



...children, their world, their education

CAMBRIDGE  
PRIMARY REVIEW  
BRIEFINGS

# THE FINAL REPORT

---

## Context and content

Since October 2006, with the support of Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Cambridge Primary Review has been investigating the condition and future of primary education in England. Between October 2007 and February 2009 the Review's 31 interim reports examined matters as diverse as childhood, parenting, learning, teaching, testing, educational standards, the curriculum, school organisation, teacher training and the impact of national policy. Many of these provoked considerable media and public interest and have influenced both policy and the wider debate.

Now the Review presents *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review* (to obtain a copy see page 4). This 608-page report draws on over 4,000 published sources as well as the Review's extensive evidence from written submissions, face-to-face soundings and searches of official data. Part 1 sets the scene and tracks primary education policy since the 1960s. Part 2 examines children's development and learning, their lives outside school and their needs, aspirations and prospects in a changing world. Part 3 explores what goes on in primary schools, from the formative early years to aims, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, standards and school organisation. Part 4 deals with the system as a whole: ages and stages; schools and other agencies; teacher training, leadership and workforce reform; governance, funding and policy. Part 5 draws everything together with 78 formal conclusions and 75 recommendations for future policy and practice. A report of this length and complexity is not readily compressed into a four-page briefing: here, by way of taster rather than summary, are some key points from the report's concluding chapter.

## The bottom line: how good is English primary education and where is it heading?

**Primary schools: how well are they doing?** The Review finds England's primary schools under intense pressure, but in good heart and in general doing a good job. Investment in primary education has risen dramatically and many recent policies have had a positive impact. Highly valued by children and parents, primary schools now represent, for many, stability and positive values in a world where much else is changing and uncertain. Contrary to populist claims, schools are not in danger of subversion by 1970s ideologues and they do not neglect the 3Rs. The real problems are very different: on these, and on what genuinely requires reappraisal and improvement, the Cambridge report points the way.

**What is primary education for?** For too long the aims of primary education have been confused or tokenistic; and, too often, aims tend to set off grandly in one direction while the curriculum follows a much narrower path. The school system requires a coherent set of aims uniting its various phases, but each phase is developmentally and educationally so distinct that it needs its own vision too. The report proposes a framework of 12 aims grounded in its evidence on the imperatives of childhood, society and the wider world today. Such aims should drive curriculum, pedagogy and school life rather than be tagged on as an afterthought. The Review wants its proposed aims to be properly debated, and presents them as a carefully-considered alternative to the 'off the shelf' approach taken by the Rose review.

## Childhood, society, policy: three recurrent themes

**Empowering children, respecting childhood.** There are legitimate concerns about the quality of children's lives, and about the transient values and materialist pressures to which they are subject, but the

'crisis' of contemporary childhood may have been overstated, and children themselves were the Review's most upbeat witnesses. The truly urgent crisis concerns not the pursuit of shallow celebrity but the fate of those children whose lives are blighted by poverty, disadvantage, risk and discrimination, and here governments are right to intervene. Meanwhile, among the many positives of modern childhood, the report celebrates the research evidence on just how much young children know, understand and can do, and argues for an education which heeds their voices and empowers them for life as both learners and citizens. The report also argues that childhood's rich potential should be protected from a system apparently bent on pressing children into a uniform mould at an ever-younger age.

***A world fit to grow up in?*** While governments equivocate on global warming, parents and children do not. The condition of British society and the wider world generated considerable anxiety among the Review's witnesses, the more so as they noted that today's primary school pupils will be only in their forties when the world reaches what some predict as the tipping point for climate change. This, allied with concerns about the loss of identity, community, social cohesion and mutual respect, made many witnesses deeply pessimistic about the future. But again the antidote was empowerment: pessimism turned to hope when witnesses felt they could take control and make a difference, whether in relation to sustainability and active citizenship or in the face of the latest official initiative.

