TOWARDS A NEW VISION FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION?
MIDWAY THROUGH THE CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW

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Invitational lecture hosted by the Worshipful Company of Weavers,
and introduced by Baroness Morris of Yardley, formerly Secretary of State for Education and Skills.

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Upper Bailiff, Lady Morris, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am honoured to fulfil this invitation from the Worshipful Company of Weavers, and to be introduced by Estelle Morris, who brought to her work as Secretary of State for Education and Skills a rare insight into what life is like for children and teachers in today's schools, and an unwavering resolve to achieve real improvements in the education of the nation's children.

The debate and the discourse

You'll probably be aware that after a quiet start in October 2006, and a year of earnest beavering away to collect evidence, the Primary Review has suddenly and dramatically hit the headlines:

> Primary children suffer from stress and anxiety ... Children reeling under the pressure of modern life ... Study reveals stressed-out 7-11 year olds ... Kids face 'excessive pressure' ... Backlash against testing regime ... Primary Review: bleak vision of our world ... The pain of a generation forced to grow up before their time ...

and this:

> Children being robbed of their innocence by guns, gangs and celebrities.

Now that really would make good copy for *Hello!* and *OK!*

All this, and much more in the same vein, was in response to the publication of our report *Community Soundings* on 12th October, an account of what we heard as we travelled round the country between January and March this year and talked with children, teachers, heads, parents, school governors and a wide range of community representatives in 87 witness sessions.

Then on 2nd November the headline writers were at it again, this time in response to our three commissioned surveys of published evidence on standards, testing and assessment at the primary stage:

> Primary tests blasted by experts ... Thousands of pupils given wrong grade in 3R tests ...
> Test regime must change ... Kids lose love of books ... Literacy drive has almost no impact.

or, throwing the caution of 'almost no impact' to the winds:

> £500 million literacy drive is flop, say experts.

and even:

> Millions wasted on teaching reading.

Did this headline writer *really* mean to say that teaching reading is a waste of money?

On Friday this week (23rd November) we publish another four interim reports in the same series. By next March there will be 32 of them. This week's reports, about which I shall say something later, don't offer such obvious food for shock/horror headlines and for that reason alone may not to attract the same degree of journalistic attention, even though they contain findings and implications of considerable significance for both policy and practice.

I start with the headlines, because they are an inescapable part of the way we talk about education in this country. They represent one kind of discourse: sensationalist, polarised, pessimistic, forever seeking to discover failings, identify culprits, point the finger of blame, reduce complex questions to the lowest common denominator.

There are of course other kinds of educational discourse. There is the no less public but at least much more optimistic language of policy announcements. Policies are 'rolled out'; 'tough', 'new' or even 'tough new' initiatives are announced, though recently 'tough' has been replaced by 'world class'; 'Task forces' are appointed; and the 'levers' of improvement are duly pressed or pulled. As a result of all this, the policies achieve 'step changes', standards are 'driven up', and the country is told it has 'the best teachers ever'.

Obviously, this last claim, though frequently heard, cannot be sustained empirically, for when does 'ever' begin? The 'ever' should really be replaced by whatever date since 1994 the current Ofsted methodology for assessing the standards of teacher training courses and newly qualified teachers was initiated. But leaving that quibble aside, I think we have to accept that such hyperbolic discourse, too, sometimes gets in the way of careful, honest debate about the condition of education today, though it is far less corrosive than the discourse of scapegoating and despair.

Is there a middle ground? Of course there is. There's the less demonstrative and more carefully qualified language of everyday professional discourse in schools - and indeed of politics beyond the media soundbites and the posturing and name-calling of Prime Minister's Questions. Discussions within DCSF, but without the press, are as intelligent, informed and thoughtful as you can hear anywhere. And there's the careful, though alas sometimes opaque language of academic research. These alternative professional, political and academic discourses, for all their faults, do at least start from the premise that educational issues are complex; that to some educational challenges there may be no easy solutions; and that such matters therefore require a kind of discussion which is respectful of alternative viewpoints yet unafraid to question deeply-held beliefs, prepared to explore alternative solutions, and fundamentally committed to the marshalling and testing of evidence. Wearing another hat which some of you might recognise, I might even call this alternative discourse 'dialogic', some of the time anyway.

This alternative discourse is also, we hope and firmly intend, the discourse of the Primary Review, which I can say, *with* evidence and *without* hyperbole, is the biggest review of English primary education since the Plowden Report of 1967, whose 40th anniversary fell earlier this year. Needless to say, the Plowden Report suffered precisely the same fate as the interim reports to which I referred earlier, as indeed did the then government's so-called 'three wise men' primary education enquiry of 1991-2, in which I was involved. Actually, the debate about Plowden was even more extreme, and Lady Plowden was subjected to a campaign of personal vilification by some commentators which was nothing less than shameful. We have been warned.

The power - and muddle - of history

No less unhelpful has been the attribution to initiatives like Plowden conclusions which it did not actually reach, and here we must accept that the teaching profession itself has sometimes been as culpable as Plowden's critics. So, for example, though it was taken to pronounce the death of a subject-based curriculum, Plowden actually favoured (para 555) a measured progression from a relatively open curriculum in the early years to a subject-differentiated one by age 12 - hardly revolutionary - and its discussion of curriculum was in other respects pretty conventional. Similarly, though it was alternately celebrated and ridiculed for advocating unbridled individualism in teaching, Plowden actually recommended (para 1243 subsection 96) a judicious 'combination of individual, group and class work'. And what of Plowden as the loony, arch-progressive tract which became the butt of the Black Paper authors, the right-wing press and even several secretaries of state and a prime minister? Well, having ourselves looked at the published research and inspection evidence for the so-called 'three wise men' report of 1992, we concluded:

> The commonly held belief that primary schools, after 1967, were swept by a tide of progressivism is untrue. HMI in 1978, for example, reported that only 5 per cent of classrooms exhibited wholeheartedly 'exploratory' characteristics and that didactic teaching was still practised in three-quarters of them ... The reality, then, was rather more complex.

We then explored that complexity: the mismatch between Plowdenite rhetoric and mundane reality; the tendency to change the surface features of practice without attenting to its fundamentals. Another warning.

For beyond examples like these are habits of thought and practice which have survived not just the 40 years since Plowden but the century which preceded it as well, and have resisted each and every challenge to their right to persist indefinitely: the classteacher system (from which Plowden encouraged more deviation than many realise) (paras 752-777); the separation at age seven of infants and juniors, (now KS1/2); the divided curriculum (high-status 'basics' vs a low-status remainder which takes its chances and often loses out, later repackaged as 'core' and 'other foundation', latterly as 'excellence and enjoyment'); the defining of those 'basics' as proficiency in the 3Rs but little else, despite all that we know, for instance, about the cognitive and cultural power of talk or the rooting of truly civilised human relations in the capacity to imagine and create.

All these classic features of supposedly modern primary schools and a 21st century curriculum go back in an unbroken line to the Victorian elementary schools, into which they were introduced in pursuit of the goals of cheapness (the classteacher system), or of educating the urban masses thus far but no further, in case they questioned their lot (the divided curriculum and the narrow view of the 'basics'). The infant/junior KS1/2 separation is more complex - for it represents the partial victory of a more enlightened view of early education which goes back to Robert Owen in the 1820s - and is therefore even more deeply rooted.

If we understand the history of primary education we understand not only how we got to where we now are, but also why certain ideas and practices are so resilient, defying all attempts at modernisation. Or rather, the surface may change, but the deeper layers of substance all too often do not. The problem isn't just structural, about the class teacher system, school ages and stages and the curriculum: it reaches deeply into classroom practice. Thus the national literacy, numeracy and primary strategies are claimed to have transformed classroom life, and yet those research studies which have studied closely and systematically what is said in classrooms, and by whom and how, have shown that the fundamentals of traditional teacher-pupil interaction survive remarkably unchanged in many classrooms: closed questions, brief factual recall answers, minimal feedback, next question, next child, few extended changes, teachers ask, children answer, and rarely the other way round. A pattern of interaction which, as Martin Nystrand also found in American high schools, requires children to report someone else's thinking (usually the teacher's) rather than think for themselves.

Every child matters; every parent and teacher matters. If we wish to distinguish long-unexamined habits of thought and action from genuine and sustainable truths, and to achieve real and lasting educational improvement, history matters too. If it's worth its salt, the Primary Review will question not just assumptions about the future but also the sacred cows of the present and past.

The Review: evidence

Now to our remit and how we are fulfilling it. Though it tends to mention Plowden in its publicity - 'the biggest review of primary education for 40 years' - this Review is very different. Instead of a publicly-funded official commission of the great and good, we have an independent review led by academics, guided by a diverse and talented Advisory Committee chaired by Dame Gillian Pugh and funded from a private source, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

Funding for such an unusual, ambitious but potentially risky initiative required imagination and courage, and I want to salute the generosity and - dare I say - the far-sightedness of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation Trustees. I also want to acknowledge the considerable contribution which Gillian Pugh and the Advisory Committee have made to our thinking. To have one critical friend, as Gillian has been, is good fortune; to have twenty is miraculous. And this Advisory Committee doesn't pontificate at a distance. They were with us when we toured the country for the Community Soundings. They took turns in leading and recording our 87 meetings. They even suffered with us the painful consequences of sitting for hours at a stretch on infant chairs ...

Like Plowden, the Primary Review seeks to combine retrospective evidence with prospective vision. Its key questions are: 'What is the current character of English primary education and how good is it?' and 'How can it be improved and how should it change to meet the challenges of a complex present and an uncertain future?' Like Plowden, the Primary Review seeks to be reasonably comprehensive. Like Plowden, the Primary Review hopes to make a difference - and that must be the hope of all such enquiries, though sadly many do not realise that hope. Another warning.

But these comparisons mark the end of the similarity. Conceptually, *this* Primary Review is a matrix of ten themes and four kinds of evidence. Evidence is all-important. It comes from:

- written and electronic *submissions*, which are open to all;
- face-to-face *soundings* with national organisations, teachers's groups and regional gatherings of teachers, parents, children and community representatives;
- *searches* of official data held by government and by national and international agencies, and
- *surveys* of published research.

This last evidential strand alone constitutes probably the biggest sweep of published research relating to English primary education ever undertaken - again, I'm confident that this isn't an exaggeration - and to achieve it the Review has commissioned 30 thematic research literature surveys from some 70 researchers in 23 universities and university departments. Here, the Primary Review has one big advantage over Plowden: the range and quality of the evidence available to it.

Starting three weeks ago, on 2nd November, we began the process of publishing the reports from these research surveys in order both to stimulate and inform public discussion.

The first group reported on the national and international evidence on standards, testing and assessment. The next group, which comes out on Friday this week, looks at what we now know about children's lives outside school, their voices and opinions, the changing patterns of parenting, caring and family life which they experience, the role of non-school agencies, especially in relation to vulnerable children and families, and the implications of trends and changes in this whole area for the work of schools. But before these two releases of our first seven research surveys, we opened the debate by publishing, on 12 October, our report on the Community Soundings: an account of what we heard from children, teachers, parents, governors and a wide range of community representatives - local authority elected members and officers, representatives of statutory and voluntary agencies, teachers from secondary, further and higher education, religious leaders, employers, police - at those 87 witness sessions in nine very different parts of the country between January and March this year. Needless to say, what we heard and reported ranged much more widely than you would guess from all those shock/horror headlines of 12 October about children under stress, and was much more nuanced.

The Plowden Committee received oral evidence from 30 organisations and 137 individuals, and written evidence from over 370 sources. We have already topped that, with oral evidence at our community soundings alone - never mind the national soundings, on which more in a moment - from 750 individuals, and over 550 written submissions which range in length from one page to over 300. We are currently near the end of analysing this vast body of submissions material and will publish a report on it in the new year.

Also in the new year we shall move to the next phase, a series of *national* soundings with different groups at which we explore the implications of the evidence emerging from all these sources. There will be three kinds of national sounding: seminars for representatives of key non-statutory organisations, to explore implications and options for *policy*; seminars for teachers to explore the implications for school and classroom *practice*; and meetings of a more variable kind with what one might call the national statutory stakeholders: government, opposition parties, the Commons education Select Committee, the key national educational agencies - Ofsted, QCA, TDA, NCSL, GTC, local authority representatives - and of course the teaching unions.

In fact, our conversations with these national statutory stakeholders started early in 2004, over two years before the Review was launched, when we were first consulting about the Review's desirability and then about its detailed planning. We believed then, and we believe even more strongly now that our emerging findings are generating a certain amount of controversy, that an independent enquiry gets nowhere by being isolationist, and that constructive engagement with government and statutory bodies is essential. It's not just

that dialogue is a precondition for democracy; it's also that government and the statutory bodies have information which is every bit as significant for our enquiry as that available from research. And we really do need to keep the dialogue open in order to disentangle what our reports actually say from those often unhelpful media reports, and to draw the attention of ministers and others to what we think are the key findings and implications.

What also matters in an enquiry like this is the way our methodology triangulates its coverage by combining and comparing different kinds of data: (invited opinion (submissions and soundings) with published empirical evidence (research surveys and official data searches); opinion seeking which is both interactive (soundings) and non-interactive (submissions); published empirical data from sources both official (searches) and independent (surveys); voices from the educational grassroots - teachers, parents and children - as well as the educational establishment. None of these sources on its own has a monopoly of the truth. The truth, or the nearest we shall get to the truth, probably lies at their intersection.

The Review: themes and perspectives

The coverage of the Primary Review is expressed as a hierarchy of 'perspectives', 'themes' and 'questions', which were arrived at after lengthy debate in our Advisory Committee and elsewhere.

We start with three broad *perspectives* - on children, the world in which they are growing up, and the education which mediates that world and prepares them for it:

- children and childhood
- culture, society and the global context
- education

These provide the framework for ten rather more specific themes relating to primary education itself:

- purposes and values
- learning and teaching
- curriculum and assessment
- quality and standards
- diversity and inclusion
- settings and professionals
- parenting, caring and educating
- beyond the school
- structures and phases
- funding and governance

Finally, for every theme there is a set of *questions.* These indicate in more precise terms what we need to investigate, and what we wish to encourage those providing evidence to comment upon.

Time does not permit me to set out the full list of questions we have identified under each theme (they can be readily checked on the Review website), but it is worth spelling out the three perspectives in full, for they encapsulate the Review's main concerns.

> *Children and childhood.* What do we know about young children's lives in and out of school, and about the nature of childhood, at the start of the 21st century? How do children of primary school age develop, think, feel, act and learn? To which of the myriad individual and collective differences between children should educators and related professionals particularly respond? What do children most fundamentally need from those charged with providing their primary education?
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> *Culture, society and the global context.* In what kind of society and world are today's children growing up and being educated? In what do England's (and Britain's) cultural differences and commonalities reside? What is the country's likely economic, social and political future? Is there a consensus about the 'good society' and education's role in helping to shape and secure it? What can we predict about the future - social, economic, environmental, moral, political - of the wider world with which Britain is interdependent? What, too, does this imply for children and primary education?

> *Education.* Taking the system as a whole, from national policy and overall structure to the fine detail of school and classroom practice, what are the current characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of the English state system of primary education? To what needs and purposes should it be chiefly directed over the coming decades? What values should it espouse? What learning experiences should it provide? By what means can its quality be secured and sustained?

These perspectives demonstrate one of the most striking conceptual or thematic differences between the Primary Review and Plowden. In as far Plowden looked outward it addressed - albeit very persuasively - essentially *local* questions to do with the relationship of community, home and school, especially in the context of social disadvantage. But it had little to say about the wider society, and nothing at all to say about the wider world.

Broadening the debate: changing education, changing world

There are two main reasons why we need to broaden the perspective of a new enquiry into primary education beyond the nexus of child, home and school, important though they are. One reason is the much-changed legislative and administrative framework; the other is the much-changed country and world we now inhabit.

