

Customer Voice Research Primary Curriculum

Sherbert Research



**Research Report No
DCSF-RR104**

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Primary Curriculum*

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Research objectives, sample and methodology

Research was required with parents of primary school aged children to support the drafting and development of a document / guide targeted at them that outlines and explains what the national primary curriculum is and how it will be changing following the Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum. And to help inform and support wider communications to parents (and public) on this issue at the launch and implementation of the new primary curriculum.

More specifically, the research established:

- The concepts, narrative, language (words and phrases) and visuals that parents understand, seem relevant to them and resonate with their experiences of having children at primary school so that the document is user friendly
- The strapline expressing the curriculum aims so that it appeals to parents
- A deeper understanding of what parents believe is the role of primary education
- What parents want their children to have learnt by the time their children have finished primary school;
- Parents' current knowledge and understanding of the primary curriculum
- How parents would like to receive this information
- When in their children's school career would they find this information most useful?
- Effective ways to explain to parents the rationale for changing the primary curriculum

Twelve, one and a quarter hour quads with parents with children aged 4 to 11 years (Reception to Year 6)

- Six with mums
- Six with dads

48 parents in total, from a range of socio-economic backgrounds

Research dates and locations

- Inner city Liverpool, rural Leicestershire, Sheffield, Feltham (suburban London)
- Research took place during the week of February 16th 2009

Research findings

Context

Most parents in this sample seemed to enjoy a happy relationship with their children's primary schools. They described primary schools as an environment where their children are developing a new set of interpersonal skills and most are enjoying learning and school life, particularly in the early years.

Most parents in this sample conceded that primary school today is vastly different to their experiences. Key points of difference were both positive and negative. Their perceptions of positive differences included: the range of subjects; more relaxed teaching style; and differentiation according to children's ability. Respondents' perceptions of negative changes included homework and testing from a young age. Although most parents in this sample understood the reasons behind these changes in practice, they expressed some concern about pressure and work levels for children in primary schools.

In the lead up to their children attending primary school, parents in this sample reported encouraging their children to learn the beginnings of basic number and letter recognition. However, once their children attend primary school, most admitted to stepping back a little from active involvement, preferring the teachers to take on this responsibility. They felt their role was to support their children develop life skills, values and behaviour and they would help with homework and support where necessary.

In this research parents expressed an interest in their child's progress, but this seemed borne out of a desire to see them thriving in their day to day environment and enjoying school rather than focusing on academic achievement. Parents conceded to having little awareness of exactly what their children learn at school.

Parents in this sample admitted to relying on their children's schools for sharing information and keeping them up to date. They said they tended to read everything brought home in the school bag, but they usually unpack it late in the evening, when their children are in bed and they are tired. Therefore mums said they'd prefer material that demanded little extra effort from them. They requested that if material is targeted at them, that it should look reassuringly simple and be written in a way that was brief and easy to understand. They said they would follow up online as necessary, with the school website being their first port of call.

The primary curriculum was not something any parents in this sample had ever thought about. Most parents seemed to know that the 'national curriculum' referred to subjects taught in schools across the country, however, most in this sample did not seem to realise that schools decided for themselves how the curriculum is taught. The majority of parents in this sample were surprised that the curriculum had not been reviewed for ten years. Most assumed it had been changed more often, attributing this perception to technological advancements and new subjects like Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE). No one seemed to have that much interest in the specific details of the curriculum and none had questioned teachers about content covered.

Most mums in this sample said they went to the important meetings at school as necessary, but may not have the confidence to ask questions. Dads tended to attend meetings at school less often. All parents imagined a meeting would be held at school as a follow up to a leaflet in their child's school bag, as a helpful way of explaining any changes to their child's education. Parents in this sample did not seem to hold strong views on the present state of the curriculum or plans for future changes; they simply wanted to know what the changes would be, be given reassurance that any changes would not impact negatively on their children's enjoyment of school and that they would not miss out on core pillars of learning.

Evaluation of concepts words and phrases

There were a number of words and phrases tested that seemed straight to the point and most parents were able to grasp their meaning. These tended to be written in simple, succinct language and avoided jargon. Parents seemed to respond to these statements with interest and agreement. However, there were other statements where parents found the language confusing and contradictory. Sometimes language was unfamiliar, seemed like jargon, loaded with flowery words and examples offered did little to shed light on meaning or precipitate interest in reading the document. Parents tended to feel intimidated by some terminology and slightly confused, which in effect caused them to mentally shutdown as they struggled to engage with the information, making them unlikely to engage with content if receiving it from the Government at home. It is important to note however, that once statements were explained and discussed in the research sessions, parents tended to agree with them in principle but called for simpler and more relevant expression of the ideas.

Most parents in this sample preferred language that spoke about children today. They seemed to disagree with the notion that parents of young children should be thinking about universities and future employment opportunities. They also seemed to resist the idea that children of this age should be contemplating their career at this early stage in their schooling and wanted to avoid projecting too far into the future.

Strapline one was preferred across the sample.

“The three aims of the curriculum for both primary and secondary schools are to help all children become:

- *successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve their full potential*
- *confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; and*
- *responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society.”*

This was because of its bullet point format and clear straightforward language. It was felt to have a more positive tone and encapsulate views held by parents in relation to the curriculum objectives. The phrases liked by parents were: enjoy learning, make progress and achieve safe, healthy lives. The phrases that gave rise to some concern were ‘successful learners’ as they felt it was not inclusive of those children who struggle and ‘responsible citizens’ as many felt that this phrase was “a bit strong” when talking about primary school age children.

