
The Primary Review

**Response to the University of Cambridge's review on
primary education in England, February 2007**

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Theme 1: purposes and values

What is primary education for?

The key focuses of primary education is to provide young children with a range of basic language and numeracy skills to inspire attitudes that embrace learning in and out of the classroom and inculcate positive social outlooks. Effectively, primary education provides the essential grounding that enables later further academic and social progress.

Taking account of the country and the world in which our children are growing up, to what individual, social, cultural, economic and other circumstances and needs should this phase of education principally attend?

Through primary education it is important that young children develop respect for others alongside self-respect and self-esteem so that they can develop confidently and cooperatively as they move through the stages of education. The development of an understanding of self and others is a key component within the notion of respect.

What core values and principles should it uphold and advance?

Key core values and principles include reciprocity, sincerity, honesty, integrity, tolerance and compassion.

How far can a national system reflect and respect the values and aspirations of the many different communities – cultural, ethnic, religious, political, economic, regional, local – to which it caters?

The increasingly global context within which we live needs to be portrayed at an early stage. Personal, social and health education and citizenship frameworks for Key Stages 1 and 2 offer relevant programmes that can be made appropriate to pupils' abilities and backgrounds, and provide opportunities to address real-life and topical issues promoting tolerance and respect.

In envisaging the future purposes and shape of this phase of education how far ahead is it possible or sensible to look?

The pace of technological and social change makes future planning very difficult with short 'shelf lives' for any current state of knowledge. Nevertheless, it is important to have a vision for each generation at least – while building in high levels of flexibility in order to adapt to the changes in society's needs.

Whatever is the base to the curriculum content, implanting learning skills and inspiring a desire to learn are at the heart of educational purpose.

Theme 2: learning and teaching

What do we know about the way young children develop, act and learn – cognitively, emotionally, socially, morally, physically and across the full spectrum of their development?

We know that pupils learn most effectively when they feel safe and secure and are healthy. They need to gain a sense of fulfilment and enjoyment to succeed which underlines the fact that learning styles and the pace of learning vary for individuals. These should be taken into account in planning provision.

What are the pedagogical implications of recent research in, for example, neuroscience, cognition, intelligence, language and human interaction?

The pedagogical implications of recent research reinforce the developments in personalised learning and the impact of meta-learning take account of different intelligences including emotional intelligence. It is important to build individual pupil's power to learn – making the social pedagogy approaches found in parts of Europe particularly interesting. Fundamentally, the main overall implication underlines the importance of a can-do ethos in schools.

What is the relationship between children's physical health, emotional well-being and learning?

Physical and emotional well-being are prerequisites necessary for pupils to 'enjoy and achieve'. Stress, motivational deficits and stunted social development are all basic contributors to underachievement.

What is the impact of gender on learning and how can schools respond to concern about the adverse impact of such differences?

Examples of gender differences are manifested in commonly found weaknesses in boys' writing, and it is evident that there are sexual characteristic bases to variations in favoured learning styles. Suitable response can be found through multi-sensory approaches to learning and by deploying mechanisms such as Brain Gym. It is also important, in many instances, to address issues of girls' confidence and expectations, notably in subjects such as mathematics and science.

Schools also need to consider how to use role models in addressing gender issues and take care in the selection of teaching resources.

What personal and situational circumstances are likely to impede learning and – conversely – what are the personal and situational conditions for effective learning?

The clear links between family and domestic circumstances and levels of poverty and pupil achievement dominate any analysis. Together with suitable provision, an awareness of a broad spectrum of special educational needs is vital, especially with the increased incidence of dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) impacting on schools.

As children move developmentally through the primary phase how do they learn best and how are they most effectively taught?

'Learning best' depends on each individual. Primary age pupils should be empowered to understand their own learning progress and ongoing learning needs. They should be enabled to become semi-autonomous in their methodology of learning – working with school staff in meta-learning approaches and having the confidence to experiment and gain knowledge from any mistakes made.

Children who are taught to understand themselves and their learning are confident and successful; pupils who depend on teachers to give answers are less confident.

Styles of teaching need to be varied and include **hand-ons** experiential situations for pupils who also should be allowed to initiate their learning if it is to provide good and lasting stimulation.

Judged against this evidence, how do current teaching approaches fare?

Obviously, there is a range of practice between schools and even within schools as teaching styles vary.

How well do they capitalise on the findings of school and classroom research?

