professionalising teachers and engaging communities.

***Funding.*** The disparity in funding between primary and secondary schools has been criticised by reports going back to Hadow in 1931, at least. If, following the proposed staffing review, primary schools are to have the staffing resources they need, in terms of both expertise and numbers, then there are considerable funding implications. The ending of the national teaching strategies and the proposed slimming down of national infrastructure will allow resources to be re-directed to local authorities and schools, but probably not to the extent required, and in the present economic climate, this is going to be problematic. But ultimately, it must surely be within the ability of one of the world's richest nations to ensure that at this vital stage of children's lives the educational task of schools is matched by appropriate professional resources.

***Others.*** There are many other recommendations – a 2-year PGCE, a review of special needs provision (partly but not wholly covered by the government's Lamb review), revision of the TDA professional standards, modifications to Ofsted inspection procedures, protection of small schools, more partnership and staff exchanges between schools, reinstatement and expansion of those school libraries which have been cut back in the mistaken belief that screens have replaced books, and much more. I can't summarise them here, and the briefing document gives the flavour only. The only authentic account of what the Review concludes and proposes is that provided by the report itself, and in view of what happened last Friday I urge you not to be content with the digests and summaries which are currently doing the rounds, including our own.

## What really matters?

The conclusions and recommendations are naturally of particular interest, but they are not all that matters about this report. For us, and we hope for you, the evidence, analysis and argument in which the conclusions are grounded are just as important. For this report is not just for this week or month, to be reacted to on an instant accept/reject basis. Still less is it for pre-election posturing and point-scoring of the kind we have heard. We hope – and immodestly believe – that the report offers food for thinking and discussion for several years to come, and a vision of primary education which will not be achieved overnight. In that sense, for ministers to claim, as they have, that the report is out of date because the Review started three years ago, is to miss the point, and spectacularly. Not only is their assertion incorrect, but the very fact that the Review started three years ago, and was not a quick-fix enquiry of the kind that governments tend to prefer, is testament to its depth and longer-term value.

In any case, the report is not just for the makers and agents of policy, but for all those who invest in this vital phase of education, especially children, parents and teachers. And let it be understood, too, that the report above all seeks to encourage a new way of thinking and talking about primary education – a way which abandons the polarisation, sloganising, myth-making, misrepresentation and name-calling which have bedevilled the primary education debate since the 1960s and which have been so evident in recent days; which is alive to nuance and the problematic; which respects evidence but is also prepared to test it; which learns from history instead of saying ‘That was yesterday. Now it’s time to draw a line and move on’; and finally, which embraces alternative viewpoints and gladly engages with new ideas, and thus gives newsreaders a break from that now routine and predictable phrase ‘The government has dismissed the findings’.

### TO FIND OUT MORE

**THE REPORT.** *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, 608 pp, Routledge, October 2009. ISBN 978-0-415-54871-7 (pb), 978-0-415-54870-0 (hb). Editor: Robin Alexander. Authorial team: Robin Alexander, Michael Armstrong, Julia Flutter, Linda Hargreaves, Wynne Harlen, David Harrison, Elizabeth-Hartley-Brewer, Ruth Kershner, John MacBeath, Berry Mayall, Stephanie Northen, Gillian Pugh, Colin Richards and David Utting. Order a copy at <http://www.routledge.com/9780415548717>.

**COMPANION RESEARCH VOLUME.** *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, 850 pp, Routledge, October 2009. ISBN 978-0-415-54869-4 (hb only). Editors: Robin Alexander, with Christine Doddington, John Gray, Linda Hargreaves and Ruth Kershner. 66 contributing authors. Order a copy at <http://www.routledge.com/9780415548717>.

**BOOKLET.** *Introducing the Cambridge Primary Review*, 42pp, October 2009, ISBN 978-1-906478-9. Edited by Diane Hofkins and Stephanie Northen. Copies are being widely circulated throughout the UK, including to all schools, local authorities and teacher training providers. They may also be downloaded at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).

**INTERIM REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS.** Those interim reports which have not been revised for inclusion in the research volume may still be downloaded from the Review website, as may individual briefings on every report published to date (including this one).

**CONFERENCES.** A programme of dissemination and debate follows the final report’s publication. The RSA event on 19 October 2009 is followed, between November 2009 and February 2010, by 14 regional conferences for professional leaders in schools, local authorities and teacher training. To book a place: [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk) or <http://www.teachersfirst.org.uk/cpr/>.

**GENERAL ENQUIRIES.** The Cambridge Primary Review, Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ. Phone: 01223 767523. Email: [enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk). Website: [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).

**PRESS ENQUIRIES.** [richard@margrave.co.uk](mailto:richard@margrave.co.uk) (Richard Margrave, Communications Director).