

## The Cambridge Primary Review

### QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

**Robin Alexander**

Notes for the meeting with the Secretary of State for Education  
and the Minister of State for Schools, Monday 25 October 2010

#### ***Background to the meeting***

*The meeting has been arranged in response to the letter of 30 June 2010 to the Secretary of State from Professor Robin Alexander, Director of the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR). In his letter, Alexander reminded the Secretary of State of the CPR's findings on an aspect of the debate about quality and standards which has had neither the attention nor the policy response that it requires: primary schools' curriculum capacities and how they can be improved. By 'curriculum capacity' we mean (i) a school's ability to teach to the highest possible standards not only literacy and numeracy but every aspect of the curriculum to which its pupils are statutorily entitled; (ii) a school's ability to discuss, conceive and develop the curriculum with the rigour that such matters demand. About both matters the CPR final report expressed concern. Since the problem is certainly not universal - for many schools amply meet both criteria - so much as the way the current system allows, perhaps encourages, excessive variation in quality between schools, the government's promise of greater professional freedom must prompt a note of caution, even though it is something the CPR has argued for and welcomes. Curriculum capacity, then, raises pressing questions about the content of primary initial training and CPD, the future of the default generalist classteacher system, the availability and deployment of specialist expertise, and school leadership. It also begs the questions of what the primary curriculum should look like and how curriculum 'standards' and 'quality' should be defined and assessed.*

*The headings below are those of the agreed agenda for the meeting.*

#### **Update**

The independently-sponsored Cambridge Primary Primary Review (CPR) is the most comprehensive and detailed enquiry into English primary education since the 1960s. Launched in 2006, supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and directed by Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University, it published 31 interim reports between 2007 and 2009, followed in October 2009 by a 600-page final report and companion 850-page research volume. Since then, the CPR has undertaken 120 regional, national and international dissemination events and many more are planned. Out of these it crystallised its eleven *Policy Priorities for Primary Education* which were widely circulated shortly before the May 2010 general election. It has become clear that there is considerable support for the CPR's findings and proposals among teachers and their unions, politicians of all parties, religious leaders, and both educational and non-educational organisations. In relation to the particular topic for this meeting, we might also mention the CPR's ongoing discussions about curriculum reform and schools' curriculum capacity with, for example, several of the subject associations, Teach First, the Prince's Teaching Institute and the Church of England (which has a legal stake in one quarter of England's primary schools).

From October 2010, with support once again from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the CPR entered its latest phase. This combines continuing dissemination and policy engagement with building a professional network. Through the good offices of DfE's recently-established Primary Education Division, CPR personnel are now in regular discussion with senior DfE officials, and the starting point for these has been the eleven policy priorities referred to above, many of which the coalition government is now addressing through its various reviews and initiatives. In parallel, and - we hope - feeding into the DfE meetings, the CPR will shortly launch its national primary network to support and disseminate the work of those teachers and teacher trainers who are keen to take forward and build on the CPR's ideas,

evidence and proposals. Led by Alison Peacock, head of an outstanding primary school in Hertfordshire and a National Leader in Education, the network will have nine regional centres based in universities and local authorities. The CPR as a whole will continue to be directed by Robin Alexander.

### **Quality and standards in the primary curriculum: how should they be defined?**

The CPR stands firmly for the pursuit of the highest possible standards of primary education and for rigorous procedures for professional and school accountability in which well-founded assessment and inspection play a significant part. However, while the CPR is no less exercised than others by the need to raise standards in literacy and numeracy, it argues that these can no longer be treated as proxies for children's primary education as a whole, and that 'standards' need to be redefined so that they align with the principle of statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum. This definitional shift - which we would also like to see incorporated into the recently-announced review of KS2 assessment - will strengthen accountability and encourage schools to approach the wider curriculum with greater seriousness and rigour than, historically, has sometimes been the case. This is vital not just to secure children's educational entitlement but also because of what the research and inspection evidence tells us about the essential and reciprocal relationship between standards in the 'basics' and the quality of the curriculum as a whole. This line of argument has fuelled the CPR's concerns about primary teachers' curriculum expertise, standards of primary teaching and teacher training, the variable quality of schools' curriculum provision, the narrow focus of Ofsted inspection and the limitations and future of the generalist class teaching system devised for the Victorian elementary schools from which today's primary schools directly descend.

