

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

Robin Alexander
University of Cambridge

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

Church House, Westminster,
Tuesday 20 November 2007

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University of Cambridge Faculty of Education
184 Hills Road
Cambridge CB2 8PQ

www.primaryreview.org.uk

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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 understanding of what life is like in today's schools, and an unwavering resolve to achieve real and lasting improvements in the education of the nation's children.

- I -

You'll probably be aware that after a quiet start in October 2006, and a year devoted to the assiduous collecting of evidence, the Primary Review has suddenly and spectacularly 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 ... Children being robbed of their innocence by guns, gangs and celebrities¹...

All this, and much more in similar 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, in 87 witness sessions, talked with children, teachers, headteachers, parents, school governors and a wide range of community representatives.

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 that '*almost* no impact' to the winds:

£500 million literacy drive is flop, say experts.

and even:

Millions wasted on teaching reading.²

Did this headline writer really mean to say that teaching reading is pointless?

On Friday 23rd November we publish another four interim reports in the same series.³ 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

¹ Typical newspaper headlines from 12 October 2007, when this was the main news item. The Primary Review report *Community Soundings: the Primary Review regional witness sessions*, and all other published interim reports from the Review, are available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.

² From 2 November 2007, when again the Review's reports were the main news item. The three reports were on the theme *How Well Are We Doing? Research on standards, quality and assessment in English primary education*. For titles see note 26.

³ Four reports on the theme *Children's Lives and Voices: research on children at home and school*. Details at note 42.

attention, even though they contain findings and implications of considerable significance for both policy and practice.⁴

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 and reduce complex questions to the lowest common denominator of a simple and eye-catching story.

There are of course other kinds of educational discourse. There is the no less public but at least more optimistic of policy announcements. Policies are 'rolled out'; 'tough new' initiatives are announced; 'task forces' are appointed, each - strangely blending military and imperial terminology - with its 'tsar'; 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? '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 less corrosive than the discourse of derision and despair which characterised the 1990s and, I fear, is now being revived.

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 name-calling of Prime Minister's Questions. 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.⁵

This, we hope and firmly intend, is also 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.⁶ 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.⁷ Actually, the debate about Plowden was even more extreme, for after a decade of celebration verging on canonisation Lady Plowden was subjected to a campaign of personal vilification which was utterly shameful. We have been warned.

- II -

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

⁴ An accurate prediction, up to a point. The coverage on 23rd November was less extensive, though no less one-sided.

⁵ Alexander, R.J. (2006) *Education as Dialogue: moral and pedagogical choices for a runaway world*, York: Dialogos; Alexander, R.J. (2006) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk*, York: Dialogos.

⁶ Central Advisory Council for Education (England) (CACE) (1967) *Children and Their Primary Schools* (Plowden Report), London: HMSO.

⁷ Alexander, R.J., Rose, J. and Woodhead, C. (1992) *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools: a discussion paper*, London: DES.

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.⁸

This finding, more or less, was replicated in classroom research.⁹ We then explored that complexity: the mismatch between the Plowden vision and a more mundane reality; energy concentrated on classroom beautification rather than pupils' cognitive empowerment. Another warning.

For reformist aspirations in primary education, then as now, are frequently frustrated or domesticated by habits of thought and practice which have survived not just the 40 years since Plowden but the century which preceded it as well: the generalist classteacher system (from which Plowden encouraged more deviation than many realise - paras 752-777); the separation at age seven of infants and juniors, (now Key Stages 1 and 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 (the divided curriculum and a view of the 'basics' which secured compliance through the written word and avoided the subversive potential of talk). 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.¹⁰

If we understand the history of primary education we understand 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. Thus, for example, 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 have survived the decade of national pedagogic strategies remarkably unchanged: 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.

⁸ Alexander, Rose and Woodhead 1992, para 20.

⁹ Galton, M. and Simon B. (ed) (1980) *Progress and Performance in the Primary Classroom*, London: Routledge; Simon, B. and Willcocks, J. (ed) (1981) *Research and Practice in the Primary Classroom*, London: Routledge; Mortimore, P., Sammons, P. et al (1988) *School Matters: the junior years*, London: Open Books; Alexander, R.J. (1997) *Policy and Practice in Primary Education: local initiative, national agenda*, London: Routledge.

¹⁰ Historical change and continuity in English primary education are explored in Alexander, R.J. (1984) *Primary Teaching*, London: Cassell, and Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford: Blackwell.

