



... children, their world, their education

NEWS RELEASE

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LATEST PRIMARY REVIEW RESEARCH SURVEYS QUESTION ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HOW YOUNG CHILDREN THINK AND LEARN; AND HOW THEIR SPECIFIC NEEDS ARE IDENTIFIED AND MET

Hard on the heels of the Government's Children's Plan, and contributing to the debate about young children's wellbeing and education, come four further reports specially commissioned for the independent Primary Review, the biggest enquiry into English primary education for forty years. Drawing on over 500 published sources, today's reports assess the latest published research on how young children develop and learn, how their differing needs are identified, and how equitably the education system meets these needs.

The two reports on children's learning stress, for all children, the importance of concentrating on the cognitive, social and linguistic prerequisites of learning during the early and primary years. They show the need for pretend play in the early years, and of structured talk and peer collaboration at the primary stage, neither of which is as well developed in some schools as it needs to be, and of the essential role in children's learning of *all* those with whom they interact - parents, carers and peers as well as teachers. Drawing on recent brain research one of the surveys challenges conventional wisdom about left-brain/right-brain learning and 'learning styles'; and rejects the long-held belief that there are developmental stages in learning to think. The reports have considerable implications for the work of teachers and those who train them.

The other two reports, on diversity, inclusion and special educational needs, underline the considerable diversity of the primary pupil population, yet they also warn against simplistic assumptions about children's differences and needs on the basis of the statistical categories currently in use. They point to inequalities in the system for identifying and meeting children's special educational needs (SEN), with some groups of children more likely to be statemented than others with comparable needs, and considerable inconsistencies in local provision. The reports show that progress towards inclusion in the primary sector is slow, and that teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to support children with SEN in mainstream primary schools.

These reports complement the four published on 23 November which assessed research on children's lives outside school, changing patterns of parenting and caring, and the relationship between schools and other agencies. Together, this fast-growing body of evidence from the Primary Review contributes not just to the Review's own deliberations but also to the current debate about the Government's Children's Plan.

Today's reports have been commissioned as evidence to the Primary Review, which however reserves judgement on their findings pending its assessment of the full range of evidence. They are:

- *Children's Cognitive Development and Learning*, by Usha Goswami and Peter Bryant (Primary Review Research Survey 2/1a).
- *Children's Social Development, Peer Interaction and Classroom Learning*, by Christine Howe and Neil Mercer (Primary Review Research Survey 2/1b).
- *Children in Primary Education: demography, culture, diversity and inclusion*, by Mel Ainscow, Jean Conteh, Alan Dyson and Katherine Runswick-Cole (Primary Review Research Survey 5/1).
- *Learning Needs and Difficulties Among Children of Primary School Age: definition, identification, provision and issues*, by Harry Daniels and Jill Porter (Primary Review Research Survey 5/2).

See next page for selected quotations from these reports and notes on the Primary Review

FOR BRIEFINGS/SUMMARIES AND COPIES OF THE FULL REPORTS: email richard@margrave.co.uk or cd372@cam.ac.uk (before 14 December) or download at www.primaryreview.org.uk (from 9 am on 14 December)

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FURTHER NOTES FOR EDITORS

Selected quotations from the four research reports published today:

