

TOWARDS A NEW PRIMARY CURRICULUM

A report from the Cambridge Primary Review

This briefing summarises key points from *Towards a New Primary Curriculum*, a special report by the Cambridge Primary Review which was first published in February 2009 and is now incorporated in revised form into the Review's final report. England's primary curriculum is one of the Cambridge Review's ten themes; it is also the subject of a government exercise led by Sir Jim Rose, whose interim report was published in December 2008 with a consultation deadline of 28 February 2009. The Cambridge Primary Review published its curriculum proposals in advance of its final report in order to contribute to the consultations on Rose.

Towards a New Primary Curriculum is in two parts. Part 1 (final report, chapter 13) identifies the questions which need to be addressed, describes current arrangements for the primary curriculum and sets them in historical and international context. It then reveals what the Review's evidence says about existing curriculum strengths and weaknesses, and about what needs to change. Part 2 (final report, chapter 14) summarises the main points from this evidence, highlights other matters in need of resolution, and sets out proposals for reform.

The evidence base of the Cambridge Review is extensive: 1052 formal written submissions, many of them from major national organisations; reports on 250 local, regional and national focus group sessions and other meetings; existing official data; 28 surveys of published research commissioned from leading academics; and over 4000 published sources. In much of this evidence the curriculum has a high profile.

Current arrangements: strengths and weaknesses

Although the Review's evidence is diverse, it is positive on the following:

- There is widespread acceptance of the need for a national curriculum, and the promise of entitlement which it embodies.
- There have been significant gains from the national curriculum since its introduction in 1989, notably in science, citizenship and the handling of values and children's personal development.
- The national primary, literacy and numeracy strategies (especially the latter) have many supporters, and younger teachers in particular welcome the structure and guidance which they provide.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) areas of learning and development provide an appropriate platform for primary education.

However:

- The beginning and end of primary education - Reception and Year 6 - are particular pressure points. In Reception, the developmentally-focused EYFS collides with the national curriculum; in Year 6, breadth competes with the much narrower scope of what is to be tested.
- As children progress through the primary phase, their statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced primary education is increasingly but needlessly compromised by the 'standards' agenda.
- The most conspicuous casualties are the arts, the humanities and those kinds of learning in all subjects which require time for talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas; memorisation and recall have come to be valued over understanding and enquiry, and transmission of information over the pursuit of knowledge in its fuller sense.

- Fuelling these problems has been a policy-led belief that curriculum breadth is incompatible with the pursuit of standards in 'the basics', and that if anything gives way it must be breadth. Evidence going back many decades, including reports from HMI and Ofsted, consistently shows this belief to be unfounded. Standards and breadth are interdependent, and high-performing schools achieve both.
- This is one of several modern manifestations of the historic divide between 'the basics' (protected) and the rest of the curriculum (viewed as dispensable). Now recognised as a threat to standards as well as entitlement, this split is exacerbated by the relative neglect of the non-core curriculum in initial teacher training, school inspection and CPD. This produces a primary curriculum which is often two-tier in terms of quality as well as time.
- Separate development and management of the national strategies (by DCSF) and the national curriculum (by QCA) have dislocated the teaching of English and mathematics. English is in urgent need of re-conceptualisation.
- Micro-management by DCSF, the national agencies and national strategies is widely perceived to be excessive and to have contributed to some of the problems above.
- Curriculum debate, and thus curriculum practice, are weakened by a muddled and reductive discourse about subjects, knowledge and skills. Discussion of the place of subjects is needlessly polarised; knowledge is grossly parodied as grubbing for obsolete facts; and the undeniably important notion of skill is inflated to cover aspects of learning for which it is not appropriate. There is an urgent need for key curriculum terms to be clarified and for the level of curriculum discussion and conceptualisation to be raised. Re-naming components of the curriculum 'skills', 'themes' or 'areas of learning' does not of itself address the fundamental question of what primary education is about; nor does it necessarily make the curriculum more manageable in practice.
- A curriculum should reflect and enact educational aims and values, but during the past two decades national aims and curriculum have been separately determined, making the aims cosmetic and the true purposes of primary education opaque. In a complex and changing world there is an urgent need for proper debate about what primary education is for. This debate was pre-empted when the national curriculum was introduced in 1988-9, and again when it was reviewed in 1997-8. It must not happen in 2009.

Towards a new primary curriculum

The new primary curriculum proposed by the Cambridge Primary Review:

- seeks to resolve the problems summarised above;
- starts from, and is driven by, a clear statement of the aims of primary education grounded in analysis of children's present and future needs and the condition of the society and world in which children are growing up;
- has regard to principles of procedure which highlight entitlement, quality, equity, breadth, balance, local engagement, and guidance rather than prescription;
- respects and builds on the EYFS curriculum (proposals on the EYFS/primary relationship and the reconfiguring of the primary phase will be in the Review's final report);
- is conceived as a matrix of 12 educational aims and 8 domains of knowledge, skill, enquiry and disposition, with the aims locked firmly into the framework from the outset;
- dispenses with the notion of the curriculum core as a small number of subjects and places all eight domains within the curriculum on the principle that although teaching time will continue to be differentially allocated, all the domains are essential to young children's education and all must be taught to the highest standards;
- at the same time insists on the centrality of language, oracy and literacy, both in their own right and as enabling learning across a curriculum in which breadth and standards go hand in hand;
- reconceptualises key curriculum areas, notably language/oracy/literacy, citizenship and personal education;
- provides for a strong local component, differentiates the *national* and *community* curriculum, and divides time between them on the basis of 70/30 per cent of the yearly teaching total;

The framework: aims (elaborated in the final report, pp 197-200)

The 12 aims for primary education are in three groups.