¹¹ The evidence on the persistence of the deep structures of traditional classroom interaction in the face of modernising initiatives comes from separate research studies undertaken by Galton, Hargreaves, Alexander, Smith, Hardman, Eke, Mercer and others. The evidence is reviewed in Alexander, R.J. (2006) *Towards Dialogic Teaching*.

¹² Nystrand, M. et al (1997) *Opening Dialogue: understanding the dynamics of learning in the English classroom*, New York: Teachers College Press.

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 witness sessions. 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' 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, and to achieve it the Review has commissioned 30 thematic research literature surveys from some 70 researchers in 23 universities and university departments.¹³ Here, the Primary Review has one big advantage over Plowden: the range and quality of the evidence available to it.

Starting on 2nd November 2007, we began the process of publishing the reports from these research surveys in order to stimulate and inform public discussion. The first group reported on the national and international evidence on standards, testing and assessment. The next group (23rd November 2007) 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 12th October 2007, 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 the headlines of 12th October about children under stress, and was much more nuanced.

¹³ The commissioned research surveys and their authors are listed at www.primaryreview.org.uk .

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 report on it early in 2008.

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 (now the Children, Schools and Families 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 the national agencies is essential. It's not just that dialogue is a precondition for democracy; these bodies also have information which may be every bit as significant for our enquiry as that which is 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 from officialdom. 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.

- IV -

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.¹⁴

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?

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?

- V -

These perspectives demonstrate one of the most striking differences between the Primary Review and Plowden. In as far as 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.

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'¹⁵ - when Margaret Thatcher's government gave early warning of its intention to introduce a national curriculum. In turn, with control of curriculum and testing secured by the 1988 Education Reform Act, the realignment of the relationship of national government, local authorities and schools gave way in 1997 to the current government's apparatus of standards, targets, tests, performance tables and national strategies for the teaching of literacy and numeracy and for primary education as a whole.

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 management of public education began. In the 1960s some 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 the trajectory of change and reform cannot stop there, for educational quality and standards are much more complex notions than their arbiters sometimes admit. Certainly they can no more

¹⁴ The Primary Review perspectives, themes and questions are listed in full at www.primaryreview.org.uk.

¹⁵ The opening sentence of Department for Education and Science (1981) *The School Curriculum*, London: HMSO.

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 fact which one must acknowledge even if one doesn't agree with Trevor Phillips' warning that we are sleepwalking into racial segregation and communal strife¹⁶; or which, in the view of Helena Kennedy's Power Enquiry, has allowed its democratic processes to become dangerously eroded by a combination of public disengagement and political chicanery.¹⁷ Such analyses - and there are others no less telling or contentious - 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 the Primary Review has also published evidence¹⁸ - 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.

Meanwhile, there's also increasing concern, as we have seen, that childhood is being diminished 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ Their timescale is almost identical to ours and in March 2008 we shall be holding a joint conference with them, supported by the General Teaching Council for England, about the important ground shared by our two enquiries and its implications for schools.

Concerns such as these 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?

¹⁶ Speech by Trevor Phillips, the then chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, to a Leicester audience in September 2005. It was widely reported in the press and as widely disputed.

¹⁷ Power Enquiry (2006) *Power to the People: an independent enquiry into Britain's democracy*, York: Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

¹⁸ Whetton, C., Ruddock, G., Twist, L. (2007) *Standards in English Primary Education: the international evidence* (Primary Review Research Survey 4/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

¹⁹ Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) *Children and Young People Today: evidence to support the development of the children's plan*, London: DCSF; UNICEF (2007), *Child Poverty in Perspective: an overview of childhood well being in rich countries*, Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre; Children's Society (2006) *The Good Childhood Enquiry*, www.childrenssociety.org.uk; Primary Review (2007) *Community Soundings: the Primary Review regional witness sessions*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

²⁰ Reference in note 19.

- VI -

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 in October goes on until next March.

First, that Community Soundings report.²¹ 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. For those children and families suffering the decline of community outside school, the schools themselves, as the report noted,

provided unfailingly positive and dynamic settings for children's development and learning, and were highly valued by children, parents and the wider community ... if community was in decline outside the school gates, it was alive and thriving within them.²²

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 what many media did was to attribute to children anxieties which were mostly expressed about them by adults. Why? Presumably because 'UK youngsters stressed and depressed'²³ makes a better story than 'Adults worried about children.' The first is news; the second is a fact of parental life.

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 we published the report:

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....?²⁴

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

²¹ Reference in note 19.

