
The Best That Has Been Thought and Said?

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ABSTRACT *FORUM* has marked the progress of the Cambridge Primary Review by three previous articles from Robin Alexander, the Review's director, and by critiques and responses from several others, notably *FORUM*'s Michael Armstrong. In 2013 the Review was superseded by the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, and this article is the text of the keynote delivered at the Trust's London launch on 23 September 2013. It briefly assesses the Review's impact to date, warning that to attempt to do so is a rather more complex enterprise than some commentators allow. It then outlines the Trust's four programmes and seven priorities, tracing the latter back to the Review's conclusions and the debate they provoked. Finally, the article returns to one of the Review's (and this author's) abiding themes: the public discourse of educational policy and policymakers' handling of evidence. In both matters, the current government, like its predecessor, is found severely wanting, and the author argues that these discursive and evidential deficits not only continue to frustrate educational progress but are also in themselves profoundly anti-educational, not to say ill-educated.

Making a Difference

The Cambridge Primary Review [1] was conceived in 2004 and launched in October 2006. Three years later it published its final report (Alexander, 2010b) and companion research volume (Alexander et al, 2010), having meanwhile assembled and analysed a large body of evidence, heard from thousands of witnesses, sifted through 4000 published sources and published 31 interim reports and 40 briefing papers.

That could have been the end of the story, but it wasn't. There followed a year of dissemination events before the Review changed from national enquiry into a national network with twelve regional centres and a 5000-strong mailing list. Meanwhile, the Review's main findings were distilled into 11 policy

priorities for the political parties contesting the 2010 general election (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010).

However, as our final report emphasised, but as some commentators failed to understand, the Review was not just about national policy. Much of it dealt with aspects of primary education that were more local and immediate. So the Review's true measure was not whether, in Robin Day's somewhat unkind words, some 'here today, gone tomorrow' minister welcomed or rejected its findings; rather, it was the extent to which, independently of policy, those findings began to influence the work of teachers and children. That's why our dissemination and networking activities over the past three years have been so important.

By this alternative measure we have ample evidence that the Review has made and continues to make a difference. Up and down the country there are primary schools whose ethos and practice are explicitly steered by the Review's educational aims, its attention to children's voice, its advocacy of a community curriculum, its evidence that standards and curriculum breadth are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive, its stance on pedagogy, its insistence on the importance of well-structured classroom talk, and many of its other messages.

Yet we can identify positive policy responses too. For example, the government's belated change of heart over the place of spoken language in the national curriculum, which a recent Freedom of Information request has shown to be substantially influenced by us [2], or its decision to investigate the long-standing challenge of securing subject expertise within the generalist culture of primary schools [3], or its acceptance that the previous government's professional standards for teachers were ill-conceived.[4] These and other developments are attributable either directly to the Review, or to the climate of opinion that the Review's evidence has endorsed, or again to the dialogue which, quietly but persistently during the past three years, the Review has maintained with ministers and DfE officials.

Of course, having acknowledged that there's a problem, ministers may choose the wrong solution or they may not go as far as we would like. But that's the point: those who judge the Cambridge Review by the number of its recommendations that have been adopted exactly as they stand, or who presume that policy is the sole determinant of what schools do in areas to which policy applies, don't understand how either policy or classroom practice work or the complex array of factors to which each is subject. And policies have little meaning until they are enacted by schools, and to enact is to domesticate, reinvent or even subvert as well as comply. Domestication – adapting generalised policy to unique school circumstances – is perhaps the most common response, and a major part of our task during the past three years has been to help teachers recognise just how much power they have.

Nor does the Review's influence stop at this island's shores. We have had website hits and email enquiries from over 150 of the world's countries and sustained interaction involving visits and exchanges with a significant

proportion of these, including meetings with education ministers. In some countries there is growing antipathy to what Finland's Pasi Sahlberg calls GERM, the Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2011). GERM reduces the performance of entire education systems to a single, questionable measure – how a small sample of 15-year-olds do, at a particular moment in time and in a relatively narrow spectrum of their learning, in the PISA tests. To the resulting international league tables governments respond with economic panic and naïve attributions of cause and effect, followed by a diet of school privatisation, high-stakes tests, league tables, a narrow curriculum and transmission teaching, not to mention the attendant verbal machismo of tough new initiatives, task forces, step changes, delivery, great schools, driving up standards, control factors and the fatuous 'going forward'. GERM is currently at its most virulent in the United States but has infected many other countries too. We are pleased that in some of them the Cambridge Primary Review is viewed as its antidote – going forward.