***Policy: solution or problem?*** The report assesses reaction to the many recent policies and initiatives for primary education and finds that while the childhood agenda is applauded, the standards agenda is viewed less favourably; not because of opposition to high standards or accountability – far from it – but because of the way the apparatus of targets, testing, performance tables, national strategies and inspection is believed to distort children's primary schooling for questionable returns. There is also concern about the policy *process*, and in this education appears to mirror the wider problems recorded by those who see British democracy in retreat. In common with other recent studies, the report notes the questionable evidence on which some key educational policies have been based; the disenfranchising of local voice; the rise of unelected and unaccountable groups taking key decisions behind closed doors; the 'empty rituals' of consultation; the authoritarian mindset; and the use of myth and derision to underwrite exaggerated accounts of progress and discredit alternative views.

## **Standards, structures, curriculum, testing, teaching and other specifics**

***Standards: beyond the rhetoric.*** For over two decades the word 'standards' has dominated educational politics. The report re-assesses both the prevailing concept of standards – finding it restricted, restrictive and misleading – and the national and international evidence on what has happened to primary school standards in recent years. The picture is neither as rosy nor as bleak as opposing camps tend to claim. Subject to the limitations of the conventional definition, many of the positive claims about standards can be sustained, but so too can some of the negatives; there are methodological problems with some of the test procedures and data; and several of the more spectacular assertions (such as that in 1997 English primary education was at a 'low state', or that testing of itself drives up standards, or that SATs are the only way to hold schools to account) have little or no basis in evidence.

***Children's needs: equalising provision in an unequal society.*** The Review supports initiatives like Every Child Matters, the Children's Plan and Narrowing the Gap, which seek to make the lives of all children more secure and to reduce the gap in outcomes between vulnerable children and the rest. But England remains a country of massive inequality, and the persistent 'long tail' of underachievement, in which Britain compares unfavourably with many other countries, maps closely onto gross disparities in income, health, housing, risk and well-being. Reducing these gaps must remain a priority for social and economic policy generally, not just for education. There is also excessive local variation in provision for children with special educational needs, and the report calls for a full SEN review.

***Matching ages, stages and structures.*** The English insistence on the earliest possible start to formal schooling, against the grain of international evidence and practice, is educationally counterproductive. The Early Years Foundation Stage should be renamed and extended to age six, and early years provision should be strengthened in its quality and staffing so that children are properly prepared – socially, linguistically and experientially – for formal learning. The Key Stage 1/2 division should be replaced by a single primary phase, yielding a seamless journey through Foundation (0-6) and Primary (6-11). The feasibility of raising the school starting age in line with these changes should be examined.

***The curriculum: not there yet.*** There is much unfinished business from the government's Rose review of the primary curriculum, and this calls into question the decision to press ahead with implementing it. The report disputes the Rose claim that the central problem is 'quarts into pint pots' and shows how the quality of the curriculum, as well as its manageability, reflect patterns of staffing and notions of professional expertise which have survived since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and have skewed the entire discourse of curriculum. The report also rejects the claim that schools can deliver standards in the 'basics', or a broad curriculum, but not both, and argues that in any case the notion of 'basics' should reflect 21<sup>st</sup> century realities and needs. The report proposes a curriculum which is driven by the proposed 12 aims (see above) and is realised through eight clearly-specified domains of knowledge, skill and enquiry, central to which are language, oracy and literacy. It also guarantees entitlement to breadth, balance and quality; combines a national framework with an innovative and locally-responsive 'community curriculum'; encourages greater professional flexibility and creativity; demands a more sophisticated debate about subjects and knowledge than currently obtains; and requires a re-think of primary school teaching roles, expertise and training.

***Assessment: reform, not tinkering.*** The report unequivocally supports both public accountability and the raising of standards, but – like several others – it is critical of prevailing approaches to testing in primary schools, and the collateral damage they are perceived to have caused. It commends not the marginal adjustment of recent proposals but a total re-think. Summative assessment at the end of the primary phase should be retained, but assessment for accountability should be uncoupled from assessment for learning. The narrow focus of SATs, which treat literacy and numeracy as proxies for the whole of primary education, should be replaced by a system which reports on children's attainment in all areas of their education, with minimal disruption and greater use of teacher assessment. School and system performance should be monitored through sample testing and an improved model of inspection.