- *The needs and capacities of the individual* ♦ **wellbeing** ♦ **engagement** ♦ **empowerment** ♦ **autonomy**
- *The individual in relation to others and the wider world* ♦ **encouraging respect and reciprocity** ♦ **promoting interdependence and sustainability** ♦ **empowering local, national and global citizenship** ♦ **celebrating culture and community**
- *Learning, knowing and doing* ♦ **knowing, understanding, exploring and making sense** ♦ **fostering skill** ♦ **exciting the imagination** ♦ **enacting dialogue**

The framework: domains (elaborated and explained in the final report, pp 265-272)

The term 'domains' has been chosen in preference to existing alternatives (e.g. subjects, areas of learning, themes) so as to allow them to be considered without preconception.

- **A domain has:** coherence, integrity and an essential core of knowledge, skill and/or enquiry; capacity to contribute to the achievement of one or more of the 12 proposed aims for primary education; potential to build on the EYFS and bridge to the secondary curriculum while respecting the distinctiveness of the primary phase of children's education.
- **A domain is not:** a named slot in the school's weekly timetable - domains are *professional* curriculum categories, and how they are translated in the classroom, terminologically, temporally and pedagogically, is for schools to decide; an invitation to low-grade topic work in which thematic serendipity counts for more than knowledge, understanding and skill.

Eight domains are identified from the Review's evidence and consultation as being essential to the pursuit of the proposed aims for the primary phase. The domains – listed alphabetically to preclude assumptions about hierarchy – 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**

The current core of three protected subjects (in which the non-core subjects have lost out and vital opportunities for extending and applying 'the basics' have been restricted) is replaced by an entitlement curriculum in which *all* domains are essential and protected, even though time allocations for each will of course vary. At the heart of the new curriculum is the revised and much strengthened domain of language, oracy and literacy, which also includes ICT and a foreign language. Oracy is considerably more rigorous than what is currently defined as 'speaking and listening' and enhances both literacy and the curriculum as a whole. Several other domains entail no less radical change, for this is no mere exercise in mere curriculum re-arrangement. Detailed domain descriptions, for which there is insufficient space here, are provided in the report.

Implementation and conditions for success (final report, pp 275-277)

For the purposes of planning, implementation and professional support the new curriculum has three segments: ♦ a nationally-determined description and rationale for the curriculum as a whole and for each domain (*statutory*) ♦ nationally-proposed programmes of study for the national component of each domain (*non-statutory*); ♦ locally-proposed programmes of study for the community component of each domain (where applicable) which also identify local needs and opportunities across the curriculum as a whole (*non-statutory*).

Nationally, the curriculum would be planned by independent expert panels, supported and resourced by QCDA or another appropriate national body; *locally*, the task would be undertaken by community curriculum partnerships (CCPs) convened by local authorities. *School-level* implementation would be flexible, but schools would be required to teach all eight domains to a consistently high standard regardless of the amount of time each is allocated. The national panels would consider how each domain is most appropriately elaborated by reference to the twelve aim and eight domain descriptions. The CCPs would identify local needs and opportunities within and across the domains. Schools would determine how, thus elaborated, the domains are reconstructed as a viable school curriculum and are named, timetabled and taught, with the aims providing a constant point of reference throughout. Success is conditional on:

Reforming institutions, procedures and requirements ♦ re-assessing the statutory and advisory functions, in respect of the curriculum, of DCSF, QCDA, local authorities and the national strategies ♦ re-invigorating local authorities as agents of curriculum development and support ♦ winding up the primary national strategy, re-integrating literacy with English and extending the concern with standards to cover the whole curriculum rather than just ‘the basics’ ♦ making what is non-statutory genuinely so ♦ reforming national assessment, especially at age 11, so that it does its job without compromising children’s legal entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Building professional capacity ♦ re-thinking primary ITT and CPD to ensure that all eight domains are properly attended to and that curriculum matters are treated more rigorously than hitherto ♦ re-thinking teaching roles and staff deployment in primary schools, in order that every school has the necessary expertise to advance the 12 aims and teach all 8 domains well ♦ encouraging local collaboration between professionals in primary, early years and secondary settings in order to ensure smooth transition from foundation to primary and from primary to secondary, and in order to share curriculum expertise and develop the community curriculum ♦ strengthening local authority capacity to take the envisaged lead role in co-ordinating the development of the community curriculum ♦ making the pursuit and proper use of evidence central to each of the above.

The Cambridge Primary Review and the Rose Review

In an ideal world the Cambridge and Rose reviews would be seen as complementary, and primary schools would take the best from both. Obvious differences arise from the fact that the Cambridge review is independent and has a broad remit, while the remit and the evidential scope of the government-commissioned Rose review were much more restricted. There are contrasting analyses of the problems, what has caused them, and how they can be resolved. The Rose review takes current policy as given; the Cambridge review does not – it applauds and builds on some policies but of others is more critical, not least because of their adverse impact on the curriculum. Rose proposes transferring the existing QCDA secondary curriculum aims to the primary phase; the Cambridge review presents new aims for primary education grounded in evidence on children’s development, needs and capabilities and an assessment of the national and global conditions which require an educational response. Rose re-organises existing national curriculum content; the Cambridge proposals reconceptualise the curriculum from first principles. The resulting curriculum frameworks are in certain respects very different; yet there is consensus on some matters and this should be welcomed and built upon.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The interim reports on which this briefing is based have now been incorporated in revised form as chapters 13 and 14 of the final 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>.

The Cambridge Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

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