

Esmee Fairbairn Foundation / University of Cambridge Review: *The Primary Review*

UCET Response

Introduction

1. UCET welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of primary education. While we have encouraged individual teacher education institutions to contribute to all aspects of the review, in this submission it is intended, after some general observations, to concentrate on two of the Review themes. The first of these, dealing with Purposes and Values, is of cardinal importance. There is a crucial need to clarify the fundamental purposes of primary education in the contemporary context, and all who have an interest in primary education have an obligation to contribute to that clarification of purpose. Secondly, UCET wishes to offer observations on Theme 6, Settings and Professionals, for that theme directly concerns the work of the institutions it represents, the centres of teacher education in the universities.

General Observations

2. The Primary Review is an extremely important and timely initiative. Over recent decades primary education has been the focus of extensive debate; there have been innumerable government measures to effect improvements of particular aspects of the work of primary schools; and there have been concerns expressed by politicians, professional bodies as well as members of the public about the direction of change. The time to take a considered view of primary education in the round is long overdue, and it is especially significant that the review is independent of government, thus encouraging a debate that can be conducted professionally rather than in accordance with what is politically expedient or a particular ideological orthodoxy. It is therefore gratifying that those responsible for the Review are adopting a participative strategy, and one that encourages all who have an interest in primary education to help to shape the pattern of future provision.

3. The scope of the review is enormous. In our view, the three perspectives of the Review and the 10 Review Themes provide an appropriate way of structuring the lines of enquiry and the disparate bodies of evidence that the Review is bound to generate. It is commendable that several major research studies have been commissioned to inform the Review, for most of the questions posed under the various themes – for example, all of those listed under Theme 2 - Learning and Teaching - are research questions, in the sense that authoritative answers require to issue from systematic enquiry, rather than from individual testimony or anecdote. UCET expects that, in the interests of transparency and in keeping with the spirit of open enquiry to which the reviewers are committed, these various research reports will be published on the Review website.

Purposes and Values

4. We offer five observations concerning the central purposes and values of primary education. Firstly, we hope the Review will reinforce wider purposes of primary education than those which have enjoyed rather too much prominence over the past two decades. For too long, government policy prescribed that the summum bonum of primary education was to cultivate pupils' cognitive achievements. It is now widely acknowledged, even in official circles, that pupils have other needs that the educational service should seek to meet, and that learning is more than a cognitive process, influenced as it is by the context in which it occurs and by what pupils themselves bring to it. The Every Child Matters agenda requires that proper attention is devoted to pupils' wellbeing as well as to

their achievement, and that change of emphasis is marked by the neologism edu-care, (although it should be noted that some members of the educational community, including early years specialists, find that term unconvincing and incapable of conveying the radical measures that are required if we are to respond positively to the needs of children as documented, for example, by the recent UNICEF study).

5. Secondly, we endorse the view that one of the first responsibilities of the primary school, not necessarily the most important and certainly not the only responsibility, is to enable pupils to acquire those skills that are the key to all subsequent learning. We refer here naturally to the foundational skills of reading and writing, of communication in its widest sense, of computation and ICT. However, basic or core skills are too often too narrowly drawn. We urge that throughout the primary school adequate attention is devoted to the nurturing of curiosity, to learning how to learn, and to inculcating the dispositions to enquire, to seek out the reason why of things, to recognise and respect evidence, as well as to be imaginative and creative.

6. Thirdly, we consider that rather more weight should be given in the primary school to the development of pupils' understanding of the various domains of human knowledge. There are those who look upon subject teaching as the transmission of slabs of content, and the subject specialist, operating within a highly restricted pedagogical range, as having no loftier ambition than to crowd pupils' heads with facts. Of course, such characterisations represent an absurd caricature of subject teaching. Properly conceived, however they are configured and inter-related, however they differentiate and coalesce over time, subjects constitute the available ways we have of exploring and interpreting the world of subjective experience, of analysing the social environment, and of making sense of the natural world. They are communities of debate and argumentation, of exploration and criticism. As such, subjects are educational resources of remarkable power, offering unlimited scope for realising an enormous range of educational purposes. Nor are these purposes restricted to what is cognitive or cerebral: subjects nurture the sense of achievement, the growth of self-confidence and self-esteem, enthusiasm and enjoyment and a wide range of other psycho-social objectives. There may be greater scope for deeper subject study in the primary school of tomorrow.

