CHILDREN IN PRIMARY EDUCATION: DEMOGRAPHY, CULTURE, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Mel Ainscow, University of Manchester; **Jean Conteh,** University of Leeds
Alan Dyson and Frances Gallanaugh, University of Manchester

This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 5/1 *Children in Primary Education: demography, culture, diversity and inclusion* by Mel Ainscow, Jean Conteh, Alan Dyson and Frances Gallannaugh. The report reviews the state of research on the diversity of the English primary school population, and conisders the implications of that research for present and future policy. In doing this, reference is made to official statistics, policy texts, research studies and developments in school-based practice. The particular example of bilingual learners is used to demonstrate alternative ways of understanding and responding to differences between certain individuals and groups of pupils. **The full report, including details of all sources consulted, is available online at www.primaryreview.org.uk.** The report can usefully be read in conjunction with Primary Review Research Reports 5/2 (*Learning Needs and Difficulties Among Children of Primary School Age: definition, identification, provision and issues*), 8/1 (*Children's Lives Outside School and their Educational Impact*) and 8/2 (*Primary Schools and Other Agencies*).

Understanding diversity in the English primary school population: alternative 'constructions' of difference

- On the face of it, understanding pupil diversity seems like a straightforward task of mapping what is known about a range of self-evident differences between children, in terms, say, of attainment, gender, ethnic background, family and social background, interests and aptitudes, and social skills. However, the ways in which apparently self-evident differences between children are understood, the way those differences are explained, and the policy responses which are then deemed appropriate, change over time. They also seem to be rooted in the differing cultures of particular schools and particular national education systems.

- Difference in the primary school population is not so much identified as *constructed*. This means that at different times and in different contexts attention is paid to this or that form of difference; that these forms of difference are understood and explained in particular ways; and that implications for policy and practice flow from these constructions. Rather than merely reporting the apparent differences in the primary population, therefore, it is necessary to describe the ways in which difference is constructed.

- Much of what is known about diversity in the primary population comes currently not from scholarly research *per se*, but from official statistics and the analyses of these statistics. The outcomes of these analyses are used more or less directly to inform policy.

- Set against the official categorisations of pupil diversity are the constructions of critical researchers and those of practitioners – sometimes working with researchers – who are in the situation of having to respond directly to the diverse characteristics of their pupils.

Statistical evidence about pupil diversity: its nature, reliability and validity

- The English education system has become rich in official statistics in recent years. In particular, the National Pupil Database (NPD) contains cumulative records for pupils in state schools, categorising them in relation to a wide range of characteristics, including age, gender, school placement, ethnicity, language status, entitlement to free school meals, attendance, special

educational needs (SEN) status and levels of attainment. In this way, official statistics map out particular dimensions of difference within the primary population.

- Statistical constructions of this kind reveal important aspects of diversity, though they can also conceal the extent to which children with similar characteristics – particular ethnic backgrounds, special educational needs status, or entitlement to free school meals, for instance – tend to cluster together in particular schools and areas. Moreover, the procedures are constrained by the need to support large databases. They focus on data that are easily quantifiable and easy to collect on a large scale. In so doing, they are highly selective, and reduce subtle and complex characteristics among individuals and groups to whatever the most readily-available measures make of them. So, for instance, the complexities of a children's social background are often reduced to whether or not they are entitled to free school meals; and the complexities of children's language competence and usage tend to be reduced to whether or not they have English as an additional language.

Understandings of pupil difference in current educational policy: diversity and attainment

- At a time when government policy has focused on raising standards of attainment, the NPD in particular makes it possible to relate the demographics of the student population to levels of attainment. As a result, diversity is understood primarily in its relation to attainment. A succession of government analyses and policy pronouncements document how some groups (as defined in the databases) do better than others, and set out the interventions that are to be targeted at these groups to bring their attainments to the level of their more favoured peers.

- As a consequence of the importance attached to raising standards of attainment, the official categorisations of difference are never neutral. Belonging to a particular ethnic group, or coming from a particular social background, or, even, having a particular gender, is seen to have a value insofar as it inhibits or facilitates the achievement of particular outcomes. Characteristics with a negative value are cast as obstacles to be overcome through policy and practice interventions.

- Given the tendency for poor outcomes to be associated with particular clusters of characteristics, and for these clusters to be distributed unevenly in geographical terms, this means that particular groups of learners in particular places are likely to be seen as overwhelmed by negative characteristics – as are the schools that serve them.