In place of the laissez-faire localism that attended primary education in the 1960s England now has one of the more centralised education systems in the developed world. The language is indicative: Plowden's benign opening maxim 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child' (para 9) was soon challenged in what was surely a deliberate way - 'The school curriculum is at the heart of education' (DES 1981) - when the Thatcher government gave early warning of its intention to take greater control. In turn, with control of curriculum and testing secured by the 1988 Education Reform Act, this realignment of government, local authorities and schools gave way in 1997 to the apparatus of standards, targets, tests, performance tables and national strategies, currently crowned by a National Primary Strategy with a designated Strategy 'manager' in every Local Authority.

It follows, then, that one of the Primary Review's central tasks is to establish from both official and independent sources exactly what has happened to the character and outcomes of primary education since this seismic shift in the control of primary education began. In the 1960s, many still recalled the Attlee government's Education Minister George Tomlinson saying 'Minister knows nowt about curriculum'. I doubt whether Ed Balls would dare to say that, even if it were translated into today's metropolitan vernacular. But the debate about quality and content cannot stop there, for educational quality and standards are much more complex notions than their arbiters sometimes admit. Certainly they can no more be exclusively equated with test scores at age 11 than the 3Rs can be defined as the totality of a rounded education.

Thus, beyond the slogans about standards and the relevance of the curriculum to the 'real world' lies a country whose real-world consciousness is strikingly permeated by questions of cultural diversity and identity, a country which - in Trevor Phillips' contentious estimate - may be sleepwalking into racial segregation and communal strife (Phillips 2005); or which, in the view of Helena Kennedy's Power Enquiry, has allowed its democratic processes to become dangerously undermined by a combination of public disengagement and political chicanery (Power Enquiry 2006). Such analyses - and there are others no less telling - have as direct a bearing on how we define quality in primary education as do the ritualised bouts of celebration or handwringing about SAT results, because they come to the heart of how a curriculum should relate to culture and society, especially now that basic schooling seeks to foster both citizenship and lifelong learning.

But 'quality' is no less international than national or local. Globalisation is hardly a new phenomenon, but the way its absolute primacy is daily insisted upon would surely have startled Lady Plowden's committee. In this matter, the UK's global economic competitiveness, and the country's position in the international league tables of student attainment - on which we also reported three weeks ago - are important yet also are only part of the story. There are alternative global realities, and the world's rich countries are beginning to realise that they are not immune from them: the gap between the world's rich and poor continues to widen, populations are on the move, identities are being questioned, geopolitical stability looks increasingly fragile, and there's now an almost universal consensus that escalating climate change and global warming may make this the make-or-break century for humanity as a whole. We are all in this together.

To some it may seem far-fetched to link primary education, identity, democracy, global poverty and climate change, though people are happy enough to link primary education to global economic competitiveness. Isn't this, you may ask, too far removed from the job of primary schools as traditionally understood, and as regularly insisted on by one of Estelle Morris's predecessors as Secretary of State: 'To teach children to read, write and add up'? Unfortunately national and global realities and trends *do* bear on what we mean, or might mean, by educational quality. Education helps to shape both consciousness and culture, and hence the good society. Today's children will need the best possible intellectual, moral and physical resources to cope with the world which previous generations have created. In 2050, the date by which catastophic and irreversible changes are predicted if decisive action isn't taken now to cut carbon emissions, today's Reception children will be aged only 48. That's why parents and teachers are worried, and rightly so.

Meanwhile, there's also increasing concern, as we have seen, that childhood is being eroded or compromised by a whole raft of social changes ranging from increased marital breakdown to precocious consumerism, the loss of inter-generational contact and respect, a crisis of me-first secularism, and the poverty of the inner lives of those children whose days outside school are dominated by television, the internet and electronic games and toys which leave nothing to the imagination.

It is a coincidence, but as far as we are concerned a highly advantageous one, that the Children's Society has launched a 'Good Childhood Enquiry' to test and address some of these concerns. Their timescale is almost identical to ours and in March we shall be holding a joint conference with them, supported by the General Teaching Council, about the important ground shared by our two enquiries and its implications for schools.

It's a statement of the painfully obvious that today's children, and their children, rather than the adults who confidently make the decisions which affect their futures, will reap the environmental, economic and social whirlwind that many now predict; and that such concerns cannot but raise daunting questions about the kind of education which schools should provide and the values they should pursue. Political vision is notoriously short term. Educational vision cannot afford to be. Primary education cannot conceivably cater for every life-chance contingency, let alone when so much is fluid and uncertain, but it can at least strive to lay an appropriate foundation for a challenging future, and in doing so acknowledge that its agency is moral no less than instrumental. The 3Rs are essential. But are they enough?

Rescuing the evidence: Community Soundings

Let us turn now to what has begun to emerge from the Review. I can comment only on what we have published so far: already much more has emerged than is in the public domain, and the interim reporting process initiated last month goes on until next March.

First, that Community Soundings report. With a few notable and welcome exceptions, the media tended to highlight just one issue: children under stress, whether from the national tests within school, or from the world outside school - guns, gangs, celebrities, growing up too soon, traffic, and - again - the ultimate nightmare of global warming out of control.