7. Fourthly, the Review should devote special consideration to the experiences of four-year-olds in primary school settings/reception classes, given the wealth of research that there now is to illustrate the extent to which these youngest children in school have suffered an excessively formal and dispiriting curriculum for far too long. Both teachers of this age range and the children themselves have been long neglected in the re-structuring of the Birth-Five Curriculum and the Primary Curriculum. In many ways this year group is an anomaly of English structures. There has been a huge neglect of their rights to learn in ways that are intellectually and developmentally suitable. This group warrants special attention if we are to prevent schools and local authorities from continuing to neglect this age range. After all, it represents the foundation on which all subsequent educational experiences build.

8. Fifthly, England is now a multi-ethnic society. We must continue to recognise and celebrate our rich cultural diversity, taking culture, ethnicity and heritage as starting points for learning in school and classroom. It is also essential to address any sexism and racism that exists in primary schools. However, within the context of cultural diversity we must not lose sight of the values that affirm our membership of a broad and coherent community. It is in the primary school that we must begin to reinforce the values of a cohesive, tolerant, just and inclusive community. These values should be the focus of study and exploration as part of the primary school's formal curriculum and should be implicitly asserted by every primary school's whole mode of operation.

Settings and Professionals

9. In recent years the professional context of teaching has changed significantly. Services for children and young people, including schools, have been integrated into single overarching agencies; children's centres and extended schools, in which the vast majority of the nation's children will be educated in the years ahead, will include a range of professionals, including teachers and various forms of professional support. Tomorrow's teachers will therefore inhabit and expect to flourish in a very different professional world. They will find themselves in schools in which the proportion of non-teaching staff has markedly increased; they will be professionally accountable for their contribution to

improving the outcomes for children, in terms of their basic needs; they will require to display a deeper sensitivity and responsiveness to the wellbeing of learners; they will work in settings which are designed to address a wider range of professional concerns than the schools of yesteryear, and which, far from being insulated from their communities, will draw on wider sources of expertise to support learning; they will have a stronger involvement with parents and other community agencies than in the past; and they will be members of teams, in some cases in leadership roles, in others as partners, in addressing shared professional problems.

10. In the years ahead teachers will therefore need to learn to participate in a culture of information sharing: they are in a position, on the basis of their interactions with children, to contribute to a more rounded picture of a child's needs and how these might be met. In this sense, the relationship between teacher and teaching assistant is bound to involve close and continuing professional interchange about individual learners. What is more, teachers will be able to refer pupils with difficulties that cannot be addressed within the classroom to the many forms of specialist support within the school or readily accessed by the school: the mentor, the learning and behaviour specialist, the speech therapist, the family liaison worker, and the counsellor, all of whom form a professional network of support for pupils' progress and wellbeing. The teacher will operate within that extended professional network.

11. Some fear that the effect of these changes will be to threaten the teacher's professional identity. On the contrary, UCET holds that the effect of these changes will be to reinforce the role of the teacher as the specialist in human development through learning. Under the new dispensation, the educational progress of learners will depend on how resourcefully teachers will be able to draw on their knowledge base, and how readily they will jettison the monocular professional vision that is associated with the blinkered pursuit of the subject, in favour of an approach that fully exploits all the opportunities for cognitive and affective development, and for the nurturing of skill, insight and judgement that subject teaching at its best involves. However, that pedagogical subject knowledge, and the capacity to ensure that it issues in accomplished professional performance, needs to be generalised so that, within the context of subject teaching and beyond it, the teacher is able to induce the disposition to learn, to relate the activities of the classroom to the social realities of the pupils' experience, to structure learning opportunities appropriately, to remove the obstacles that can impede learning, and to energise learners to assume fuller responsibility for, and become more effective managers of, their own learning. And in all of that work teachers will be operating from a professional base in which subject teaching expertise and proficiency in the facilitation of human learning will be mutually reinforcing features, rather than being so antithetical that possession of the one rules out possession of the other.