The statements that were easily understood included:

Rationale for change:

“Teachers say they need ‘more flexibility’ to teach subjects in different ways and to tailor their teaching to individual children’s needs”. More flexibility was well understood in the context of teaching subjects in different ways.

Most parents tended to agree that teachers should have the freedom to decide how the content is shared with children. Most parents in this sample applauded the reference to ‘individual children’, as it reassured them that no one would be over looked in the classroom.

*“The curriculum needs to change because the world is changing. **The primary curriculum needs to be kept up to date as the world, the education system and the sort of jobs people do change.** Universities and employers tell us that they need young people who are well-educated with good literacy, numeracy and language skills, but also who know how to apply their subject knowledge and their skills in different situations. So we need to make sure the curriculum prepares all children for their futures of further study, university, training and work - by creating real, deep understanding and by enabling them to apply their knowledge as well as giving them a rigorous grounding in individual subjects, the three Rs and ICT.”*

This paragraph was generally understood - but some parents did not seem to know what ICT or the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) meant.

Transition

“The new curriculum will make the steps up to primary and secondary school smoother and easier for children.”

This statement was easily understood and was not met with any argument or question.

Summer born

*“The interim report also recommends that **summer-born children** should start primary school the September after their fourth birthday and some children could start part-time, but that parents should be given better information on the pros and cons of their child starting early so that they can make a choice.”*

Most parents seemed to understand that summer-born meant born in the summer months, but they seemed unsure about the implications for summer-born children as set out in the paragraph. Most appreciated that parents could make a choice but a few felt that personal / financial and childcare circumstances removed some element of choice.

Statements less easily understood

Too many subjects to teach each of them separately

*“We must help primary class teachers solve the ‘**quarts-into-pint-pots**’ problem of teaching twelve subjects, plus religious education, to sufficient depth, in the time available.”*

“Quarts-into-pint-pots” was not a phrase parents were familiar with - at best it comes across as old fashioned and out of touch. Many guessed at the meaning and the outcome had various interpretations although most arrived at the correct definition after some discussion. However, if parents were to read this passage without group input many would be unlikely to understand it

Separate subjects vs. cross-curricular studies (1)

*“Separate subjects are here to stay, but pupils will also strengthen their skills and knowledge through rich **cross-curricular learning**. Children should have more opportunities to use and apply knowledge and skills across the curriculum, e.g. in practical work in mathematics, science and technology. It’s no good teaching young people facts alone if, when faced with a real science problem, they don’t know which formula to apply.”*

For most in this sample, the term 'cross-curricular learning' is unfamiliar and assumed to be jargon. Some elements of the paragraph were confusing and contradictory for parents, and some struggled to understand how separate subjects could also be cross-curricular. Some parents felt using a simpler example may help e.g. The Romans or Dinosaurs as this would resonate with what they know their children have learnt and help make it relevant to them.

Separate subjects vs. cross-curricular studies (2)

"We need a primary curriculum which is challenging and constantly enriches children's understanding, where they can apply knowledge and skills learnt in one subject to better understand another. So, for example, it makes sense to capitalise on local history when studying local geography through researching, say, the reasons early settlers chose particular locations to put down roots."

Most parents found this easier to understand although some felt it was still too wordy. Some did not like the use of the words 'challenges', 'capitalise' and 'enriches' as they felt they were "too strong" when writing about primary school.

Areas of learning

Some understood the term 'Areas of learning' in the context of the research discussion but felt they wouldn't have known it independently. When initially presented with the diagram that portrays key areas of learning offered by the new curriculum, parents appeared puzzled. Mums admitted more openly than dads to struggling to understand the diagram, whereas a few dads would hazard a guess and helped each other decipher its meaning. There was a call for simple annotation that explains the diagram with examples.

Other phrases that parents struggled with: (underlined words represent the language parents found difficult)

"ICT is fundamental to engagement in society", and "the foundations for this engagement must be laid in primary school."

"The new curriculum promotes challenging subject teaching alongside equally challenging cross-curricular studies"

"In the past, ill-defined 'topic work' ruled the primary roost and sold many children short of a good education. The review does not use terms such as 'topics' precisely because of the rudderless curriculum these gave rise to in the past."

With this statement the language was deemed by parents to be flowery and inappropriate and there was a concern that expressing changes from a negative position could upset some parents with older children who have already been through the primary curriculum, as they would question whether their children had been let down by the system.

"It also has to instil children with a love of learning for its own sake and with an insatiable appetite to go on learning." Many did not understand this phrasing, however once it was explained they agreed in principle.

Recommendations

Parents felt that if the Government wants to communicate changes in the primary curriculum to them it would be helpful to:

- Remember the overall context when writing documents targeted at parents, including how they're likely to be reading them, where they're reading them, when and why;
- Express phrases simply and clearly, so that points made are clarified and sweeping statements avoided;
- Tell them how it is now, how it will be different and what this means (to them and their children);
- Use examples relevant to parents - these may help bring the changes to life by resonating with parents' experiences
- Use diagrams to illustrate points but make them easy to understand
- Avoid lapsing into jargon as this causes parents to 'switch off' and disengage completely
- Avoid using dated metaphors and references to expert educationalists and experts who are largely unfamiliar to the average parent of primary school age children
- Keep any documents as brief as possible with web link to follow up if they want more information (school website / Directgov)
- Most imagine finding out about changes to the primary curriculum through their child's school at the beginning of the academic year, when they are in the mindset for receiving new information about their children's school.

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