From Review to Trust

All this our sponsors have understood, and I want to pay tribute to both of them. The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation generously funded the Review through its implementation, dissemination and network phases. Now Pearson is supporting the Review's latest incarnation, the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

The Trust will build on the Review's work and advance its mission to secure the best possible education for children in primary schools. It will do this through four programmes: policy engagement, research, school leadership, and professional development. Thus, it will continue to work with policy makers and their advisers to exert whatever policy leverage is possible. It will extend the Review's evidence, undertaking strategically focused further research where funding allows. It will construct an alliance of outstanding primary schools keen to work together to address the Trust's priorities; and it will support teachers and their development through its expanding national network, its regional centres and its partnership with Pearson.

Through these four programmes the Trust will address seven priorities. These reach back through the eleven pre-election priorities I mentioned earlier to those of our final report's recommendations that received strongest endorsement during our dissemination programme.

Seven Priorities for Lasting Primary Education Reform

Priority 1, top of the list, is to find and disseminate ways to help schools to tackle educational disadvantage and reduce the overlapping gaps in social equity and educational attainment. The stark indicator of the scale of the problem is child poverty, currently affecting between 17 and 26 per cent of Britain's children, depending on whether relative or absolute poverty is the

measure used [5], though both statistics are appalling. ‘Closing the gap’ is a cause to which most politicians subscribe – including, through the Pupil Premium, the current government – yet after a long succession of initiatives going back to the educational priority areas of the 1960s, the challenges remain severe. For, as we know but don’t always admit, policies seeking to close equity and attainment gaps *within* the school will make reduced headway if economic and social policies *outside* the school pull in the opposite direction. Yet this perception can all too easily become a self-fulfilling counsel of despair, for as many schools have spectacularly shown, there’s a great deal that expert and inspirational teachers and school leaders working against the odds can do and have done. We must learn from them, and through the Trust’s Schools Alliance and wider network we expect to do so. As we said in our final report, ‘Good teaching makes a difference. Excellent teaching transforms lives’ (Alexander, 2010b, p. 279).

Priority 2 is to abandon the tokenism that too often attaches to the idea of children’s voice, and advance children’s voices and rights in school and classroom in accordance with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990; Alexander, 2010b, chapter 10, pp. 143-156). Children, says the Convention, have a right to be involved in decisions about their own learning, so children’s voice is as much about pedagogy as it is about school councils.

Priority 3 is to reverse the typically English view of educational aims – to which the current government is not immune – as a high-sounding statement you attach to the curriculum after you’ve determined its content and whose function is therefore cosmetic. Nor is it good enough to make primary education’s seven years of concentrated human development, and its rich possibilities for learning, entirely subservient to what follows, as argued by those who say that the main aim of primary education is to make young children ‘secondary ready’ (DfE, 2013b). Instead we should start, as the Cambridge Review started, with a well-argued vision that addresses the condition and needs of children and society in today’s complex world and then construct a curriculum in line with this (Alexander, 2010b, chapter 12, pp. 174-202). Children leaving primary school should of course be ready for what follows, but education is no less about the quality and intensity of learning here and now. Anyway, what follows Year 6 is *life*, not just Year 7.

Priority 4 is to create a true entitlement curriculum. While primary schools must and do insist on the foundational importance of literacy and numeracy, they should also lay those other foundations – in science, the arts, the humanities, in physical, emotional and moral development and in lived experience – that in their way are no less important for young children’s future learning, choices and lives; foundations, we might suggest, that will make children more truly ‘secondary ready’ than if they do the three Rs and little else. So the Review has consistently argued against the neo-Victorian opposition between the ‘basics’ and the rest, which the new national curriculum perpetuates in its sharper-than-ever distinction between ‘core’ and foundation subjects (DfE,

2013a; see Alexander, 2010b, chapters 13 and 14, pp. 203-278). Such stratification is both educationally inappropriate and pedagogically counterproductive. This two-tier curriculum undervalues not just the true cultural and economic worth of the non-core subjects but also the evidence from research and inspection showing that learning in one area enhances learning in others.

Ministers frequently invoke, unattributed, Matthew Arnold's definition of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said'.^[6] They might note that Arnold, who was a school inspector as well as poet and essayist, did not mean by this that the arts and humanities should be left to chance. Without deflecting attention one jot from the imperative of literacy, the Cambridge Review argues for a primary curriculum whose core includes essential knowledge, skills and experience drawn from *all* subjects, not just three of them.

Priority 5, to develop a pedagogy of repertoire, evidence and principle, rather than mere compliance with habit or official fiat, is perhaps the centrepiece; for it is through teaching that educational aims and a paper curriculum come alive; and it is only by understanding the art of the science of teaching, and the ample evidence – from research, inspection and shared experience – that is available to inform and improve it, that teachers will be able fully to exploit the power of teaching to help children achieve the highest possible standards in their learning (Alexander, 2010b, chapter 15, pp. 279-310).