Moves to individual pupil target setting and the use of assessment data to inform teaching and learning reflect the value of classroom research. Larger-scale research, both national and international, is used well in specific locations, but has limited impact through restricted dissemination. This seems to be improving, especially with the increased value placed on networking and partnerships. However, budget limitations often restrict the capacity for continuing professional development for teachers.

What is the proper place of ICT and other new technologies in teaching and learning?

High quality up-to-date ICT and other new technologies are absolutely essential as classroom tools for teaching and learning. The use of multimedia acts a motivator and stimulant for pupils, and the connected skills are vital to 21st-century life. The capacity to provide knowledge cannot be replicated in other ways.

How can teaching, and the system as a whole, most appropriately respond to differences in children's development, ways of learning and apparent capacities and needs?

Previous comments on the value of personalised learning approaches, flexibility in provision and building learning power apply here with Assessment for Learning a key means for delivery.

Special education needs pupils often do not have their needs met as lack of appropriate expertise can undermine the potential benefits of integration.

In what ways might teaching, and the organisation of classrooms and schools, change in order to enhance young children's engagement and learning and maximise their educational prospects?

Key elements include high quality ICT in all classrooms and approaches that incorporate meeting the holistic needs of each child with current developments in extended schools offering sound principles. The relative low level of funding of primary schools can limit their ability to obtain maximum benefit.

Theme 3: curriculum and assessment

What do children currently learn during the primary phase?

A big emphasis is placed on basic skills, social skills and experiential learning.

What should they learn?

More attention should be given to promoting strategies about 'how to learn' and developing the capacity of pupils to transfer learning between different situations.

What constitutes a meaningful, balanced and relevant primary curriculum?

Key areas must be mathematics, science, English, personal, social and health education and the foundation subjects with a strong role for creativity and skill development through practical learning situations.

Do notions like 'basics' and 'core curriculum' have continuing validity, and if so of what should 21st-century basics and cores for the primary phase be constituted?

Yes – basics include literacy, numeracy and science with a clear position personal, social and health education, arts and the humanities. The 21st century is more about new methods of delivery rather than content.

Do the current national curriculum and attendant foundation, literacy, numeracy and primary strategies provide the range and approach which children of this age really need?

The strategies are too restrictive in methodology. Pupils should be encouraged to develop skills in more creative and autonomous ways. The National Curriculum offers an excellent guide that teachers can adapt for detailed content.

What kinds of curriculum experience will best serve children's varying needs during the next few decades?

In general terms, flexibility in provision is important with continuous days, pupil- initiated projects and exciting accessible multimedia at the heart.

Aspect would also like to see more consideration of European models of social pedagogy as ways of interconnecting learning and care as well as small group work and project teams to promote the development of truly personalised learning.

General principles allowing for detailed national variations include:

- focusing on the child as a whole person and supporting overall development – body, mind, feelings, relationships, spirit and creativity
- encouragement for professionals to constantly reflect on their practice so that their theoretical understandings and self-knowledge impact on learning and teaching practice
- giving consideration to the learning environment in order to appreciate personal preferences
- involving children and young people in their own learning and showing respect for their views and contribution to planning
- a more gradual entry into formal learning situations for young children with greater value placed on structured play.

These principles, backed up by modern ICT, should influence curriculum experiences.

How are the different needs of children, including those with specific learning difficulties, currently diagnosed?

Diagnosis currently relies too heavily on teacher observation and intuitive reactions. Engagement with outside agencies is too piecemeal and will hopefully become more systemised with the implementation of the effective delivery of *Every Child Matters* and children's services.

How should their progress and attainment be assessed?

Assessment for Learning provides the mechanisms that promote individual target setting and learning plans.

What is the proper relationship and balance of Assessment for Learning and assessment for accountability?

Through Assessment for Learning, teachers should be allowed to focus on individual pupils needs as the most effective accountability measure and so ensure more meaningful outcomes.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to assessment, both national and local?

The main strength is the increasing focus on individual pupils; the key weakness is simplistic approaches to reporting. The current reporting regime creates the realised potential for unfounded general comparisons between schools with too great an emphasis placed on end of Key Stage test results.

What assessment information should be reported, and to whom?

End of Key Stage assessment should be reported – but only to parents and linked secondary schools. Key Stage 3 and 4 value-added should be fed back to primary schools as progress is not only a measure of secondary school success but an indicator of a primary school's instilling of capacity to learn.