What did the report really say? First, in terms of scope, it covered an agenda far wider than that portrayed by most of the press. We had discussions on schools, curriculum, assessment, educational aims and values, learning, teaching, teacher training, school leadership, school governance, school funding, primary-secondary transfer, the contrasting challenges of inner city and rural schools, children with special needs, children of migrants and Travellers, parenting and caring, multi-agency provision, *Every Child Matters*, culture, identity, faith and much more.

Second, much of the discussion was positive and constructive, especially when people were talking about what life is like in primary schools today.

Third, and perhaps most important: though we did indeed report - I quote - that 'there was a pervasive anxiety about the current educational and social contexts, including significant areas of recent policy, and a deeper pessimism about the world in which today's children are growing up', we also reported that of all the groups we spoke to, children were *least* likely to share the pessimism not just about the wider world but also about tests and testing. This is not to say that they were immune to these anxieties: they weren't and we should heed what they said. But many media did was to attribute *to* children anxieties which were mostly expressed *about* them or on their behalf by adults. Why? Presumably because 'UK youngsters stressed and

depressed' (Channel 4 News) makes a better story than 'Adults worried about children.' The first is news; the second is a fact of parental life.

This fundamental misreporting not only distorted our findings and led to all those 'stressed and depressed' headlines; it also allowed some to muddy the waters by linking our findings to those of the UNICEF report on childhood wellbeing which came out earlier this year. This report, you will recall, placed the UK bottom overall out of 21 nations on six indicators: material wellbeing; health and safety; educational wellbeing; family and peer relationships; behaviours and risks; and subjective well-being. Since in the House of Lords debate on the UNICEF report in March the government had sought to dismiss the UNICEF findings as based on old data on matters like child poverty, the media merging of the two reports allowed the government to dismiss ours too.

The community soundings report is infinitely richer in its coverage and views than has been generally realised. Read it, and you will agree with me. Further, because this is an *interim* report, it ends not with firm conclusions, but with questions, on the basis that all evidence is an invitation to question. Thus we ask, as others have asked since:

> *Are* children as relentlessly and unprecedentedly under pressure both inside and outside school as many witnesses claim? .... *Are* today's children growing up too soon? Is 'childhood innocence' something to be genuinely reclaimed before it is too late, or merely a misplaced nostalgia for a way of life which was never enjoyed by more than a minority? ... *Is* the quality of parenting in serious decline, as some witnesses claim....?

And so on: 47 questions, in all, about children, society and primary education for considered discussion over the next few weeks and months, grouped under headings which take us back to the Review's ten themes: the national and global context; children and childhood; parenting, caring and educating; aims, values and the curriculum; learning, teaching and teachers; assessment; schools, structures, ages and phases; funding and governance.

So although this first report certainly stirred up discussion and debate, it was too often the kind of debate that the Review is trying hard to transcend - polarised, narrowly-focused and ill-informed. No less regrettably, the reporting forced the government to be defensive rather than responsive. A DCSF spokesperson said:

> We reject the pessimism that now is a bad time to be a child ... The vast majority of children go to better schools, enjoy better health, live in better housing and in more affluent households than they did ten years ago ... There is an unrelentingly negative view of young people in this country, where the problems of the few eclipse the achievements of the many. Over 70 per cent of media stories about young people are negative, so it is no wonder that most young people tell us they feel stereotyped, criticised and undervalued.

Clearly the DCSF spokesperson hadn't read our report either.

Rescuing the evidence: standards, testing and assessment

Did we fare better with the next publication? This time, on 2nd November, we published not one report but three, and they came not from data we ourselves had collected but from an analysis of published research and official material on standards, assessment and testing. In all, our six consultants, from Bristol and Durham universities and the National Foundation for Educational Research, reviewed over 240 published sources and then prepared carefully considered syntheses of what the national and international evidence shows about standards in primary education over time, about the methodology, reliability and side effects of the national tests, and about the whole business of assessment and its relationship not just to measured standards but also, and more fundamentally, to the quality of children's learning.

The findings from these three surveys were mixed. If you consider what's at stake in a system with 17,500 primary schools and 4 million pupils, let alone here in London where by some estimates over 300 languages are spoken, how could it be otherwise? So there was good news about the stability of the system; about pupils' attitudes to primary schooling (confirming what we heard in the Community Soundings); about improvements in standards over time, especially in maths and science; and about how well in these areas we compare with other countries.

But there were less positive findings, and these, with unerring predictability, were what made the headlines on 2nd November: the relatively modest gains in reading standards, which prompted the Durham team to ask about whether the National Literacy Strategy had given value for money; gains in standards at the expense of the enjoyment of reading; the adverse side-effects of testing on the curriculum; and the much bigger gap between high and low attaining primary pupils here than in many other countries.

The surveys also raised important questions about the dependability of the test data, the thinness of the international evidence and the way the national tests are used as measures of both individual pupil attainment and whole school performance.

Yet again, however, the narrow and negative focus of the media coverage forced the ensuing so-called debate down an essentially unproductive route. The DCSF spokesperson responded:

> The government does not share the view that children are over-tested ... Less than 0.14 per cent of teaching time for 7-11 year olds is spent on national tests.

But this wasn't really the point. The concern expressed by our witnesses was not about the time actually spent *administering* the tests - for which that figure of 0.14 per cent may or may not be accurate, though, curiously, it appears to have been calculated as a proportion of time spent over the whole of Key Stage 2 rather than Year 6 when the tests are actually taken. Our witnesses' concern was about the *impact* of the tests on children, teachers, and the curriculum, for which such percentage calculations are neither appropriate nor possible. However, if teachers *were* to find a way of calculating how much time they spend in years 5 and 6 worrying about the tests, preparing for the tests and coaching for the tests, or the extent to which the upper primary curriculum has been made to fit the tests, then I suspect the figure would be a lot higher than 0.14 per cent.

