



Primary review

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There's been a myth that primary school is "sorted". Primary schools, after all, are lovely communities where children feel secure and happy. Added to that, succeeding governments have provided an entitlement for all children, fixed literacy and numeracy, and ensured that there is safe and enriching after-school provision for all.

Results have gone up, albeit not as much as ministers want, but by and large they have "delivered". Most of the nation's anxieties have been focused on the state of older children and their education.

So three cheers for the Primary Review, which is putting the schooling and lives of four to 11-year-olds under the microscope and revealing them in all their diversity, complexity and intensity.

The review is independent, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and directed by Professor Robin Alexander at Cambridge University. Its two-year sweep is vastly ambitious, packed with consultations, research reviews and analysis, which will be contemplated and debated and distilled into a set of powerful recommendations and findings at the end of 2008. One hopes it will have the same hold on the public imagination as its 40-year-old predecessors, the 1967 Plowden and Gittins reports.

Judging by the recent press response, it may well do. Reflecting as it did other studies highlighting the dire state of British childhood, the review's first interim report captured the headlines across newspapers and electronic media of all complexions. "Family breakdown, exam pressure, celebrity culture and crime are robbing children of their innocence" – the *Daily Mail's* intro is representative.

Community Soundings

The Review's report on its series of "Community Soundings" taken around the country summarises interviews with more than 750 children, teachers, governors, heads, local authority officials, and religious and community leaders. Robin and his team were struck by the consistency of the messages they received from every constituency and

every region:

- Primary children are under too much pressure from tests, targets and tables, which are distorting the curriculum;
- Family life and community are breaking down;
- Children are made anxious by global threats such as climate change and terrorism;
- Traffic and other dangers mean children are over-protected.

But let's stop and unpick the *Times Educational Supplement's* headline: "Our primaries are heaven". OK, a bit nauseating. But the point, as the story goes on to explain, is that schools are seen as havens from the troubled, materialistic and celebrity-obsessed world outside.

One school leader, says the report, "expressed the countervailing values of school precisely and starkly: selfishness, retaliation and survival outside the school; caring, mutual respect, negotiation and arbitration within it".

Heads and other leaders also believed creativity in the curriculum would help compensate for children's troubles in the outside world.

None of these findings are surprising, nor is one of the biggest lessons to be drawn from them so far:

What makes a difference is feeling empowered. "Pessimism turned to hope when witnesses felt they had the power to act," says the report. "Thus, the children who were most confident that climate change need not overwhelm them were those whose schools had decided to replace unfocussed fear by factual information and practical strategies for energy reduction and sustainability.

"Similarly, the teachers who were least worried by national initiatives were those who responded to them with robust and knowledgeable criticism rather than resentful compliance, and asserted their professional right to go their own way."

There are lessons here for "governments with centralising tendencies", as well as for schools and teacher education, the report adds.

However, there's only so much even

the most amazing primary can do to change what happens outside the school gates, not to mention across global boundaries. As ever, education cannot solve all society's ills.

Unfortunately, though, there are times when it manifests the divisions in society, even against its will. The best-off parents paid for extra tuition to help their children get top marks in national tests, to maximise their chances of getting into good private secondary schools – "in effect, creating a parallel schooling system". At the same time, they worried about the stress the tests were causing their children.

"In contrast, parents in one of the more economically deprived London communities saw the school itself as the best available solution to local social and economic challenges," says the report.

Governors' concerns

Governors added the concern that SATs were discriminating against the children most in need of support – those with special needs or from difficult home circumstances. But they also saw value in the tests. Looking inward to their schools and outward to the local authority, they brought wider perspectives to many of the issues.

This first interim publication peers into a world that would have deeply disheartened Lady Plowden and her team. The 1967 report's sparkling optimism and touching belief in the power of social engineering is not to be found in 2007.

But let's end on an upbeat note, and consider those heavenly primary schools across the land. "The potentially uneasy relationship between school and what lies outside its gates was manifested nearly everywhere by levels of security which would have been inconceivable at the time of the Plowden inquiry," writes Alexander. "Yet once inside the building there was nothing gloomy about school life as we observed it. Whatever is happening in the wider world, and whatever their anxieties about the future, these children spent their school days in communities-within-communities which unflinchingly sought to celebrate the positive."