All this begs questions about the nature of the curriculum itself. The CPR argues that education is about acculturation as well as the acquisition of skill, and that induction into - and exploration of - a culture's principal ways of knowing, understanding, enquiring, doing and making sense is therefore central to the curriculum, though this is not all that a curriculum should entail and the formulation leaves open the operational question of how schools might plan and organise such a curriculum for teaching. The CPR also argues that breadth in this enterprise is essential, for without breadth alongside 'the basics' children have no basis for later educational development and choice. The CPR's curriculum framework envisages eight 'domains' of knowledge, understanding, skill and disposition driven by 12 core aims, manifested in provision which combines a statutory national entitlement curriculum with a variable 'community curriculum' determined locally [CPR final report, chapter 14].

### **What problems in current primary curriculum provision most urgently need to be addressed if standards are to be raised and quality is to be assured?**

Contrary to the Rose Review's remit and central premise, the current national curriculum may be tightly packed but it is not inherently unmanageable, for Ofsted's evidence shows that many primary schools successfully plan and deliver the current national curriculum to a high overall standard. Indeed our best primary schools achieve both high standards in literacy and numeracy and a curriculum which is broad, balanced and well-managed.<sup>1</sup> The main problems are: (i) some primary schools' capacity to plan and manage a modern curriculum, which comes down to the quality of school and curriculum leadership; (ii) the loss of breadth and the variable and often poor quality of teaching in the non-core subjects because of a too-exclusive concentration in some schools on the basics and the historic neglect of the wider curriculum in ITT, CPD, inspection and policy; (iii) the availability, especially though not only in smaller schools, of the necessary subject or domain-specific expertise for every area of the curriculum that schools are obliged to teach; (iv) the ability of some primary teachers to talk about curriculum and pedagogy knowledgeably, analytically and with reference to hard evidence, especially in relation to epistemological matters. We quote again from the CPR's final report:

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Ofsted (1997) *National Curriculum Assessment Results and the Wider Curriculum at Key Stage 2*; Ofsted (2002) *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools*; Ofsted (2008) *Improving Primary Teachers' Subject Knowledge Across the Curriculum: a summary of evidence from subject surveys (excluding English and mathematics)*; Ofsted (2009) *Twenty Outstanding Primary Schools*, Ofsted (2010) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2009-10*.

Curriculum debate, and thus curriculum practice, are weakened by a muddled and reductive discourse about subjects, knowledge and skills. Discussion of the place of subjects is needlessly polarised; knowledge is parodied as grubbing for obsolete facts; and the undeniably important notion of skill is inflated to cover aspects of learning for which it is not appropriate [CPR final report, p 493] ...

... The long-standing failure to resolve the mismatch between the curriculum to be taught, the focus of teacher training and the staffing of primary schools must be resolved without delay. The principle to be applied is the one of entitlement adopted throughout this report: children have a right to a curriculum which is consistently well taught regardless of the perceived significance of its various elements or the amount of time devoted to them [CPR final report, p 505].

The CPR makes its case not only on the grounds of curriculum entitlement and quality, but also because the international research evidence shows that domain, subject or ‘pedagogical content’ knowledge, or the teacher’s depth of understanding of what is to be taught, is one of the key attributes that distinguish the best teachers from the rest. Here research reinforces what both common sense and children themselves tell us (when asked by the CPR about the attributes of good teachers, children said ‘knowing a lot about their subjects’). Yet there remains in some quarters a degree of resistance to this imperative, and to its corollary that the generalist class teacher system, though in theory ideal for young children, can no longer be treated as sacrosanct.