Similarly, DCSF briskly dismissed our three surveys of those 240 sources of published evidence on the grounds that standards in reading, maths and science - I quote - 'are at their highest levels ever - this is not an opinion, it is fact'.

I won't take issue with the inference that the Primary Review's commissioned analyses based on 240 sources of published evidence are opinion rather than fact, nor with the looseness of that claim about 'the highest levels ever' - the spokesperson ought perhaps to have said 'the highest levels since we started measuring reading, maths and science attainment in this particular way', which is only since about 1995. One understands the political function of statements like 'the best teachers ever' and the 'highest standards ever' but the business of the Primary Review is evidence, not votes. That apart, the minister was absolutely right that steady improvement is what the year-on-year DCSF figures clearly show. But claims about standards achieved in the national tests, as in any tests, are 'fact' only if they satisfy the classic criteria of *validity* and *reliability*, and of this our consultants were not convinced. This is what we need to talk about.

Incidentally, if the data *are* open to methodological challenge, then it's only fair to point out that the graph is theoretically as likely to *underplay* the extent of improvement as to exaggerate it. Well, perhaps not, for the problem with those 'best ever' claims is that they tend to be countered by wholly different data: the frequently-voiced opinions of employees and universities about the poor literacy skills of even those recruits or students who are, in terms of measured attainment, the nation's high flyers. If university students cannot write correctly or grammatically, or use written or spoken language to construct and sustain an argument, and if - as CBI claimed last year - one in three businesses has to send its staff for 'remedial catchup' lessons in basic literacy and numeracy, then we cannot afford to be complacent about the education these young people have received ten years earlier. And never forget that if, as in this year's KS2 tests, the percentage of pupils reaching what has been defined as the required level, Level 4, was 80 per cent in English and 77 per cent in maths, this means that 20 per cent of pupils in English and 23 per cent in maths did *not* reach the required level. Break it down further, and you find while overall 85 per cent of girls attained Level 4 in English, 40 per cent of boys did *not* achieve Level 4 in writing. To see what percentages really signify, turn them on their head. Clearly, there *is* a problem.

Nor should the robust DCSF defence of the national strategies pass without comment. After all, the government's preferred evaluations - by Ofsted and OISE (Ontario Institute for studies in Education) - have been somewhat ambivalent. The final OISE evaluation report on the literacy and numeracy strategies said:

> The intended changes in teaching and learning have not yet been fully realised ... It is difficult to draw conclusions about the effect of the Strategies on pupil learning.

And Ofsted's 2005 report, placed only last week on their website, says:

> The quality of teaching and learning in the literacy hour and the daily mathematics lesson continues to improve. Despite this, in both subjects, the teaching in one in three lessons is no better than satisfactory ... Too many pupils are given work which is not well enough matched to their needs ... The subject knowledge of a significant minority of teachers is limited and holds back effective planning, teaching and assessment ... Schools' focus on the literacy hour and daily mathematics lesson has been largely unaffected by the publication of *Excellence and Enjoyment*.

On that basis, I think we have to accept that Peter Tymms' contention about the impact of the strategies is at least worth discussing.

But a no less important consequence of all this was that once again we lost sight of what really mattered: the need for a fundamental debate about what we mean by 'standards'; about whether standards in primary education ought to be defined as test performance in three subjects, themselves rather narrowly conceived; about whether pupil performance in the SATs and the performance of an entire school should be treated as synonymous; about whether, if we must test, we are testing the right things and in the right way; about the impact of high stakes testing on children and the curriculum; and about what assessment means and ought to mean as an aspect of teaching and learning. For, as Wynne Harlen found in her survey for us, contrary to the claim one frequently hears, there's no evidence that testing *of itself* 'drives up standards'. It's *good teaching* which drives up standards; testing merely measures them, more or less imperfectly, depending on the tests used.

The gap: attainment and inequality

But overshadowing all this is probably the most disturbing of all the findings from these three reports: the gap between the high and low attainers, already wide by the top of the primary school and a yawning gulf by the time students reach the age of 16, at least in comparison with most other high GDP nations.

When I talked to Peter Tymms about this after receiving the report he wrote for us, he said that if one bears in mind that we have a wider spread of attainment in English than in maths, then it seems fair to argue that the English language, and especially our highly eccentric English spelling, may be partly to blame. Certainly, when I worked with Ofsted in their comparative study of the education of six year olds in England, Denmark and Finland, we were told by Finnish experts basking in the glory of their spectacular PISA results that one reason that Finnish children learn to read and write so quickly and accurately - when they don't even start compulsory schooling until age 7 - is that Finnish is strictly and consistently phonetic: there is only one way to spell a particular phoneme, or to pronounce a particular combination of letters. Learn the rules, follow them, and they won't let you down. English, clearly, isn't like that.

But this cannot be the whole story, for the gap in pupil attainment maps too exactly for coincidence onto other gaps: the gap between rich and poor; the gap of social class, still, in our supposedly classless society, a significant indicator of educational prospects; the gap in parental aspirations; the gap in the quality of under-five care; the gap of gender; the gap of race; the gap of disability; the gap of exclusion.