- 'Learning in young children is socially mediated. Families, carers, peers and teachers are all important. Even basic perceptual learning mechanisms require social interaction to be effective. This limits the applicability of educational approaches such as e-learning in the early years ... The ways in which teachers talk to children can influence learning, memory, understanding and the motivation to learn.' (Report briefing 2/1a)
- 'The cognitive prerequisites for reading and number depend on language development, perceptual development and spatial development, and can be enhanced by direct teaching ... For reading, the key cognitive prerequisite is phonological awareness ... For number [it] is recognition of numbers as approximations of quantity.' (Report briefing 2/1a)
- 'Talk and social interaction among children play a key role in children's social development and learning ... Research ... supports the view that joint activity among pupils should be an intrinsic and integrated aspect of classroom life.' (Report briefing 2/1b)
- 'Observations in primary classrooms, however, suggest that children seldom have the opportunity to engage in productive social interaction. Group or pair-based activity is rarely organised in ways that will best achieve productive interaction. Teachers may not monitor this kind of activity effectively or prepare children well for it.' (Report briefing 2/1b)
- 'Difference in the primary school population is not so much identified as *constructed* ... The English education system has become rich in official statistics in recent years ... The National Pupil Database (NPD) contains cumulative records for pupils in state schools categorising them in relation to a wide range of characteristics.' (Report briefing 5/1)
- 'The constructions of difference which inform official statistics ... offer an impoverished understanding of difference ... They ignore the complexities of children's lives ... More fluid notions of difference ... emerge from interactions among children, and between them and their teachers, as they work together in particular educational contexts, on particular tasks and priorities.' (Report briefing 5/1)
- Identification of children with special educational needs is resource driven, regulated by statutory guidance, and open to a multiplicity of interpretations and practices across local authorities ... There are inequities within the system in respect to gender, class and ethnicity, and as a result of the influence of single-interest lobby groups certain SEN groups are over-represented. All this adds up to an excessive degree of variation in what should be a consistent and equitable system.' (Report briefing 5/2)
- 'A key issue is the tension between, on the one hand, competitive education markets based on school league tables and narrowly-conceived measures of pupil attainment and, on the other, a broadly-based account of inclusive schooling within the "whole child" remit of local authority children's services. This tension is fundamental to current policy and it needs to be resolved.' (Report briefing 5/2)

The Primary Review interim reports

These four research surveys have been commissioned as expert evidence to the Review. Together with others in an interim report series which will eventually number 32, they are being published now in order to encourage discussion and debate. **However, the Primary Review reserves its own judgement on the matters with which these interim reports deal pending its assessment of the full range of evidence** (see 'focus and evidence' below). Once published, each interim report is available on the Review website both in full and in the form of a 3-4 page briefing. The interim reports are being published in thematic groups, with a single press release covering each group. So far, 12 interim reports have been published, on the Review's regional community soundings (12 October 2007), educational standards and testing (2 November 2007), children's lives outside school (23 November 2007), and these four (14 December 2007). Earlier reports provoked considerable interest and comment. All are available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.

The Primary Review

Based at the University of Cambridge, supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and directed by Professor Robin Alexander, the Primary Review was launched in October 2006 and will run for two years. It aims to gather evidence from a wide range of sources, sift facts from rhetoric, and stimulate debate about the future of this vital phase of education. The Review will culminate in a report containing recommendations for future policy and practice. The most comprehensive such enquiry since the Plowden Report of 1967, the Primary Review is examining how well the current English system of primary education is doing, how it can be improved and how primary schools should respond to the national and global challenges which lie ahead. Along the way, the Review is assessing the impact of government primary education initiatives of the past 20 years.

Focus and evidence

The Review is focusing on ten broad themes: (i) educational purposes and values, (ii) learning and teaching, (iii) curriculum and assessment, (iv) quality and standards, (v) diversity and inclusion, (vi) settings and professionals, (vii) parenting, caring and educating, (viii) children's lives beyond the school, (ix) school structures and phases, (x) educational funding and governance.

The Review draws on four kinds of evidence: (i) written submissions, of which a large number have been received, and on which a report will be issued early in 2008; (ii) oral soundings taken from schools and communities locally (the 'Community Soundings' reported on 12 October 2007) and from national groups and organisations; (iii) systematic searches of official national and international data; (iv) surveys of relevant published research - as in the present case - commissioned from leading national and international experts.

Direction and consultation

The Review is directed by Professor Robin Alexander, Fellow of Wolfson College at the University of Cambridge and Professor of Education Emeritus at the University of Warwick. The work of the Review's Cambridge-based central team is supported by 70 research consultants from universities across the UK and a 20-strong Advisory Committee, chaired by Dame Gillian Pugh, whose members come from both inside and outside education.

The Primary Review's launch last autumn followed nearly three years of planning and consultation involving the government, opposition parties, statutory national educational agencies, teaching unions, and representatives from local authorities, schools, educational research, parents' groups, business and religious communities. The consultations showed strong support for the Review and helped shape the way it is being undertaken. The Review is fully independent, but it is committed to constructive engagement with government, opposition, national agencies and the teaching unions, and it has already had the first of several planned sessions with the House of Commons Education Committee.

FOR FURTHER DETAILS: www.primaryreview.org.uk

MEDIA ENQUIRIES ONLY: Richard Margrave, Primary Review Director of Communications:
T: 01277 214 219 or 07789 692 360 E: richard@margrave.co.uk