



Primary reviews compared

Diane Hofkins

We all know the joke about the peasant who is asked for directions: "If I were you I wouldn't start from here," he replies helpfully.

Today we have before us two sets of primary curriculum proposals. One starts from here; the other takes the peasant's advice and begins from first principles.

Sir Jim Rose's recommendations are pragmatic; they are constructed within the parameters set by ministers and designed to be workable with minimum disruption. They are decent and practical, like sensible shoes. Rose has successfully squared several circles, finding a way to retain both subjects and cross-curricular work and to maintain the centrality of the 3Rs while enabling breadth.

Professor Robin Alexander's are visionary. The Cambridge Primary Review's report asks, "What is primary education for?", and builds its framework on aims for individuals and the wider world. It is not tethered to government agencies, but funded by a charity, Esmee Fairbairn. These proposals are much more complex. In their idealism, they are more like winged sandals. For example: "We would wish to encourage a vigorous campaign aimed at advancing public understanding of the arts in education, human development, culture and national life, coupled with a much more rigorous approach to arts teaching in schools. The renaissance of this domain is long overdue."

Alexander proposes eight "domains", all of which are of high importance, though they wouldn't be expected to take up equal space in the timetable. Rose, with six "areas of learning", sets priorities. At the top are English, maths and ICT. "The teacher who once said: 'If children leave my school and can't paint that's a pity but if they leave and can't read that's a disaster' was perhaps exaggerating to make a point," says Rose. "The point is nevertheless well made. Primary schools have to set priorities despite the righteousness of arguments for breadth and balance."

Whichever curriculum you prefer (the hardline NASUWT might dislike

the amount of change and Inset Cambridge would require), it's not an equal competition. Rose is the one the Government asked for, and unless Labour calls and loses an election, that's the one that will be implemented – in September 2011.

Though Rose's interim report went out for consultation, the curriculum structure it recommends appears to be non-negotiable. The report's own timetable shows that the QCA was to draw up draft content only two weeks after its publication. These were undergoing "informal" consultations (which, it's understood, excluded local authority and teacher union reps who attended meetings about Rose) before a further round of official ones later this spring.

The success of the Rose curriculum will be down to the details. Meanwhile, we must view Alexander's radical vision as a discussion document for the long-term.

What are the proposals? Rose's six areas of learning dovetail with the Early Years Foundation Stage and segue into KS3. They are:

- Understanding English, communication and languages;
- Mathematical understanding;
- Scientific and technological understanding;
- Human, social and environmental understanding;
- Understanding physical health and wellbeing;
- Understanding the arts and design.

He adopts the three secondary curriculum aims. These are to help all children: become successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve; confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; and responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society.

Alexander's proposals are part of a broad review of primary education as a whole, and the full report will appear later this year. Among other proposals, it will advocate reforms to assessment, governance and teacher training. Rose's brief excludes national testing or changes to the wider system.

Cambridge's eight domains are:

- arts and creativity,

- citizenship and ethics,
- faith and belief,
- language, oracy and literacy,
- mathematics,
- physical and emotional health,
- place and time,
- science and technology.

They are to be planned on a matrix with the 12 aims which are intended to influence the whole of primary education, not just the curriculum. The aims for the individual are wellbeing, engagement, empowerment and autonomy. For others and the wider world, respect and reciprocity; interdependence and sustainability; local, national and global citizenship; and culture and community. Finally, there are exploring, knowing, understanding, making sense; fostering skill; exciting the imagination and enacting dialogue.

A "community curriculum", taking up 30 of the timetable, encourages innovation, responds to local needs and helps foster the school's role in community life and regeneration. ICT, given high priority in Rose, is not a separate domain, but is seen as a tool supporting learning across the board.

Alexander says the Cambridge curriculum reconceptualises the way subjects are thought about in primary school and promotes the highest standards for all spheres of learning, not just literacy and numeracy. This is what it says about the oft-sidelined disciplines of history and geography (the place and time domain):

"Place and time principally includes how history shapes culture, events, consciousness and identity and the lessons which it offers to our understanding of present and future; and the geographical study of location, other people, other places and human interdependence, locally, nationally and globally. Like the arts, this domain and its contributory disciplines stand in need of proper public and political recognition of their importance to children's understanding of who they are, of change and continuity, cause and consequence, of why society is arranged as it is, and of the interaction of mankind and the physical environment."