Priority 6 pursues the always controversial matters of assessment and standards. In both, we want a wider practical repertoire and a more sophisticated vocabulary. We want approaches that don't treat assessment and testing as synonymous, that enhance learning as well as test it, that support the curriculum rather than distort it, and that pursue high standards in all areas of learning, not just the core subjects. It is no longer acceptable for test performance in a narrow spectrum of learning to be treated as proxy for the child's entire educational attainment. Tests of course have their place, but both assessment and accountability are, or should be, about more than test results. All this is pretty basic stuff, but the battle to move from a primitive to a mature account of assessment is far from won.^[7]

Priority 7 takes us back to those 'community soundings' in different parts of the country with which the Cambridge Primary Review started. These reminded us of Britain's immense demographic, economic, cultural and linguistic diversity and the consequent variety of its educational circumstances and needs. The soundings also showed how the best of our schools both live the idea of community in their everyday activities and relate to the community beyond their gates (Alexander & Hargreaves, 2007). Priority 7 encourages such community engagement and responsiveness, including in the curriculum.

These seven priorities form a coherent whole. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are at the heart of what schools are about. Aims signal what they are for. All are framed by commitment to childhood, community and society. The priorities will be pursued through all four of the Trust's programmes, for we

know that in the world's best education systems policy, research, school leadership, teaching and professional development go hand in hand.

Professional development brings me to the Trust's relationship with Pearson. Pearson accepts that the integrity and autonomy that the Trust has inherited from the Cambridge Primary Review must never be compromised by its association with the commercial activities of the world's biggest educational publisher. So we have created two operations: the Trust's autonomous work on the programmes and priorities I've mentioned, based now at the University of York [8]; and, separately managed, a Trust/Pearson partnership which develops co-branded professional services and materials for schools, building on the Review's evidence and principles. Work on these joint services is well under way, and first in line are the Primary Curriculum 2014 regional conferences in which Pearson and the Trust are collaborating with 11 of the subject associations.[9]

Policy, Discourse and Evidence

Finally, let me return to the policy context. I've noted that the Trust, like the Review before it, attaches great importance to policy engagement. I've argued that what is required is sustained policy dialogue rather than grandstanding, and I've exemplified areas where we can discern the Cambridge Review's impact on government thinking. But I don't need to remind you that the previous government refused even to discuss much of the evidence that the Review published between 2007 and 2010, or that ministers wilfully misrepresented some of the Review's findings in order to dismiss them out of hand. So predictably negative was the Labour government's response to our reports that it became almost as big a media story as the reports themselves. We were not alone: our experience was symptomatic of tendencies that are widespread, persistent and well documented. I've lost count of the number of times I've heard on the news that some important piece of research has been published only to hear the newsreader add, 'The government has dismissed the findings.'

Political parties may change but political processes by and large do not. So, notwithstanding what our post-election policy dialogue has achieved, there remain two critical challenges to an evidence-led enterprise like ours: how governments handle evidence, and the way they choose publicly to talk about it.

For the Trust, as for the Cambridge Review, evidence is paramount. We seek and welcome it, albeit with due discrimination, as a stepping stone to improved educational understanding and practice. But governments are more wary, because evidence may challenge thinking that has no more than ideology to sustain it; it may compromise policy or electoral advantage; it may simply be too expensive to act on – though in the Cambridge Primary Review we tried to come up with recommendations that were as far as possible cost-neutral. So, regardless of whether the evidence is unassailable, qualified or downright shaky,

it may be welcomed, cherry-picked, trimmed, traduced or simply ignored. The test is not evidential validity but political expediency.

Thus, in the recent national curriculum review, we find comparative international data used with eye-watering selectivity and scant regard to cultural context. We are told that the national curriculum – I quote from the Secretary of State himself – ‘must ensure that our children master the essential core knowledge which *other nations* pass on to their pupils’.[10] So that’s it then: we don’t *learn* from other nations, or strive to understand the condition and needs of our own; we merely import what other nations – or rather, those of them that today outperform us in PISA but tomorrow may not – define as ‘essential core knowledge’, believing that what works for them will work for us.[11]

I stress that the problem may not be the evidence as such but what people do with it. Simply copying other countries’ prescribed paper curricula is both culturally crass and pedagogically naïve, for it ignores my earlier point about the gulf that can exist between policy as prescribed and enacted, and the self-evident truth that it is the quality of teachers and teaching that has the much more immediate and durable impact on children’s learning and attainment. And while PISA has become a sophisticated and valuable indicator of countries’ relative performance on a range of measures, it is symptomatic of the politicisation of such evidence that PISA test scores are hyped while PISA evidence on equity (OECD, 2013), which has considerable explanatory power and bears directly on the Cambridge Primary Review Trust’s first priority, tends to be ignored, in UK policy circles at least.