By way of confirmation, the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education 3-11 Project (EPPE) reported earlier this year that:

> The quality of the early years learning environment and parents' (especially mothers') qualifications levels are the most important background factors relating to a child's attainment in reading and mathematics at Year 5, followed by low birth weight, need for support for English as an additional language (EAL), early health or developmental problems and socioeconomic status.

Also earlier this year the Equalities Review's final report noted the serious levels of underachievement among Gypsy/Roma and Irish Heritage Traveller children; and of children from Pakistani, Black Caribbean and Black African families. Then we had the Rowntree Foundation's findings about the low educational achievement of white children in poverty and boys from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African backgrounds, and their insistence that

> children from poor homes are nearly a year behind when they start school, and two years behind by age 14. Most never catch up.

Then, just three weeks ago the RSA published its report on Risk and Childhood. It usefully undermined some of those popular myths about the level of risk experienced by today's children: 'Parental concern,' it noted, 'is not necessarily in line with statistical risk'. At the same time it found that risk is very unevenly distributed, and that - I quote - 'In many ways risk stands as a present day proxy for inequality.' Thus, if you suffer to a serious degree the financial and social inequalities I referred to, you are also more at risk from those dangers in the home and in streets, parks and other public spaces which worried many of our Community Soundings witnesses - traffic accidents, unhealthy living, becoming the victim of crime. And, crucially, you are also more at risk of underachieving educationally.

It all seems to add up, doesn't it? On the basis of major studies such as these, the solution to the notorious attainment gap seems clear, though anything but simple in execution: reduce social inequality, and you will reduce educational inequality. But we also need to ask whether schooling itself contributes to the attainment gap. After all, there are many fine schools situated in areas which rank high on indicators of inequality and deprivation yet whose pupils do well, so the quality of teaching and school leadership are crucial variables too. We understand the power of good teaching too well to want to return to the Plowden-era tendency to explain underachievement exclusively in terms of home, family and socio-economic status. We know the impact of school and classroom factors from a whole succession of classroom studies, including several that I myself have been involved in. We know from the EPPE 3-11 Project the long-term influence of good quality pre-school settings, and the direct impact on the quality of primary teaching on KS2 test results. Even more significant in terms of judging the relative impact of home and school factors, EPPE reported:

> The combined influence of attending a better pre-school and a more academically effective primary school ... [are] similar in size to the impact of having a high rather than a low home learning environment or a mother with the highest level of educational qualifications rather than none.

Of course, there are arguments about the figures: the Rowntree reports conclude that 'just 14 per cent of variation in individuals' performance at school is accounted for by school quality.' Other studies argue that school effects are much more substantial. Sidestepping yet another sterile dispute about percentages we might ask a rather different question: do some policies actually *exacerbate* inequality? All the evidence from the 1950s and 1960s about the self-fulfilling consequences of selective secondary education indicated that they may, and contrary to a recent claim such selection hasn't disappeared: one calculation suggests that 15 per cent of England's secondary schools are selective. At the primary stage, admissions policies may favour those who can afford to be mobile and choose which school to send their children to (one Community Sounding parent wryly told us that the only people who benefit from the national tests are estate agents). Homework policies favour those whose homes provide optimum physical and intellectual conditions for undertaking it. A schooling system premissed on stability of intake and continuity of study may unwittingly discriminate against the growing proportion of our population which is transient or otherwise highly mobile. This, too, came up during the Community Soundings, in illuminating meetings with Travellers, seasonal migrants and local authority representatives.

And what of coaching? In one of our community soundings schools, in a prosperous suburb, we were told that half of the children in Years 5 and 6 had private tuition to get them good SAT grades. The school's SAT performance was impressive; so too were its recent Ofsted reports. But what, in these circumstances, do such results indicate - the quality of teaching or the level of parental income? Who in these circumstances is adding the value?

As I say, the fuss which followed the publication of our reports on standards, testing and assessment three weeks ago spectacularly ignored what mattered most: educational inequality, and its close relationship to those other inequalities which make ours such a divided society. The Primary Review will not make the same mistake. There is not just *one* gap, the gap in attainment, but many gaps; and while closing one may help reduce another, the child who scores high on most or all of the inequality indices - health, wellbeing, income, home, family, pre-school, primary education - starts life with vastly better prospects than the child who misses out on some or all of these, or whose inequalities at home are compounded by those at school.

Children's lives: intervention and autonomy

What, then, are the prospects for the next group of research reports, which will be published this Friday (23rd November), and advance copies of which are already on the desks of ministers, and the heads of the national education bodies and the teachers' unions? With this week's four reports, and the further four to be published on 14th December, we focus firmly on children: their development and learning, their educational needs, their homes and families, their lives outside school - and their voices. The reports published this Friday cover research on children's lives outside school and their educational impact, changes in parenting and caring and the relationship between home and school, the roles and relationships of primary schools and other agencies, and the voices and opinions of pupils and why it is essential that we listen to them.

