

Analysis: Schools – A fresh vision for primary education

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The biggest review of primary education in England for more than 40 years has just issued the last of its interim reports. Lauren Higgs examines what are the findings thus far and the suggestions for reform that are now emerging.

The current generation of English primary school children are the subject of countless reports, surveys and newspaper headlines. Apparently they are unhealthy, unhappy and stressed out. But despite a deluge of evidence, the last comprehensive review of the primary education system was more than 40 years ago.

The University of Cambridge's Primary Review is set to change that. After two years of research and 30 interim reports, the climax of the Primary Review is looming. The final report is not due until early 2009, but the last set of the interim reports, which form the basis for the review, were unveiled last week.

Professor Robin Alexander, the director of the Primary Review, says: 'It is too early to predict what will be in the final report'. But the review's priorities are clear and include: the reform of current testing processes; the need to tackle inequalities for disadvantaged children; and the importance of empowering children through participation.

Excessive testing

It's no surprise the roles of both teacher and pupil have changed considerably in the 20 years since the national educational reforms of 1988. While national tests exist to drive up standards, evidence from the interim reports claim statutory testing has produced little improvement in standards and key stage test results are misleading, exaggerating pupil attainment.

The cost to both pupils and teachers is high. An excessive focus on testing has a negative effect on classroom motivation since children respond better to praise for effort, not performance. According to

the interim reports, teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time coaching primary pupils to answer test questions, at the expense of broader learning outcomes. This is a finding echoed by the recent Children, Schools and Families Select Committee report on testing (CYP Now, 14–20 May).

The report's findings show children learn best through working collaboratively, yet seldom have the chance to engage in productive social interaction in the classroom, because of a narrow focus on curriculum. A potential solution to the problems could lie in a new system for evaluating attainment. One of the interim reports suggests national standards could be tracked by using sample surveys of schools across England. However, getting rid of testing completely would be controversial. A spokeswoman for the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) says: 'In their initial teacher training, teachers learn a range of techniques to assess children. Testing is just one part of children's experiences of learning.'

Several of the interim reports discuss what can be done to tackle inequalities in the primary school system. Evidence shows more children with statements of special educational needs are being educated at special schools, and children from some ethnic minorities are more likely to be classified as having special educational needs than others.

One report suggests some of these inequalities arise from an excessive degree of variation in the way local authorities identify children with special needs. Proposals call for more emphasis on inclusion and a national system to help identify children with special needs in a more consistent way.

Professor Alan Smithers, director of the University of Buckingham's Centre for Education and Employment Research, believes it is necessary to strike a balance between being inclusive and providing for children with specific needs. 'We shouldn't be afraid of the differences between children,' he says. 'The focus has to be on putting in place a system that works for all children.'

Pupil participation

The need to recognise the voice of the pupils is another strong theme to emerge from the reports. Pupil participation is vital, especially for the development of services for children with special needs. Although pupil participation already influences decision making in some primary schools, evidence suggests many schools are failing to listen to children. According to one report, pupils want the opportunity to tell teachers what helps them learn. It suggests the schools and local authorities that do take young people's voices seriously should be used as examples of best practice, to help those schools that need to focus more on participation.

When the Cambridge review started in 2006, it set out to consider primary education in a wider social, cultural and economic context. There is no doubt that the review's interim reports have addressed those challenges.

However, the final review in 2009 promises to make more robust conclusions. A new vision for primary education lies ahead, which will include recommendations on everything from values and structure to the curriculum and the learning environment schools should provide.

The Primary Review

The review started in October 2006

- It is funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation
- The work is directed by Professor Robin Alexander from the University of Cambridge, and guided by an advisory committee of 17 members
- The Department for Children, Schools and Families has started a separate review into primary curriculum, the results of which are due in autumn 2008 – www.primaryreview.org.uk.