Then there’s the surrounding discourse, for in order to make the evidence fit the politics, those who convey that evidence must be made to fit too. So the bearer of evidence that is dodgy but ideologically compliant is hailed as the one true expert while the bearer of evidence that is secure but politically less palatable is pilloried. Thus, those who in March 2013 proposed an alternative national curriculum vision were denounced as ‘enemies of promise’ and ‘Marxists hell-bent on destroying our schools’ [12]; and those who raised perfectly legitimate questions about the kind of early years experience that will help children to thrive educationally were accused of ‘bleating bogus pop-psychology’, dumbing down and lowering expectations.[13] This is the old ‘discourse of derision’, back with a vengeance. I say ‘old’ because of course it is matched by what we heard in response to the Cambridge Review from Labour, though Labour’s insults were less colourful.[14]

Diminishing Education, Demeaning the Educated Mind

It is surely reasonable to suggest that this kind of stuff is incompatible with ministers’ lofty advocacy of ‘the best that has been thought and said’, or indeed with the promise of the enlightenment for which institutions like the British Academy stand.[15] It is surely proper to ask whether heaping abuse on members of the electorate holding different views is what government in a democracy is about, especially – and bafflingly – during a period of public

consultation when different views are what government has expressly invited. But in more urgent and practical vein, I say simply that the discourse of derision is the enemy of progress. In despair at the arrogance, ignorance and intransigence of power, educators either knuckle under or take to the barricades. Either way, education is the poorer.

So yes, policy isn't the whole story and teachers have more power than many of them realise. And yes, the Cambridge Primary Review Trust remains firmly committed to policy engagement, values its dialogue with ministers and officials, and is pleased when this yields positive results. And yes, policy is shaped by more than evidence alone. But deep and lasting improvements in this country's education system will be secured only when, in their discourse and their handling of evidence, policymakers exemplify the educated mind rather than demean it, practise the best that has been thought and said rather than preach it.

Notes

- [1] See Alexander (2007, 2011, 2012c) and Armstrong (2010) for earlier *Forum* articles about the Cambridge Primary Review, including the 2010 Brian Simon Lecture (Alexander, 2011).
- [2] Department for Education response to Freedom of Information request dated 26 July 2013, Case Reference 2013/0047506. The response cites as key evidence Alexander (2012a).
- [3] In response to recommendation 127 in the Cambridge Primary Review final report (Alexander, 2010b), the DfE initiated an in-house investigation of the evidence on curriculum capacity in primary schools. Its report endorsed the Review's conclusions.
- [4] Alexander, 2010b, pp. 408-419. The DfE commissioned a review of teachers' professional standards that produced two reports in 2011. The Cambridge Primary Review's further evidence on this matter is at http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/themes/teachers_expertise_training_development_deployment.php
- [5] Department for Work and Pensions figures for 2011-12, quoted by Barnardo's, the Child Poverty Action Group and the BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-22887005> (accessed 31 October 2013).
- [6] From the Preface to his *Culture and Anarchy* (Arnold, 1993).
- [7] Alexander, 2010b, chapters 16 and 17, pp. 311-342; see also the Cambridge Primary Review's 2013 evidence to the DfE consultation on primary school assessment and accountability: http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads_/news/2013/10/DfE_CPRT_primary_assessment_and_accountability_response.pdf
- [8] <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk>

- [9] <http://www.pearsonschoolsandfecolleges.co.uk/Primary/GlobalPages/pearson-primary-professional-development/curriculum-2014-conferences/The-Cambridge-Primary-Review-Trust-and-Pearson.aspx>
- [10] Letter from Secretary of State Michael Gove to the Chair of the National Curriculum Review Expert Panel, 11 June 2012.
<http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/1/secretary%20of%20state%20letter%20to%20tim%20oates%20regarding%20the%20national%20curriculum%20review%2011%20june%202012.pdf> (accessed 31.10.13).
- [11] For fuller critiques of governments' uses of international evidence, see Alexander, 2010c, 2012b.
- [12] 'I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools: Education Secretary berates "the new enemies of promise" for opposing his plans', *Daily Mail*, 22 March 2013.
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html> (accessed 31 October 2013).
- [13] 'Start schooling later than age five, say experts', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 2013.
<http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/1/secretary%20of%20state%20letter%20to%20tim%20oates%20regarding%20the%20national%20curriculum%20review%2011%20june%202012.pdf> (accessed 31 October 2013).
- [14] As we illustrated in the Cambridge Primary Review final report itself (see Alexander, 2010b, pp. 21-25). Elsewhere (Alexander, 2010a), I discuss four 'discourses of power' – dichotomy, derision, myth and meaninglessness.
- [15] The event at which this keynote was presented took place at the British Academy, the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences.

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