What is the most helpful balance of national and local in curriculum and assessment?

A national framework that allows for local sensitivities and priorities seems a proper model.

Theme 4: quality and standards

How good is English primary education?

Good, improving but still significantly under-resourced despite advancements of recent years.

How consistent is it across the country as a whole?

Any inconsistency would appear to be highly localised and cannot be associated with particular regions of local authorities especially as social context is so influential.

Have standards risen or fallen?

Risen.

How do they compare with those of other countries?

Many other countries appear to have sounder approaches to the early years of primary education which has a long-term beneficial effect.

How should 'standards' and 'quality' be defined for this phase?

The standard and quality of teaching provision and facilities should be improved, but for pupils the key elements are motivation and achievement.

How should they be assessed?

Again, Assessment for Learning provides suitable mechanisms for internal school use. End of Key Stage testing has its problems but is now embedded.

What is the available range of national and international evidence on these matters?

There is much evidence from the developed world with a great deal of knowledge about successful methods used across Europe, in North America and Oceania.

How reliable is it?

There are sound indicators of reliability in terms of employment skills and productivity.

How well, and how appropriately, is it used?

National and international evidence is not used systematically. Teachers are, in general dependent upon the continuing professional development programmes promoted by their individual school. Research-based approaches are relatively uncommon.

What are the most effective contributions to standards and quality of, for example, research, inspection, government initiatives, school and teacher self-evaluation, performance management, pre-service training and in-service training?

All of the above contribute to standards and quality but tend to be at a whole school level: the impact will vary. Overall, many of the initiatives and systems impacting on primary schools are managed in ways that lead to negative feelings among teachers and an approach of 'working with' rather than 'doing to' is necessary.

What are the proper roles in the processes of systemic review and quality assurance of the Department for Education and Skills, the national agencies and parliament?

Local authorities should be equipped to provide appropriate challenge and support, with inspection as an occasional measuring check.

Theme 5: diversity and inclusion

Do our primary schools attend fairly and effectively to the different learning needs and cultural backgrounds of all their pupils?

Practice varies, overall classes are too large, and primary schools are too stretched in terms of workload and resourcing. Better teacher–pupil ratios are required both for smaller classes and to release the resource for effective planning and innovation.

Do all children have equal access to high quality primary education?

Inevitably, this will vary. Also, inclusive education – while having merits – does, on occasions, disadvantage those with unmet needs; those pupils unsuited to mainstream provision; and other pupils in the group from whom attention is diverted.

If not, how can this access be improved?

More resources are required and particularly an analysis is necessary looking at how inclusive education can be managed to maximise meeting the needs of all pupils.

How can a national system best respond to the wide diversity of cultures, faiths, languages and aspirations which is now a fact of British life?

English as an additional language support should be improved and made more consistent, and personal, social and health education programmes are vital in advancing attitudes of tolerance and understanding. It is worth devoting further attention to appropriate use of assembly time as communal activity that needs to embrace cultural and religious diversity.

Of what is identity constituted in a highly plural culture, and what should be the role of primary education in fostering it?

Identity is concerned with distinctive features; primary education should celebrate differences while emphasising similarities between people.

How can primary schools best meet the needs of children of widely varying abilities and interests?

Teachers need to be adequately and appropriately supported to meet the needs and interests of children of widely varying abilities and interests. Workforce reform must be sufficiently resourced to allow teachers to focus on teaching and learning and allow managers the time to manage provision to meet pupils' varying needs. Teacher morale must be of such that they are enthused to address the challenging agenda of personalised learning.

In short, well-directed satisfactory resourcing is crucial. This would work to the benefit of all pupils, including gifted and talented and special educational needs, though more consideration of those with low level additional needs has to be built in to the personalisation agenda.

How can schools secure the engagement of those children and families which are hardest to reach?

Key elements are parental involvement and creating an ethos that builds individual confidence to engage with the education system. This will involve innovative and flexible solutions.

Theme 6: settings and professionals

What are the physical and organisational characteristics of our best primary schools?

Recently rebuilt schools highlight the significance of high quality buildings to pupil and staff morale as the physical environment clearly impacts on teaching and learning. Modern schools need sufficient space to facilitate flexible provision with accommodation planned to suit specific purpose. Ideally space should be available for co-located other children's services professionals to work from the school base. Pupils taught in old or inadequate buildings are placed at a disadvantage.