An impoverished understanding of difference and the alternatives: taking account of complexity, access to resources and the child's active role in social life and learning

- The particular constructions of difference which inform official statistics and policy direct attention towards low achieving or otherwise vulnerable groups who might otherwise be overlooked. However, in more general terms they offer an impoverished understanding of difference.

- In particular: they reinforce the either/or categorisations of official statistics and ignore the complexities of children's lives; they tend to overlook the resources to which those differences give children access; and they overlook the role of the child as agent, making sense of and acting within their worlds.

- As an alternative to this, the work of critical researchers points to very different constructions of difference – not in terms of fixed and evaluative categories, but of much more fluid constructions that are negotiated in particular contexts. So, what children 'are' and how they are 'different' from each other cannot be read off from a list of characteristics. Instead, it emerges from the interactions amongst children, and between them and their teachers, as they work together in particular educational contexts, on particular tasks and priorities. Moreover, each child plays a part in shaping the way that their distinctive and shared characteristics come to be understood.

Implications for policy and practice of fluid rather than fixed understandings of pupil diversity

- ***The development of alternative forms of practice in the complex classroom context.*** On the face of it, more fluid notions of difference are less immediately usable by policy-makers. However, recent collaborations between practitioners and researchers have shown how they might form a

productive basis for policy and practice. What these studies illuminate is the way in which teachers who are required to work within the framework of categorical constructions are nonetheless capable of moving beyond those constructions. As they confront the complexities of their classrooms, they come to understand their pupils in terms other than those proposed by official discourse, and in this way are enabled to invent alternative forms of practice to respond to difference constructed in these ways.

- ***The capacity of teachers to challenge fixed categorical thinking about pupils.*** It is important not to romanticise these developments by assuming that they escape all the dangers of categorisation and deficit thinking, or that they lead to the discovery of entirely new practices. However, they do suggest that, in the right circumstances, primary teachers are able to challenge the categorical and deficit-oriented thinking informing national policy on pupil difference by confronting and reflecting on their own experience of working with children to whom what is routinely on offer does not readily apply.

- ***Central policy support for responses at school and classroom level: dialogue and resources for new thinking about inclusive practice.*** The role of central policy is not to generate fixed categorisations and responses to those categorisations, but to support and facilitate responses that can be made at school and classroom level. In particular, policy can foster a dialogue between the broad generalisations, the overarching aims and the large-scale resources that it can bring to bear on the one hand, and the knowledge of detailed interactions that teachers can bring to the table. Even in its current state, national policy is able to act as a resource in providing teachers with conceptual tools, problematising their existing responses, and offering material resources and guidance frameworks within which their practices can be developed. Needless to say, the more policy pursues inclusive and equitable ends, the more productive it will be in this respect.

- ***Building capacity among schools and teachers: leadership, teacher development, knowledge-sharing, collaboration and professional support.*** Policy has much to do in building the capacity of schools and teachers to respond to diversity. This involves: supporting the development of school leaders who are concerned with diversity and know how to develop their schools in this respect; creating structures so that teachers have access to what practice actually looks like when it is being done differently; conceptualising teacher development in terms other than simply learning how to implement centrally-mandated practices; and finding processes whereby teachers can be enabled to think through their shared experiences so that they can help one another to articulate what they currently do and define what they might like to do.

Conclusion: a policy-practice partnership, balancing trust and support for teachers

Over the past forty years, policy-makers have swung between faith in schools and teachers, and faith in central direction. Between these extremes, however, there is real potential for a partnership between reoriented national policy and practitioners who are once again trusted, though not simply abandoned to their own devices. Within such a partnership, a more productive and equitable set of responses to diversity may well be possible.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Ainscow, M., Conteh, J., Dyson, A. and Gallannaugh, F. (2007) *Children in Primary Education: demography, culture, diversity and inclusion* **(Primary Review Research Survey 5/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-10-0.**

The report is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these deal with the opinion-gathering strands of the Review's evidence base. The remainder report on the thirty surveys of published research which the Review has commissioned from its 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education and to stimulate debate during the period leading up to the publication of the Review's final report in late 2008.

The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Review has ten themes and four strands of evidence (submissions, community and national soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data). The report summarised in this briefing relates to the **Research Survey** strand and the theme **Diversity and Inclusion.**

Enquiries: The Administrator, The Primary Review, Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ. Phone: 01223 767523.

Email: enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk . Website: www.primaryreview.org.uk.

Press enquiries: richard@margrave.co.uk (Richard Margrave, Communications Director).

Note: the views expressed in the Primary Review Research Reports are those of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Primary Review, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge.