
The Cambridge Primary Review: a voice for the future

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ABSTRACT The Cambridge Primary Review, the most comprehensive study of English primary education for forty years, is now becoming widely disseminated. This article describes ways in which schools can begin to take action immediately to implement the aims and principles offered for discussion by the Cambridge Primary Review. There is a call for the profession to become re energised and empowered through a collective endeavour to seek the best possible learning opportunities for all teachers and children through a demand for excellence in all areas of the curriculum.

Children, their World, their Education (2010), the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, devotes an entire chapter to discussing the necessity for debate about the aims of primary education. The Review sets out to examine a number of questions:

What is primary education for? To what needs and purposes should it be chiefly directed over the coming decades? What core values and principles should it uphold and advance? 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 it principally attend? (p. 174)

Our school presented evidence to the Cambridge Primary Review that demonstrated how our aims for primary education have enabled us to adhere to the national curriculum, achieving high standards, while offering rich curriculum experiences. This article illustrates the way in which our school's vision for learning cuts across the debate between 'formal versus informal', 'child-centred versus adult-led', focussing instead on excellence achieved through equity, empowerment and expertise.

The Wroxham School has achieved national recognition for a transformative approach to learning, where no child is labelled by ability. This

innovative approach enabled us to experience dramatic school development through an *alternative* improvement agenda. Rapid progress for every child was achieved through an irresistible personalised approach to learning, at a time when most schools felt restricted by externally imposed targets. Our school moved from the Ofsted category of requiring 'special measures' to 'outstanding' within the space of three years. Subsequent inspections in 2007 and 2009 also judged the school to be outstanding. This recognition was achieved through a principled, anti-determinist approach to teaching and learning.

The Wroxham School was designated a national 'School of Creativity' in 2009. Schools of Creativity are funded through Creative Partnerships, a programme that brings creative workers such as artists, architects and scientists into schools to work with teachers to inspire young people and help them learn. Funding is designed to extend the work of the school and to provide additional resources for dissemination. The model of partnership between creative experts and teachers aims to extend professional development and to act as a catalyst for further innovation. An intrinsic part of our approach is a belief in life-long learning for all adults and children in our school community; consequently partnership with creative agents has provided an additional impetus and resource for development. The teachers' learning through increased access to expertise has encouraged them to offer the children new creative learning experiences. It is interesting to note that children across the country who gave evidence to the Cambridge Primary Review often said that they enjoyed subjects where they could be active and use their imagination. They also 'valued those subjects that sparked their curiosity and encouraged them to explore' (p. 213).

The twelve interdependent aims for primary education put forward for discussion by the Cambridge Primary Review, are grouped into aims for well being of individual children, their interaction with others and the wider world and their engagement with learning. Radical transformation of our school over the last seven years has been achieved through equal emphasis on each of these aims. Our vision is for a school where all children and adults can build the confidence to challenge themselves and be challenged, within a supportive team. This culture has been established through the core guiding principles described in *Learning without Limits* (Hart et al 2004): trust, co-agency and inclusion of everybody. Shared certainty that opinions and ideas will be valued and considered by the school community has fostered innovation. As the Review reminds us, 'Dialogue is the antithesis of a state theory of learning, and its antidote' (p. 307).

The story of our school development and our pedagogical stance, which rejects labelling by ability, has been the focus of a research project over the last five years. This story is now being written up for publication in 2011, with the working title *Creating Learning without Limits* (Open University Press). We have not allowed ourselves to be relentlessly driven by national schemes of work or formulaic pedagogy. We have worked in partnership with colleagues from higher education institutions: this partnership has enabled our ideas to be

enriched, extended and validated. The professional courage that characterises our school is born of knowledge about child development and pedagogy. This contrasts significantly with evidence gathered by the Cambridge Primary Review, which found that in many schools there has been a 'striking decline in professional self-confidence' (p. 34). The Review expresses concern that 'pupils will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected to do as they are told' (p. 308).

The excitement generated by a school ethos in which expert teaching staff are given the freedom to respond to ideas means that no day is ever the same as the next. It also means that we work as restless, passionate innovators. Instead of feeling overwhelmed or exhausted by classroom demands, colleagues feel enabled and inspired. Although standards of attainment are very high, our school has never allowed the 'assessment tail' to wag 'the curriculum dog' (p. 208). The following vignettes illustrate how we offer a broad balanced curriculum. The examples seek to reinforce the conclusion of the Cambridge Primary Review that 'the assumption that standards and breadth are incompatible – which has been chiefly fostered by politicians and which many of them still believe – is utterly unfounded' (p. 22).