How are they resourced and equipped?

Resources and equipment should be directed at encouraging a culture of learning. High quality up-to-date ICT facilities are crucial as are other resources that allow for differing learning styles with multi-sensory facilities vital for many special needs pupils.

How are they managed and led?

Modern primary schools need leadership that inspires a learning culture for staff as well as all pupils. The role of, and support for, primary headteachers deserves attention as current resourcing levels leaves too many of them in isolated management positions.

What are the lessons for school design and organisation of recent national initiatives?

Good provision to allow multi-purpose use of space and suitable facilities for operation as extended schools. Other desirable features include vandal proofing and designs that are user-friendly.

How well are teachers and other professionals involved in this age range trained?

It can be difficult for one year PGCE courses to provide sufficient grounding for primary school teaching but it is imperative that continuing professional development becomes the norm for all teachers.

How effectively are they deployed?

Responses depend on individual schools and colleagues as mentoring skills need to be learnt. Interschool initiatives are attractive as aids to personal teacher development. These are improving but league tables for attainment, etc, act against collaboration in a local area.

How well is their development supported at school, local and national levels?

More funding is required to aid effective mentoring of trainee and inexperienced teachers and to develop new middle managers and senior leaders as well as to promote excellent teaching.

How can the nation secure and retain the best professionals for this phase of education?

Without losing accountability, a culture is required that raises teachers' status as there is too much explicit and implied criticism allowed through over-reporting of unrefined data. The prevailing sense is of a profession beset by constant change imposed from above which acts as a further indicator of low status.

A research-based change programme should replace what comes across as rather impulsive initiative overload.

What balance of expertise, and of teachers, assistants and other para-professionals, should schools contain and how should they be used?

In specific terms all classes benefit from a teaching assistant. ICT support, in primary schools, is inadequate. More generally, Aspect would point to social pedagogical and small group models referred to in section 3.

What are the conditions for their success?

Basic points include:

- mutual respect
- providing opportunities to meet colleagues away from the classroom to plan
- familiarising support staff with the school building and school routines
- ensuring broad-based training
- giving support staff a formal introduction to pupils
- making support staff roles and responsibilities as explicit as possible
- ensuring that teachers understand the role and expectations are reasonable
- involvement in regular structured team meetings
- formal appraisal systems.

What are the future workforce needs of the phase as a whole?

Finding mechanisms that allow time to plan personalised learning approaches.

Strong programmes of continuing professional development for all school staff. School budgets sufficient for 21st-century delivery, including smaller classes.

How can these be met?

By adding targeted funding that schools use to promote individualised learning programmes and also to network in order to gain from exposure to good practice.

Theme 7: parenting, caring and educating

What are the parenting and caring conditions on which children's welfare and their successful primary education depend?

Individualised needs must be met for parental confidence and to promote positive attitudes to schools.

But what, too, should educational and other services do to support parents and carers in their work?

Family and parenting support within extended school provision are highly necessary. Working with parents is about support; school/parent partnerships based on dictation lead to alienation.

How are the challenges of home-school relationships most effectively met?

Regular and varied parental involvement with an open attitude on the part of the schools should be well established mechanisms.

By what means can parents/carers, teachers and other professionals operate as far as possible in harmony and pursue goals which, while not identical, are not in such conflict that they damage the child's educational prospects?

Common systems which embrace distinct roles are at the heart of harmonious relationships.

Relationships break down through poor communication and lack of mutual understanding.

A fundamental mechanism is a clear homework policy and mechanisms for gaining parental feedback. An interesting indicator is the way in which a school responds to expressed parental views.

Theme 8: beyond the school

What do we know about children's lives beyond school and the impact on their development and education of those groups and influences – family, peer, community, media and so on – to which they are subject?

Recent developments in children's services establish a far better base for understanding children's lives and the impact on school. However, time must be created and allowed for school staff trust and respect of other professionals to be developed through mutual understanding and resourcing made available to facilitate this. Structural change must be reinforced by addressing the issues at the point of delivery.

What is the current division of responsibilities between the people, institutions and agencies who are principally concerned with young children's education and those who are concerned with their upbringing and welfare – parents and carers especially, but also health services, social services and other statutory and voluntary agencies?

Children's services developments will gradually break down barriers, but unified systems and integrated working will take time to become embedded.

How successfully does the work of these people and agencies articulate and cohere?