### **How can it be done? What leverage can policy exert? How can the CPR help?**

The CPR final report recommended a **national primary staffing review** whose remit would include:

The relationship between (i) the curricular and other tasks of primary schools as they are now conceived, (ii) the roles and numbers of teachers and other professionals required, (iii) the expertise and training/retraining which this analysis dictates, (iv) the recruitment of appropriately-qualified graduates to primary PGCE courses. [CPR final report, p 506]

In the present financial climate, arguing for an increase in teacher numbers is a non-starter, even if the case is sound. But this does not diminish the urgency of the question: **In relation to the demands of teaching a modern curriculum to a high standard across its full range, are primary teachers as effectively trained, deployed, led, supported and inspected as they should be?** This, indeed, might be a more viable remit in the aftermath of the government’s October 2010 Spending Review because it focuses on quality rather than numbers; and we do believe that quality and quality assurance are the critical issues.

Thus expressed, the question also registers the four aspects of provision to which such an enquiry might attend:

- (i) curriculum preparation/support in primary initial teacher training and CPD;
- (ii) primary teaching roles and school staff deployment;
- (iii) primary schools’ curriculum leadership;
- (iv) the extent to which TDA training and leadership requirements, Ofsted inspections and schools’ own quality assurance procedures attend with due seriousness, as they should, to quality and standards across the whole curriculum, not just in literacy and numeracy.

The CPR final report also commends fuller exploitation of the potential of school clustering, federation, resource-sharing, teacher exchange and all-through schools, and it argues for a greater diversity of teaching roles in primary schools, using the continuum first proposed in the 1992 ‘three wise men’ report. This presented as a basis for school staffing decisions the complementary roles of *generalist*, *combined generalist / subject consultant*, *semi-specialist* and *specialist*. As in 1992, the CPR urges that the debate should ‘move beyond the simple opposition of “generalists” and “specialists” ’ [CPR final report, p 506] and that schools should explore more diverse staffing profiles which might, for example, gradually introduce children to specialist teachers and teaching from a fully generalist base in the early years.

All this means that the remit of any review in this area must include not just school staffing but also ITT, professional standards, CPD and Ofsted inspection. We would also argue that children's curriculum entitlement and schools' curriculum capacity, as we have defined them here, should feature in contingent reviews which DfE and/or NDPBs have initiated or are contemplating, for example on KS2 assessment, the TDA professional standards and of course the National Curriculum itself.

The CPR network will play its part in taking this debate forward, encouraging schools to audit their subject expertise and curriculum leadership and elevate the quality of their curriculum thinking and planning; and it will explore ways to secure curriculum entitlement standards as we have defined them, whether through different patterns of staff deployment, networking, staff exchange, CPD or other strategies. The CPR also hopes to work with the Prince's Teaching Institute on developing a primary curriculum leadership programme comparable to the one now on offer for secondary teachers; and with Teach First on bringing a strong subject dimension to the new primary ITT programme for outstanding graduates.

Yet without a strong policy steer progress will be slow, because existing training and staffing structures, and the mindset that informs them, allow limited room for manoeuvre. Many continue to resist the arguments presented here, notwithstanding the force of the evidence – and indeed its longevity, for the problem of curriculum capacity in primary schools has outlived a major HMI enquiry in the 1970s, a select committee enquiry in the 1980s, a government enquiry in the 1990s, and much attention throughout this period from both inspection and research. All this, needless to say, is documented by the CPR [CPR final report, ch 21] and we hope that this time the evidence will help to deliver improvement.

We believe, therefore, that in this vital part of the effort to raise standards in primary education there is considerable advantage in combining policy leverage through the proposed staffing review with the best of what emerges from the CPR network. In this, as in re-thinking the curriculum itself, working towards an assessment system which is truly fit for purpose and addressing other matters that the government intends to review, the CPR can offer two kinds of resource: first, its extensive array of evidence on the strengths and weaknesses of England's current system of primary education, already published in *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review* and *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*; second, cumulative evidence from the CPR network, once it is fully operational, on how our best teachers, schools, teacher educators and local authorities work together to build on the strengths and address the weaknesses which the CPR has identified. By the time the current phase of support from the CPR's sponsor ends, in September 2012, we expect to have assembled a considerable body of such evidence to build upon that contained in the final report. We very much hope that ministers and DfE will be prepared to work with us, in the spirit of the dialogue which was initiated after the May 2010 general election, as we move from analysing systemic problems of curriculum capacity in the primary sector to identifying practical solutions.

Robin Alexander  
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