

New Visions for Education Group

National Forum on Education and the Election
WHAT FUTURE FOR EDUCATION?
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WHAT FUTURE FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION?

Robin Alexander

Director of the Cambridge Primary Review

Last October, after three years of consultation and a further three years for collecting and analysing evidence and releasing 31 interim reports, the Cambridge Primary Review published its final report. This acknowledged the government's considerable achievements in primary education since 1997: a massive increase in educational funding, staffing and support for primary schools; a visionary childhood agenda centering on increased pre-school provision, *Every Child Matters* and the Children's Plan; and much else.

At the same time, the report challenged the particular way government has chosen to pursue its essential goal of raising primary standards, using high stakes tests, league tables, prescriptive national teaching strategies and procedures for inspection, initial teacher training, CPD and school improvement which require strict compliance with official views of what primary education is about and how it should be undertaken.

The report ended with a question which we hoped might just give someone in DCSF pause for thought. We asked, 'Will this final report from the Cambridge Review be dismissed in the same summary fashion as its 31 interim predecessors?'

If you read the newspapers on 16th October you'll know the answer. But I'm not here to complain about that infamous misrepresentation and premature dismissal of six years' work and an unrivalled body of evidence. Instead, I'm pleased to report that we've now had constructive discussions with Ed Balls and Vernon Coaker, and indeed with Michael Gove and David Laws, and we expect to take these further with senior officials after the election, regardless of which party is returned. In any case, what we heard from DCSF last October was in marked contrast to the welcome the Cambridge report has received pretty well everywhere else, notably from teachers, heads, parents, religious leaders, national organisations and the governments of several other countries.

It's encouraging, too, that Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, our sponsors since 2006, have agreed further funding to support the growing network of schools which are keen to take up the Cambridge Review's ideas without seeking - in that chilling phrase which primary heads have used repeatedly at our dissemination conferences - 'permission to innovate' from their Ofsted inspectors and local authority School Improvement Partners.

So there are grounds for optimism. Yet the fact that headteachers should need permission from anyone to act as their training, experience, judgement and local knowledge dictate is a symptom of what has gone wrong with our education system.

In a couple of weeks' time the Cambridge Review will be sending to the three main political parties its list of post-election policy priorities for the primary sector. I cannot pre-empt that list – indeed, it hasn't yet been agreed – but in light of our final report there are some obvious candidates. For instance, and here I speak directly to the next Prime Minister and Secretary of State:

1. As the most urgent priority, accelerate the drive to reduce the overlapping gaps of poverty, equity and educational attainment, all of them far wider in England than most other developed countries, and understand that teachers can do only so much to close the attainment gap for as long as the lives of so many children are blighted by poverty and disadvantage.
2. Consolidate the present government's Early Years Foundation Stage and extend it to age six so as to give children in primary schools the best possible foundation for oracy, literacy, numeracy, the wider curriculum and lifelong learning. And in case there's still any doubt about what we said on this matter, let me stress that this is about the character of the early years and early primary *curriculum*, not the school starting age.
3. Use our report to address the perennially neglected question of what a 21st century primary education is for. The Mrs Beeton approach adopted by the Rose review – first catch your curriculum, then liberally garnish with aims – is not the way to proceed, especially if the aims in question are on special offer from the OECD. Aims must be grounded – as the Cambridge Review's aims are – in evidence and argument about the nature and imperatives of childhood, society and the wider world today, and in a clear framework of values and principles. And they must *drive* curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and the wider life of the school, not be added as mere decoration.
4. Also understand that the Rose Review's narrow remit prevented it from addressing the problems of the primary curriculum which are most in need of attention, especially the policy-driven loss of curriculum entitlement and the untenable split between the 'basics' and the rest; that collapsing 13 subjects into six 'areas of learning' may solve nothing; and that the curriculum debate therefore remains wide open. And don't think that the minimalism of the 1950s (or 1870s) is a proper alternative. We cannot return to the laissez-faire days when literacy and numeracy were assured but everything else was a lottery. Look instead at the Cambridge model: a entitlement curriculum of breadth, richness and contemporary relevance, which secures the basics and much more besides, and combines a national framework with a strong local component.
5. Ditch the discredited dogma that There Is No Alternative to SATs and start paying attention to the evidence. Stop making KS2 tests bear the triple burden of assessing pupils, evaluating schools and monitoring national performance. Stop treating testing and assessment as synonymous. Stop treating test scores in literacy and numeracy as proxies for the quality of education as a whole. And abandon the naive belief that testing of itself drives up standards. It doesn't, but good teaching *does*. Instead, initiate wholesale assessment reform drawing on the wealth of alternative ideas and models now available, so that we can at last have systems of formative and summative assessment which do their jobs validly, reliably and without causing collateral damage. And adopt the Cambridge Review's definition of standards as excellence in *all* domains of the curriculum to which children are statutorily entitled, not just the 3Rs.

And, by the way, understand that those who argue for assessment reform are every bit as committed to rigorous assessment and accountability as those who put their faith in the

current tests. The issue is not *whether* children should be assessed or schools should be accountable – they should – but *how*.

6. In primary classrooms, move from the current pedagogy of official *recipe* to a pedagogy of *evidence, repertoire and principle*. Recognise that this is no soft option, for in place of mere compliance with what others expect we want teachers to be accountable to evidence on learning and teaching so that they can justify the decisions they take. Note too that the Cambridge report's unmatched evaluation of over 4000 published sources shows how far that evidence differs from the narrowly-conceived official versions of 'best practice' which teachers are currently expected to adopt. As we said in our report: 'Children will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected merely to do as they are told.'
7. Replace the current professional standards for teachers, which have no obvious evidential basis, with a framework which is in line with research about how teachers actually develop as they progress from the stages of novice to expert. Don't box in our most talented teachers with banal and bureaucratic prescriptions devised by lesser mortals at DCSF, TDA and Ofsted. Balance the need to give NQTs the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence for their first appointment with the vital ingredient that current teacher training requirements actively discourage: critical engagement with the larger questions of educational context, content and purpose.
8. Grasp at last the primary school staffing nettle. Recognise that the generalist classteacher system inherited from the nineteenth century has considerable advantages for young children and their teachers, but that in terms of the expertise dictated by a modern curriculum it may demand what only the most exceptional teachers can give. So initiate a full review of primary school staffing, assessing teacher expertise, roles and numbers against the tasks which primary schools are required to undertake, and consider more flexible ways of staffing schools using a mix of generalists, semi-specialists and specialists, and exploiting opportunities for professional partnerships and exchanges between schools. Re-assess, too, the balance of teachers, teaching assistants and other support staff. There is no substitute for a trained and experienced teacher.
9. Help schools to work in partnership with each other and with their communities rather than in competition, sharing ideas, expertise and resources – including across the primary/secondary divide – and together identifying local educational needs and curriculum opportunities. End the league table rat race and emulate Finland's paramount commitment to social and educational equity through a genuinely comprehensive school system of consistently high quality.
10. Finally, the condition on which everything else depends. Reverse the centralising thrust of recent policy. Re-balance the relationship between government, national agencies, local authorities and schools. End government micro-management of teaching. Require national agencies like Ofsted, QCDA, TDA and NCSL to be independent advisers rather than government cheerleaders or enforcers. Re-invigorate local community engagement in schools and the curriculum. Abandon myth, spin and the selective use of evidence. Restore the checks and balances which are so vital to the formulation of sound policy. Exploit the unrivalled compendium of evidence and ideas which the Cambridge Review has provided on all the matters I've mentioned and much more.

Do all this, and you'll have a truly world class system of primary education.