²² *Community Soundings*, pp 2 and 21.

²³ Channel 4 News, 12 October 2007.

²⁴ *Community Soundings*, pp 45-6.

reporting appeared to force the government into a defensive rather than responsive stance. 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.²⁵

All that may be so; but it bears little relation to what the Community Soundings report actually said.

- VII -

Did we fare better with the next publication? This time, on 2nd November 2007, 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.²⁶ 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 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 in an increasingly unstable society; 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 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 path. DCSF had already responded, in the context of the Community Soundings report:

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.²⁷

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

²⁵ DCSF press statement, 12 October 2007.

²⁶ Tymms, P. and Merrill, C. (2007) *Standards and Quality in English Primary Schools Over Time: the national evidence* (Primary Review Research Survey 4/1); Whetton, C., Ruddock, G. and Twist, L. (2007) *Standards in English Primary Education: the international evidence* (Primary Review Research Survey 4/2); Harlen, W. (2007) *The Quality of Learning: assessment alternatives for primary education* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/4), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

²⁷ DCSF press statement to the BBC, 12 October 2007.

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, ministers briskly dismissed the three Primary Review surveys of those 240 sources of published evidence on the grounds that standards in reading, maths and science 'are at their highest levels ever - this is not an opinion, it is fact'.²⁸

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' (DCSF 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 and vision, 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 needed to discuss.

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 information: 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,²⁹ 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.³⁰ (To see what percentages really signify, one should always 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.³¹

And Ofsted's recently-released 2005 report 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*.³²

On that basis, I think we have to accept that the impact of the national strategies on the quality of primary education and the standards of pupil attainment remains a legitimate matter for debate. The 2007 PIRLS

²⁸ Lord Adonis, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, DCSF, on BBC television, 2 November 2007.

²⁹ The CBI skills report, *The Guardian*, 21 August 2006.

³⁰ All data on the 2007 national tests from the DCSF website.

³¹ Earl, L., Watson, M *et al* (2003) *Watching and Learning 3: final report of the external evaluation of England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies*, Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, pp 3 and 8.

³² Ofsted (2005) *The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and the Primary Curriculum*, London: Ofsted, p 2.

report on the standards of reading in English primary schools compared with those of 40 other countries, published after this lecture, confirms this.³³

But a no less important consequence of all this was that once again we lost sight of what really mattered: the need for a re-examination of 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 of research evidence for the Primary Review, contrary to the claim one frequently hears, there's no evidence that testing *of itself* 'drives up standards'.³⁴ It's *good teaching* which drives up standards; testing merely measures them, more or less imperfectly, depending on the tests used.

- VIII -

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 one of our consultants about this after receiving the three research survey reports on standards and assessment, he said that if one bears in mind that we have a wider spread of attainment in English than in maths, and that the wide range in literacy performance also characterises other English-speaking countries,³⁵ 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,³⁶ 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 that straightforward. On the other hand, unlike many other languages, it has shed most of its inflexions, together with all but a basic residue of its declensions and conjugations, so its wayward orthography is offset by a relatively simple and relaxed grammar. So is literacy really a more difficult proposition in English?

What might also have been noted is a major difference in linguistic *context* as well as structure, especially in urban primary schools. In many classrooms there is not just one home language, phonetic Finnish or anarchic English, but many. In England today, English as an alternative language (EAL) hugely complicates the acquisition of literacy.

But even 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

³³ The report on the 2006 international reading literacy survey covers the reading attainment of ten-year olds. It shows that although English primary pupils achieved significantly above the international mean, their performance relative to other countries has declined since 2001, and that they enjoy reading rather less than their contemporaries in other countries (Twist, L., Schagen, I., Hodgson, C. (2007) *Readers and Reading: the national report for England 2006* (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), Slough: NFER.

³⁴ Harlen, W. (2007) *The Quality of Learning: assessment alternatives for primary education* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/4), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

³⁵ Confirmed in both the 2001 and 2006 PIRLS studies.

³⁶ Ofsted (2003) *The Education of Six Year Olds in England, Denmark and Finland: an international comparative study*, London: Ofsted.

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.³⁷

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.³⁸ 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 the Foundation's 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.³⁹

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 succinctly noted, 'is not necessarily in line with statistical risk'. At the same time it found that risk is very unevenly distributed, and that 'In many ways risk stands as a present day proxy for inequality.'⁴⁰ 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 in theory, though anything but simple in practice: reduce social inequality, and you will reduce educational inequality. But we also need to ask how far schooling itself may contribute to the attainment gap. After all, there are many high-performing schools situated in areas which rank high on indicators of inequality and deprivation yet whose pupils do well against the odds of circumstance, 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.⁴¹

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 premised 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.