The introduction of modern language teaching in Key Stage Two presented a new curriculum demand, which required additional subject teaching expertise. Working in partnership with our local secondary school, we were offered an opportunity to send one of our teachers on an immersion visit to France. Our Year Five teacher, Liz Edwards, took part, keen to extend her knowledge of the French language. When she returned to school she built on her experience by planning a term's study of France. Katharine Wheatley, visiting languages teacher, supported her work. This professional cross-phase partnership enabled Liz to gain the confidence and skill to begin teaching French to her class. Inspired, she responded to an invitation from the local twinning organisation to establish a partnership with a school in Franconville, Paris. Children from our school now communicate via web cam with children in Paris on a weekly basis and there have been exchange visits between the schools. The high standard of language learning in our school has been achieved through professional development, access to expert subject teaching support and the imagination and energy of excellent teachers. This example is given as an illustration of the importance of teachers' subject knowledge. The Review concludes: 'It is our view that some of the problems which have been projected onto the curriculum – the claim that since 1989 it has been inherently unmanageable, for example – may be less about the curriculum than the expertise of teachers, and specifically the limits to what a class teacher can reasonably be expected to know and do' (p. 408), and continues: 'while testing may be the elephant in the curriculum, where teaching expertise is concerned the elephant may be subject knowledge. That has hugely significant implications for primary teacher training, the way teachers are deployed in schools and the future of the class teacher system' (p. 418).

Learning about the positive impacts of Forest School in Scandinavia gave us the impetus to develop our school grounds for outdoor learning. Forest School is now offered as a weekly part of the curriculum for all children. One of our teachers, Martyn Vandewalle, has now trained as a Forest School leader and recently began offering courses for families in the local community (Vandewalle, 2010). We have built a forest school hut and decorated it as a potting shed complete with allotment vegetables made from recycled materials. Seminars in the hut are punctuated by squawks and chirrups from the birdsong wall clock. The school is characterised by an irrepressible energy and sense of fun, which combine to promote a positive atmosphere of harmony and self-belief. Future plans include working with our creative agent to design and build an outdoor music garden where children can work together to make music. Members of staff who have expertise in this area will extend the potential for learning through lessons with opportunities for musical composition and performance. The rigour of the process that has ensured high standards across all curriculum subjects comes from building a staff team with expertise that they are able to share with colleagues. 'The message is clear, expect more, teach better, and children will respond' (p. 99).

Our Year Four children are currently writing to great grandparents and members of the local community to gather information about World War II. As I write, they are visiting the local golf course where there is a pillbox that they will explore. They plan to hold a tea party for the local community, catering from their 'rations', and to write an article for the local newspaper. The local museum staff will visit the school next week and the children are excited about handling real artefacts. Their classroom is decorated with models of World War II aircraft (a holiday homework project) and there is a role-play Anderson shelter. This class has a teacher who is passionate about history; his knowledge and enthusiasm will enable the children to understand the importance of historical enquiry.

Children in Year Six work with a science specialist from our staff teaching team and visit our neighbouring secondary school during the year. They conduct experiments wearing lab coats and enjoy the challenge of carrying out investigations and interpreting their findings. Children are not left to find out for themselves but are taught the importance of hypothesis and analysis of findings. Although science lessons are often exciting they are characterised by the 'cognitive challenge [that] is essential in all teaching' (p. 91). Mathematicians throughout the school are similarly supported and celebrated.

Our most ambitious project to date was initiated last year by our deputy headteacher, Roger Billing. Seeking to reinvigorate children's reading, we decided to build a new library space through the renovation of a double decker bus. The project was planned by staff, children and parents and rapidly gained recognition both locally and further afield. We were delighted when Anthony Browne, Children's Laureate, heard about our story bus project and requested a visit in the spring term. This inspired a Picture Book Week in January with every class reading, analysing, enjoying and emulating Browne's work. When

he visited the school in February his status amongst the entire school community had reached that of celebrity. He spent nearly a whole day with us and in each classroom the children could hardly wait to show him their writing and to talk to him about his work. Year Six students had created picture books inspired by Browne, and he joined a session in which Year One and Year Six children shared and discussed their stories in small groups. In the Foundation Unit he came upon a group reading 'Gorilla' with their teacher. The children's excitement was enhanced still further when they realised who had joined them. Paintings of Willy the chimp were proudly shown. Christopher's mother later informed me that her five year old had been too excited to eat breakfast because his favourite author was coming to school.