***A pedagogy of evidence and principle, not prescription.*** The report finds strong support for the claim that national tests, national teaching strategies, inspection, centrally-determined teacher training and ring-fenced finance have together produced a 'state theory of learning'; and it views as suspect some of what has been imposed. The report argues for a pedagogy of repertoire and principle rather than recipe and prescription, and proposes reforms in teacher training to match. It wants teaching to be fully rather than selectively informed by research, especially by pedagogical, psychological and neuroscientific evidence which clarifies the conditions for effective learning and teaching. The principle that it is not for government or government agencies to tell teachers how to teach, abandoned in 1997, should be reinstated.

***Expertise for entitlement: re-thinking school staffing.*** The report commends recent increases in the numbers of teachers and teaching assistants (TAs), and efforts to give primary teachers status, incentives and support. But there is a historic and growing mismatch between the tasks primary schools are required to undertake and the professional resources available to them. TAs are no substitute for teachers, or for the expertise which a modern curriculum requires. At issue is the viability of a system which continues to treat the generalist class teacher role as the default. The report calls for a full review of primary school staffing which properly assesses the nature of the expertise which a modern primary education requires, taking account of the full diversity of schools' work. The report particularly underlines the importance of teachers' domain or subject knowledge – the point at which the class teacher system is most vulnerable – because research shows that it is the teacher's depth of engagement with what is to be taught, allied to skill in providing feedback on learning, that separates expert teachers from the rest. It argues for training and resources which enable schools to mix the undeniably important role of class teacher with those of semi-specialist and specialist, so that every school can meet the Review's definition of educational entitlement as access to the highest possible standards of teaching in all curriculum domains, regardless of how much or how little time is allocated to them. The report supports moves to distributed school leadership, but urges that heads be given more support, especially in their non-educational tasks, and that they should be helped to concentrate on the job for which they are most needed – leading learning.

***From novice to expert: reforming initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD).*** While applauding the dedication of the primary teaching force, the report contests the claim that England's teachers are 'the best-trained ever' on the grounds that it cannot be proved and encourages complacency, and that certain vital aspects of teaching are neglected in ITT. In line with its recommendations on school staffing, the report wants ITT to prepare teachers for a greater variety of classroom roles. It rejects training for mere 'delivery' or 'compliance' and urges that more attention be given to evidence-based pedagogy, subject expertise, curriculum analysis and the open exploration of questions of value and purpose. It queries the value and empirical basis of the current TDA standards for professional certification and advancement, finding them out of line with research as well as too generalised to discriminate securely between the different professional levels, and recommends their

replacement by a framework which is properly validated against research and pupil learning outcomes. It urges the end of 'one-size-fits-all' CPD and commends an approach which balances support for inexperienced and less secure teachers with freedom and respect for the experienced and talented.

**Schools in communities, schools as communities.** The report supports government initiatives to encourage multi-agency working across the boundaries of education and care, and argues for greater use of mutual professional support through clustering, federation, all-through schools and the exchange of specialist expertise. It highlights the considerable communal potential of schools, and wants this to be enacted through curriculum and pedagogy as well as through 'joined-up' relations with parents, carers and community groups. The proposed community curriculum partnerships could be catalysts for this activity. With their strong educational record and vital community role in mind, the report urges that small and rural schools be safeguarded against cost-cutting closure. It also warns against the closure of middle schools, commending attention to witnesses' developmental arguments for their retention at a time of anxiety that children are growing up too soon. In the matter of funding, too, the Review believes that the historic primary-secondary funding differential, which has defied the recommendations of official enquiries since 1931, and from which 7-11 schools suffer particular disadvantage, should finally be eliminated.

**Decentralising control, redirecting funds, raising standards.** The Review found a widespread perception that notwithstanding the delegation of school budgets and staffing, the centralisation of the core educational activities of curriculum, assessment, teaching, inspection and teacher training has gone too far. The report calls for the responsibilities of the DCSF, non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), local authorities and schools to be re-balanced; and for top-down control and edict to be replaced by professional empowerment, mutual accountability and proper respect for research and experience. At a time of financial retrenchment, ending the multi-billion pound national strategies (as urged by the Review long before the announcement in the June 2009 white paper) and dramatically reducing DCSF and NDPB infrastructure would yield substantial savings. These could be used to strengthen primary school staffing in the way the report proposes and raise educational standards as the report re-defines them.

---

## 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. A public debate at the RSA 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).

**Note: the views expressed in Cambridge Primary Review reports and briefings do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge.**