Limited – the common assessment framework and information sharing protocols are tools that will need to be implemented through continuing professional development programmes that bring different professional together. Systems must be well understood to avoid dissipated energy and confusion.

In the context of changing familial demographics and growing concern about young children's well-being, might these relationships, and the attendant responsibilities, be differently conceived?

Inter-agency links are still poor in too many instances, with each working to their own brief. Distinctive professions have particular contributions to make and general children's workers are not the answer. Schools are at the hub of children's lives and getting them to work on a multi-agency basis is a fundamental priority that needs definite strategies.

Schools need help in navigating children's services. Link officers have a key role to play.

Theme 9: structures and phases

How well do existing structures and phases – ‘educare’ and schooling, pre-school in its various forms, infant/junior/primary, first/middle, foundation/Key Stage 1 & 2 – work?

The obvious answer is that provision is piecemeal and patchy. More attention needs to be devoted to developing models of organisation as well as of leadership management and governance of extended settings.

What are the salient characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of the various institutions and settings in which primary education takes place?

It is difficult to generalise – strengths and weaknesses vary between individual schools – never mind across the country. However, a key strength to target is ‘enjoyment’ through exciting provision.

Are there problems of coherence, transition and continuity within and between phases?

Clearly such problems can exist between primary phases (infant and junior or first and middle) or from primary to secondary. Through primary schools are advantageous wherever possible.

The problems are most acute where secondary schools draw from several primary schools and particularly with cross-boundary pupil movements. The principle of local schools for local children should be strongly encouraged.

How can these be overcome?

Transition is a key issue with a great deal of good practice in academic and pastoral liaison. Work shadowing and temporary teacher exchanges are just two devices that aid coherence and continuity. Sound interschool relationships are very important. Although always true, parental choice reinforces the need for all schools to be of high quality.

What can the primary phase profitably learn from developments in the phases which precede and follow it?

Pre-school provision focuses on individual pupils to good effect and allows for flexible varied experiential learning. Secondary practice needs to build upon primary education with gradual changes in style so it is more that those schools can learn from primary schools.

How are children grouped within the primary phase and what are the advantages and disadvantages of the different grouping arrangements?

School budgets often determine groupings and in that context the 30 class size limit creates enormous problems of flexibility. Standard numbers should always be a multiple of 30.

Parental attitudes are also highly influential as even if mixed-age classes are appropriate they can be met by strong local resistance. Mixed-age classes can be related to ability but equally age-related structures keep groups together. Local discretion and size of school need to be the major determining factors.

When should formal schooling start, bearing in mind that many other countries start later than we do and conceive of the relationship of pre-school and formal schooling somewhat differently?

Testing at age 7 has led to a ‘too much and a too early’ formality in schooling methods. Year 1 often proves to be a culture shock for pupils with undesirable pressures.

Are there more effective alternatives to current structures?

Year 2 provision should be more formal than Year 1, but assessment should be formative and not based on SATs. Reporting Key Stage results for primary schools is divisive.

Theme 10: funding and governance

How adequately is the system of primary education in England funded and how efficiently is it controlled and administered?

Funding allocations are unfair both in terms of regional differences and in the under-resourcing of primary education. Headteachers are too often forced into covering absence, and both small and large primary schools often have to manage in very inflexible ways caused by tight budgets. Another issue faced by many primary schools as a consequence of relatively low funding is the efficient operation of a management team given the level of senior staff teaching commitments.

Does it have the right balance of control and responsibility between national government, local government, local communities and schools?

No, local authorities are best placed to work with schools though the configuration of local government boundaries creates widely varying capacities.

What has been the impact of the post-1988 drive to a more centralised system?

Curriculum guidance has improved significantly but the assessment regime has not been developmental: the number of initiatives has been excessive and local authorities have suffered from constant uncertainty about role.

What should be the position of faith schools?

Faith schools should be allowed distinctive features but operate within whole system approaches led by local authorities.

Through what system of school governance are the interests of children, teachers, parents and local communities most effectively and equitably addressed?

School governance has been a success story since individual governing bodies have been required. However, the pressures on them are often too great given the volunteer status of participants and this becomes a real worry if commissioning children's services becomes another area of work.

How might matters be differently ordered?

There should be stronger systems established to create more standardised approaches to stakeholder involvement in school policy development through questionnaires and models of pupil councils. Local authorities have a key role in assisting schools in these respects.

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