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Children, their world, their education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review

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BOOK REVIEW


Supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and led by Professor Robin Alexander, the Cambridge Primary Review was launched in October 2006. By February 2009 it had published 31 interim reports, 28 of them extensively referenced surveys of published research.

The Review’s final report, Children, their World, their Education, was published in the spring of 2010. A companion volume, The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys, was published simultaneously, and a summary booklet, Introducing the Cambridge Primary Review, was widely distributed.

The introductory chapter of Children, their World, their Education describes the organisation of the report. In most of the remaining chapters a historical review is followed by an assessment of the current situation, a report of the views of witnesses (through written submissions or given at the soundings meetings), and the Review’s conclusions and proposals.

Part 1, ‘Contexts’, describes the remit, methodology and procedures of the Review and the history in which it is located. It compares the Review with other discourses and examines policies and legacies.

Part 2, ‘Children and Childhood’, explores the condition of childhood today and asks how far the current anxiety about children’s well-being is justified. It describes how the lives of children have improved over the past century and notes the concerns of parents and teachers about the stresses and strains faced by children today. It argues that the division between the responsibilities of the state and of parents have ‘always been blurred and controversial in England’ (65), recounts the changes which have occurred in the relationship between parents and schools, and considers the damaging effects of poverty on children’s ability to learn. It asks ‘How do young children develop, think, feel, act and learn?’ (90) and offers some post-Plowden insights. It argues that all aspects of childhood are shaped by culture and assesses whether the education system exacerbates inequalities. It notes the changing views of special needs and diversity and argues that ‘given opportunity and the best of teaching, learning has few limits’ (143).

Part 3, ‘The Experience of Primary Education’, examines what actually happens to children at primary school. It evaluates the Early Years Foundation Stage, reviews the history of the aims of primary education from 1861 to the present, notes the contrasting visions of government, parents and teachers, and offers a set of principles and aims. In seeking to answer the question ‘What should children learn?’, it offers a new curriculum framework based on eight ‘domains’. It discusses a range of issues relating to pedagogy and examines the nature and purposes of assessment, issues of reliability and validity in testing, and the pros and cons of teachers’ judgements. It
examines definitions of ‘standards’, warns that constant changes to the testing regime and Ofsted inspection criteria make comparisons of performance over time problematic, and concludes that ‘teachers and schools can and should have a greater role in the assessment of their pupils’ (341). Finally, it considers the physical contexts of learning.

In Part 4, ‘The System of Primary Education’, the focus shifts from schools and classrooms to the national system of primary education as a whole. It considers pupil grouping policies, selection, streaming and setting, communication and continuity, and the effects of pressure to compete. It assesses the relationship of schools to a range of other agencies. It describes the expansion and diversification of the primary school workforce in recent years and considers arguments for and against the ‘generalist’ class teacher system. It notes that the working environment of primary schools has been radically transformed over the past 20 years and examines the governance and funding of schools.

Part 5, ‘Conclusions and Recommendations’, consists of 153 statements, of which 75 are recommendations.

The report ends with an editor’s postscript, seven appendices, a 33-page list of references and an alphabetical subject index.

At more than 281,000 words in 514 pages, the report is long, detailed and comprehensive. Every topic is grounded in history, the views of witnesses are reported, research evidence is presented, the current situation is assessed in detail and, in most cases, thoughtful proposals are made for the future.

There is much to admire in it. The determination of the authors to ‘make a difference’ is clear and commendable, right from the outset: ‘The Cambridge Primary Review was set up to make a difference, not to make money. Profits from the sale of the final report will be placed in trust to be used to support the education of some of the country’s most marginalised and disadvantaged children’ (xvi).

Like Plowden before it, the Review places children at the heart of the educational enterprise and stresses the importance of listening to them.

It is to be commended for seeking to construct a curriculum from the ground up, rather than from desired outcomes down. ‘The Review’s curriculum framework 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’ (494).

The Review rightly bemoans the deskilling of teachers and emphasises the importance of raising their professional status and improving the quality of school leadership. It notes the malign influence of the ‘culture of compliance’ and warns that ‘pupils will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected to do as they are told’ (308).

Readers may not agree with all the Review’s proposals, of course, but what the authors desire is an informed and rational debate about the issues. ‘Whatever readers think about our conclusions and recommendations, we hope that they will treat with due seriousness the matters we explore, the evidence we have assembled, the arguments we present, and the experience and hopes of the thousands who have participated, directly or indirectly, in this enterprise’ (1).