In the Year Three class, children were busily working on pastel illustrations. Here Browne was overwhelmed by children keen to meet him and to show him their author studies and their surreal art. In Year Five he was given a special 'hot seat' and was asked extensively about his illustrations, characterisation technique, his narrative style, his motivation to write, his sources of inspiration. In the afternoon, Year Four took him outside to the freezing cold playground to show him the bus, their plans for its use as a special story space and their ideas for decoration and refurbishment.

One Year Five boy, Ashley, begged to be allowed to join the Children's Laureate at lunch time so that he could show him his stories. I had not read Ashley's work but glowed with headteacherly pride when the quality of his writing was praised. This particular event is significant because of what happened a few weeks later. The Year Five children were on a coach trip and I overheard them talking excitedly to Ashley with comments such as 'So when are you going to write another one of your stories?' and 'Mr Wellington Boot is so funny!' Suddenly I wished I had a digital voice recorder with me. Was I really overhearing a leisure time conversation between ten year old boys about writing? What was it about Ashley's stories that had inspired this kind of interest and admiration amongst his peers? The following day I asked Ashley if he would come and show me his writing. It emerged that he had been working at home on a series of books about the adventures of a character called Mr Wellington Boot. Each book was about six pages long, with simple, witty illustrations and an enticing story line; the individual books formed part of a sequence of stories. After a little research, I discovered that for the price of sending two teachers out on a one-day course about 'Inspiring boys to write' we could pay for one hundred copies of Ashley's work to be published. *The Amazing Adventures of Mr Wellington Boot* was published in July and includes reviews from the author's peers and a tribute from Anthony Browne. At the opening of our Story Bus, Ashley dealt calmly and professionally with the queues at his book signing and took the opportunity to introduce associated merchandise, such as bookmarks and quizzes.

What does Ashley's story have to tell us about the aims of primary education? Well, firstly, level 5 writing scores are highly sought after, but genuine authorship is rarely achieved through practising SATs tests. Secondly,

creative leadership enables excellence. The decision to buy the bus was innovative and risky. The buying of the bus and our ambitious plans for it captured the imagination of Anthony Browne whose impending visit inspired our Picture Book week. The expertise of teachers in leading children's detailed study of Browne's books provided the impetus for Ashley to write at home. Our decision to invest in Ashley's work raised the importance of writing for every child in the school and we are now inspired to enhance our library with a wide range of books written and illustrated by our children.

The coalition government decided not to proceed with the new national curriculum proposed by the DCSF and has announced that schools should continue with the existing curriculum arrangements during 2010-11; further announcements about curriculum will be forthcoming in the autumn. This interim period provides a critically important opportunity for the teaching profession to embrace the twelve aims for primary education set out in the Review and to provide a school wide approach to leadership and learning that builds on aims for *the individual* (well being, engagement, empowerment, autonomy) for *self, others and the wider world* (encouraging respect and reciprocity, promoting interdependence and sustainability, empowering local, national and global citizenship; celebrating culture and community) for *learning, knowing and doing* (exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense; fostering skill, exciting the imagination, enacting dialogue).

The Cambridge Primary Review is clear that 'it is not testing which raises standards but good teaching' (p. 325) and that 'cognitive challenge is essential in all teaching' (p. 91). If teachers are going to move towards 'a pedagogy of repertoire rather than recipe, and of principle rather than prescription' (p. 511), we need to re-energise the profession. The dissemination phase of the Review now aims to establish and renew partnerships between schools and universities. A national network of university regional centres promoting enquiry-based research within and between schools begins this autumn. This exciting initiative offers a catalyst for professional regeneration allowing us to assert our deeply held principles and beliefs about what primary education is for and how children learn best.

Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, has declared that he trusts the teaching profession. This is our chance to build on that trust. Increased freedom for schools offers us the opportunity to dismiss the false dichotomy between child centred and formal pedagogy. The national network for the Cambridge Primary Review aims to build capacity for equity, empowerment, expertise and excellence within all primary schools in England. The Review makes many specific recommendations. You are warmly invited to join with us to turn recommendation into reality and principle into practice.

References

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