³⁷ Sammons, P., Sylva, K. *et al* (2007) *Effective Pre-School and Primary Education 3-11 Project (EPPE 3-11): Influences on Children's Attainment and Progress in Key Stage 2: cognitive outcomes in Year 5*, London: University of London Institute of Education.

³⁸ The Equalities Review (2007) *Fairness and Freedom: the final report of the Equalities Review*, Norwich: HMSO.

³⁹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007) *Experiences of Poverty and Disadvantage*, paper synthesising findings from eight reports from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Education and Poverty Programme, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The strong negative correlation between deprivation and attainment is further confirmed in the 2007 PIRLS report on reading attainment among 10-year olds (see note 33).

⁴⁰ Madge, N. and Barker, J. (2007) *Risk and Childhood*, London: RSA.

⁴¹ Sammons, Sylva *et al* (2007), summary p 2. See note 37.

This, too, came up during the Community Soundings, in illuminating meetings with Travellers, seasonal migrants and local authority representatives.

As I say, the fuss which followed the publication of our reports on standards, testing and assessment on 2nd November spectacularly ignored what probably matters 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 fares well on most or all of the inequality indices - health, wellbeing, income, home, parental aspiration, 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.

- IX -

What, then, are the prospects for the next group of research reports, which will be published on 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?⁴² With this week's four reports, and the further four to be published on 14th December,⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

The concept of the 'insufficient child' and his/her family continues to drive encounters between primary schools and other agencies ... [and may] perpetuate a climate of stigma and censure that fails to mesh with the diversity of contemporary family practices.⁴⁶

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

⁴² Robinson, C. and Fielding, M. (2007) *Children and Their Primary Schools: pupils' voices* (Primary Review Research Survey 5/3); Muschamp, Y., Wikeley, F., Ridge, T. and Balarin, M. (2007) *Parenting, Caring and Educating* (Primary Review Research Survey 7/1); Mayall, B. (2007) *Children's Lives Outside School and Their Educational Impact* (Primary Review Research Survey 8/1); Barron, I., Holmes, R., MacLure, M., Runswick-Cole, K. (2007) *Primary Schools and Other Agencies* (Primary Review Research Survey 8/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

⁴³ Goswami, U. and Bryant, P. (2007) *Children's Cognitive Development and Learning* (Primary Review Research Survey 2/1a); Howe, C. and Mercer, N. (2007) *Children's Social Development, Peer Interaction and Classroom Learning* (Primary Review Research Survey 2/1b); Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Farrell, P., Conteh, J. (2007) *Children in Primary Education: demography, culture and inclusion* (Primary Review Research Survey 5/1); Daniels, H. and Porter J. (2007) *Learning Needs and Difficulties Among Children of Primary School Age: definition, identification, provision and issues* (Primary Review Research Survey 5/2); Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

⁴⁴ Quoted from authors' briefing on Primary Review Research Survey 7/1.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Quoted from authors' briefing on Primary Review Research Survey 8/2.

prevents this. Where pupils are listened to on teaching and learning issues, teachers can gain insights into what motivates, helps and hinders their learning.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹

This last assessment, from Professor Berry Mayall at London University's Institute of Education, enshrines an important warning about the role of the state in children's lives outside school. Taking these four reports together, and the 450 published sources of evidence on which between them they have drawn, 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 alongside 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.

- X -

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. It probably sounds ungracious to carp about the headlines when one has benefitted from the publicity; yet 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

⁴⁷ Quoted from authors' briefing on Primary Review Research Survey 5/3.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Quoted from the Prof Mayall's briefing on Primary Review Research Survey 8/1.

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 respect and give full 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 the Review's four main strands of evidence. But nor is engagement constructive if the Review's findings are dismissed out of hand when they raise questions about the government's policies; or if instead of debating both evidence and argument openly and fairly, the discourse descends into the mire of hostile briefing against Primary Review personnel.

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, none has a monopoly of the truth, and the Review has made it clear that it reserves judgement on the matters raised in its interim reports until the full range of assembled evidence has been assessed and compared.

If we don't follow the basic principles of evidential openness, reciprocity and balance we shall be left not with 'evidence-based policy' but the altogether more cynical business of policy-based evidence - and that almost certainly means bad policy. 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.