12. On this analysis, there is a need to re-affirm the importance of subject knowledge in teacher education. However they may evolve in response to advances in human understanding or technology, or to fluctuations of intellectual fashion, these domains of knowledge will continue to constitute the principal vehicles through which the educational objectives of schools and other settings are realised. However, the approach to subject teaching now required calls for a more explicit recognition of the psycho-social and other educational aims that are to be pursued. That is, teachers need to understand, analyse, apply and, importantly, demonstrate in their interactions with learners, just how subjects can be exploited as resources for addressing the needs of children, for equipping them with the tools of autonomous living, for nurturing their affective as well as their cognitive development, and for cultivating a wide range of social and practical skills. They need to learn to relate to pupils in such a way that they can make pupils' personal and social experience the starting point for their exploration of all that subjects have to offer.

13. While, then, we envisage that teaching will continue to offer challenging opportunities which will continue to make it an attractive career, there are ways in which the public perception of teaching might be enhanced. Firstly, in the public statements about the competences that must be demonstrated prior to becoming a teacher, there has been a tendency to represent teaching as a matter of mastering a restricted repertoire of practical techniques and the teacher as a mere technician with little responsibility for exercising professional discretion. Such representations fail to acknowledge that there is a great deal of knowledge that teachers need to acquire if they are to be effective mediators of learning. That knowledge is neither inert nor a mere intellectual embellishment, but represents the kind of cognitive capacity that issues in intelligent action. We make a plea that the

Primary Review makes reference to the need for teachers to exercise critical reflection, for that is at the heart of effective teaching. It needs to be publicly and officially endorsed that becoming a teacher is to be inducted into a community of reflection, enquiry and debate, and that the capacity to engage in such reflection underpins the teacher's classroom decision-making, the evaluation of practice, the adjudication between alternative lines of professional action, and ultimately gives point to the endeavour to facilitate and enrich learning, enabling the teacher to evolve a rationale for his or her classroom and school work by locating it within a broader social and human context.

14. An alternative way of acknowledging the theoretical underpinnings of teaching is to emphasise the extent to which teaching is informed and illuminated by evidence. The capacity to draw on and exploit evidence needs to be nurtured from the beginning of the teacher's professional preparation. All of those who embark on such programmes should be encouraged to see themselves from the outset as researchers of their own practices, with the resourcefulness to adjust their teaching strategies in the light of the evidence they generate about their engagements with learners. We would expect teachers to display a disposition to self-scrutiny and, in addition, to be able to draw on evidence on the most appropriate ways of engendering learning. Indeed, we would expect the most accomplished teachers to contribute to the extension of our understanding about teaching and learning, through the completion of master's degree theses, articles in the professional journals, and in other ways.

15. UCET therefore insists that teachers should have an entitlement to engage in reading, reflection and research, which is vital to their own professional wellbeing and to their effectiveness. There is a danger that teachers may rapidly exhaust their professional capital unless it is continuously replenished by reading, by research, and by engaging with a wider circle of professional contacts than those who teach in the same or a neighbouring school. It is for this reason that UCET has repeatedly urged that teachers should have opportunities to engage in programmes of postgraduate study so that they can bring theoretical perspectives and other forms of evidence to bear on their own professional performance and the effectiveness of the schools in which they work.

16. We have no doubt that the quality of teaching would be enhanced if all teachers had such opportunities for further professional development and that these further qualifications should be formally accredited by the teachers' professional body (the GTCE), as is already the case for teachers in Scotland and is being planned for teachers in Northern Ireland. In UCET's view, it would strengthen the professional standing and attractiveness of teaching if there were more opportunities for teachers to regulate themselves in this way. It appears to be government policy to portray teachers as the mere agents of government policy. Without denying the responsibility of government to satisfy itself with regard to the quality of the teaching workforce, there is a need to strike a more appropriate balance between professional autonomy and public accountability in teaching. We hope that the Review will contribute to that more appropriate balance.

Gordon Kirk, Academic Secretary
14 February 2007