Among my own concerns are the proposals for an interlocking grid of 12 aims, 8 ‘domains’ and 10 ‘procedural principles’, which surely has the potential for planning overload and is reminiscent of the complexities of attainment targets with which teachers struggled in the early days of the National Curriculum.
I am disappointed that the Review does not take a firmer line on setting and streaming. It cites six studies which demonstrate the various damaging effects of setting, but then goes on to argue that teachers should ‘categorise with caution’. Extraordinarily, the subject is barely mentioned in the ‘Conclusions and Recommendations’, where the authors simply note that ‘the quality of teaching is more important’.

But my greatest disappointment with the Review is its refusal to make any proposals regarding the place of religion in schools. The subject is raised at several points in the report – in Chapters 5, 12, 14 and 18. It notes that there is a wide divergence of views on the place (or otherwise) of religion in the curriculum. It acknowledges that the act of worship ‘raises more difficult questions’ but it makes no attempt to provide any answers – it simply observes that ‘the matter arouses strong feelings. We believe it deserves proper debate’ (268). It appears to accept without question that ‘denominational schools see their mission as the advancement of particular religious beliefs and moral codes’ (268). Shouldn’t this view have been challenged on the basis that the advancement of religious beliefs is tantamount to indoctrination? And finally, it notes the widely differing views of parents on the subject of ‘faith schools’ but once again makes no attempt to offer possible solutions. Since two-thirds of the public believe that ‘the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind’ (Guardian/ICM poll reported in The Guardian, 23 August 2005), I should have liked to have seen more rigorous criticism of them in the report.

The report makes clear at the outset that it is aimed at a wide audience: parents, teachers, teacher trainers, governors, community leaders, local authorities, politicians and policy-makers, as well as the general public. It is no easy task to construct a document as lengthy and detailed as this in a way which makes it accessible to such a wide variety of groups. But to a large extent that is what the authors have achieved. It is very readable, though the language in a few places is, perhaps inevitably, a bit dense and jargon-laden. There are few grammatical or typographical errors to distract the reader’s attention – the only ones I spotted were a handful of misplaced commas, inconsistency over the spelling of focussed/focused, an ‘affects’ which should be ‘effects’ and an apostrophe that should be a comma.

Will it be taken seriously by policy-makers? The early signs are not good. The report itself sheds light on the Machiavellian workings of government and politicians. ‘Review personnel had no fewer than 27 meetings with government and NDPBs [Non-Departmental Public Bodies] between October 2006 and March 2009. The tenor of these meetings was usually cordial, and in most cases the issues under discussion were constructively explored. Yet when government commented publicly on the Review it was as if the meetings had never taken place’ (479).

Few were surprised when Schools Minister Vernon Coaker dismissed the Review out of hand: ‘it’s disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed on many major changes in primaries,’ he said (The Guardian, 16 October 2009). As usual, when faced with evidence which doesn’t support their agenda, politicians resort to ‘the discourse of derision’.

Comparisons with Plowden are inevitable. ‘Like Plowden, the Cambridge Primary Review seeks to combine retrospective evidence with prospective vision. Like Plowden, it seeks to be wide-ranging. Like Plowden, it hopes to make a difference’ (2). Both reports are long and detailed. Both are grounded in the history of primary education. Both regard the lives and experiences of children themselves as the fundamental starting point.
There are differences, of course, most notably in the conduct, methodology and outcomes of the two enquiries.

What becomes clear as you read the Cambridge Review is just how much has changed in the past 40 years – in schools, in society at large and in the power of central government. A trivial but interesting indicator of this change is that, where Plowden includes 38 abbreviations in its four-page Glossary, the Cambridge Review has 227 abbreviations in a list occupying five pages. More significantly, since 1988 – and especially since 1997 – education has become the subject of an avalanche of legislation.

The Cambridge Primary Review is undoubtedly the most important piece of work on primary education for at least 40 years and Children, their World, their Education is a fitting conclusion to that work. I hope it will be read widely, and that some, at least, of its recommendations will inform future policy.

As I finish writing this book review, the general election is two weeks away. The new primary curriculum which was to have been implemented in September 2011 (based on the proposals of the government’s own Rose review) has been lost from the Children, Schools and Families Act. So there is much to play for. However, given that the outgoing Labour Government has sought to denigrate the Cambridge Review, and that the Conservative Party is fighting the election on policies which would effectively destroy our state system of education, I can’t say I’m optimistic.

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