Once again, the range of evidence trawled by our consultants - eleven of them this time, from five universities - is vast: over 450 published sources are listed in the four reports. I don't want to say too much about them in advance of their publication, but I've pulled out some quotations which give a sense of their flavour. Remember that what we have in these reports is not the opinion of their authors but their assessment of what the published evidence shows with a reasonable degree of certainty:

> Social class remains a key influencing factor in parent-school relationships. Parents and children need to understand 'the rules of the game' that operate in schools if the partnership is to be successful. (Report briefing 7/1)
>
> The most challenging home circumstance, which cannot be viewed optimistically, is the increasing number of children living in relative poverty. Poverty remains a significant factor in the lives of many children, with the inevitable impact on children's health and wellbeing and on their capacity to engage fully in school activities, both financially and emotionally. (Report briefing 7/1)
>
> Children say that they are normally very happy at primary school ... They would like more control over their learning, though towards the top of the primary school the pressure of SATs often prevents this. Where pupils are listened to on teaching and learning issues, teachers can gain insights into what motivates, helps and hinders their learning. (Report briefing 5/3)
>
> The *Every Child Matters* (ECM) ideal of equipping learners for life in its broadest sense appears to be at odds with the current emphasis at the primary stage on target setting and academic achievement in a narrow range of subjects. (Report briefing 5/3)
>
> As children's lives become increasingly 'scholarised', they may wish to defend the home as their private space. Children and parents may also resist current moves to increase 'parental involvement' by turning the home into an educational environment. Parents will have to consider how far to protect their children against scholarisation and how far to help them engage with it. Free time for young children is an important issue here. So too is the need for the education service to accept that many children contribute to the family division of labour and that school work is not the only educationally productive activity in which they engage. (Report briefing 8/1)

This last assessment, from Professor Berry Mayall at the Institute of Education here in London, enshrines an important warning about the role of the state in children's lives outside school. There can be something unnerving about the readiness of people to take on professional roles which bear the title 0-7, 0-11 or 0-14 if in doing so they assume that children will not develop and learn, and parents are not capable of helping them to do so, without the eager intervention of paid and qualified professionals from the moment of birth. But taking these four reports together, and the 450 published sources of evidence which between them they have drawn on, it's clear that what is needed here is a policy of *balance*. The reports show unambiguously that the state and voluntary agencies must be prepared to intervene to support vulnerable children and families, and we have found that of all the government's recent policies few enjoy such widespread support as Every Child Matters. Yet the reports also argue that those involved in young children's education should respect childhood, and listen carefully to children's views; that they should strive to understand children's lives outside school and the way that parenting and family life have changed; and they should give children and families time and space to pursue activities other than school work. Children are active agents in their own development and learning, not blank slates who depend on the interventions of teachers, local authority children's services and government strategies before they become capable of embarking on the journey from neonate to rounded adult, productive worker and responsible citizen.

Conclusion: the discourse of inclusiveness and reciprocity

That, for the moment, is as far as I can take you with this unfolding narrative of emerging evidence from the Primary Review. For the next few weeks, as I've said, we are concentrating on children and childhood. In January we turn to England's system of primary education, and will publish a series of reports which look at its structure, governance and financing, at its aims and curriculum now and in the future, at teachers, teacher training, professional development, school leadership and workforce reform, and finally at the all-important matter of the pedagogy of primary education: what the evidence tells us about the teaching and classroom conditions which are most reliably conducive to learning, and the nature of the knowledge, dispositions and skills on which such teaching depends. Along the way we shall publish evidence from elsewhere in the UK and from other countries, for there is a great deal we can learn from the international evidence, especially if we are prepared to break with the political preference for looking only across the Atlantic. And we shall also at last publish our analysis of the massive body of material which constitutes the 550 written submissions received by the Review, a corpus of evidence which in its way is no less significant than the published research. Then, from March or so, we assess the full range of data in preparation for writing the final report.

I want to end with two comments, or hopes, about where we go from here, and they take us back to the problem of the public educational discourse in this country with which I started, and which has been a *Leitmotif* of this lecture.

First, the Review team - and I guess our Advisory Committee and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation too - are delighted that the media have shown such interest in what we are doing and have brought the Review to the attention of people who would otherwise not have known about it. But comparing some of the coverage with what we and our research consultants have actually written makes it clear that the agenda for the debate about the future of primary education cannot and must not be dictated by the writers of headlines, or by those who seek to extract one sensational 'story' from material which is much more wide-ranging and complex. That means, equally, that those who wish to engage in the debate about our interim reports should read them in the original, and not rely on others' versions of them, or be forced to react to the media version rather than the original. All our reports and briefings can be downloaded from the Review website - www.primaryreview.org.uk .

Second, I said that we are committed to constructive engagement with those in the arena of policy, and we are. But constructive engagement works only if it is a two-way process. Engagement is *not* constructive if we at the Review fail to give proper consideration to the government's own account of the matters which we are investigating. That, indeed, is why the search of official data is one of our four main strands of evidence. But nor is engagement constructive if the Review's findings are dismissed out of hand when they appear to query the government's version of events, or if they are accepted only when they toe the party line.

There are, as the Review's methodology demonstrates, different kinds of evidence, and all of them - whether test data, inspection data, published research or individual and collective opinion - must be open to scrutiny, challenge and discussion. None can be exempted. If we don't follow this basic principle of evidential reciprocity we get not evidence-based policy but policy-based evidence. As Karl Popper reminded us when he argued that scientific knowledge advances by trying to prove hypotheses wrong rather than right, it is *not* good governance to assume that political judgement and official data are inherently superior to other views and other kinds of evidence. That assumption has nothing to do with knowledge or truth, and everything to do with power.

In any case, education doesn't start and end with policy. There's a world of educational thinking and practice out there over which teachers, parents, children and communities have much more influence than they may realise. The debate about the present and future of primary education belongs to all of us.

Thank you.