



... children, their world, their education

PRIMARY REVIEW
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS
OVERVIEW OF
3/4, 4/1 & 4/2

HOW WELL ARE WE DOING?

Research on standards, quality and assessment
in English primary education

Community soundings, research surveys and other kinds of evidence

On 12 October 2007, the Primary Review published its first interim report, *Community Soundings*, an account of evidence collected by the Review team between January and March 2007 at 87 meetings with teachers, heads, children, parents, school governors and a wide range of community representatives.

The community soundings, along with the national soundings and submissions (on which we have yet to report) elicit professional and public opinion. Complementing this, the Review's research survey and official data search strands investigate evidence from national and international published research and from government departments and national educational agencies. Whereas the soundings and submissions register what people think now, in 2007, the published sources add a vital historical dimension, registering change in educational thinking and practice over time, and revealing the way evidence on particular questions has accumulated.

The next reports to be published in our interim report series arise from the Review's research survey strand. For this, some seventy academics were commissioned to undertake thirty surveys of published research relating to the Review's ten themes, drawing out key findings and implications for future policy and practice.

The research surveys are being released in groups. Each survey yields a detailed and extensively referenced report together with a much shorter briefing. Where necessary, as in the present case, a further briefing provides an overview of the group of reports as a whole.

How well are we doing? Research on standards, quality and assessment

The first group of research surveys to be published consists of three reports:

- *Standards and Quality in English Primary Schools Over Time: the national evidence*, by Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell (Primary Review Research Survey 4/1).
- *Standards in English Primary Education: the international evidence*, by Chris Whetton, Graham Ruddock and Liz Twist (Primary Review Research Survey 4/2).
- *The Quality of Learning: assessment alternatives for primary education*, by Wynne Harlen (Primary Review Research Survey 3/4).

The reports and their accompanying briefings may be downloaded at www.primaryreview.org.uk. Between them, they cover a very substantial body of published evidence: some 240 sources, both official and independent, are referred to.

Research surveys 4/1 and 4/2 examine evidence on the vital question of what has happened to standards of pupil achievement in English primary schools over time. While, in the context of a wider analysis, survey 4/1 focuses on the national evidence on attainment in mathematics and reading over time, survey 4/2 considers such evidence as is available on how English primary pupils compare with those from other countries. The two reports also assess the reliability of the evidence on which claims about national and comparative educational standards are based.

Research survey 3/4 considers assessment *processes* as well as *outcomes*. It reviews research on the forms and systems of assessment through which national standards are monitored, and the uses which are made of assessment results. It compares assessment systems in England with those in several other countries, raises questions about their validity, reliability and impact, and proposes radical changes to the way assessment is conceived, undertaken and used at the primary stage.

Each of these research surveys was independently conceived and undertaken, and for this reason the source of each finding below is clearly specified. Together, the surveys raise important policy questions about procedures for assessing the performance of both pupils and their primary schools which were initiated by the governments of 1979-97 and since then have been consolidated.

Positive findings from the research surveys:

- The essential stability of England's system of primary education over time (4/1).
- Primary pupils' generally positive attitude towards their learning in the tested areas (though this appears to decline with age) (4/1).
- From the national data: modest improvements in standards in primary mathematics over time, especially since 1995 (4/1).
- From the international data: big improvements in primary mathematics from TIMSS 1995 to TIMSS 2003 (4/2).
- From the international data: considerable improvements in primary science by comparison with other countries (4/2).
- From the international data: high standards in reading skills among English primary pupils by comparison with those from other countries (4/2).

Less positively, the surveys reveal:

- The limited impact of the national strategies on reading standards (4/1).
- Gains in reading skills at the expense of pupils' enjoyment of reading (4/2).
- Increases in test-induced stress among primary pupils, and in pressure on their teachers (4/1).
- A narrowing of the primary curriculum in response to the perceived demands of the testing regime (4/1).
- The persistence of a much bigger gap between high and low attaining English pupils in reading, mathematics and science than in many other countries (4/2).

The research surveys raise important methodological and procedural questions, for example:

- The generally low level of dependability of the current national system of assessment in England (3/4).
- The misleading nature of the apparent dramatic improvements at Key Stage 2 between 1995 and 2000 (4/1).
- A tendency to define 'standards' at the primary stage by reference to an excessively narrow range of educational outcomes (4/1).
- The thinness of evidence about how English primary pupils compare with those from other countries (4/2).

The research surveys question tenets of recent policy:

- In terms of standards, the returns on a massive investment of public money in national strategies appear to be negligible for primary literacy and relatively modest for primary numeracy (4/1).
- Evidence does not support the claim that testing of itself 'drives up standards' (3/4).

On the basis of the evidence surveyed the reports propose that:

- Accountability of individual schools should be based not merely on pupil performance in the KS1 and KS2 tests but on the full contribution which the schools make to their pupils' education (research surveys 4/1 and 3/4).
- National standards of pupil achievement should be monitored through regular sample surveys which draw on a large bank of test items, rather than by the KS1 and KS2 tests (research survey 3/4), and the process should be independent (research survey 4/1).
- Greater use should be made of teacher judgement in the summative assessment of individual pupils (research survey 3/4).
- The overall balance of assessment should be shifted away from testing and targets, because properly conceived and conducted formative assessment has greater impact than summative on the quality of pupil learning (research survey 3/4).
- Policies and strategies in the domain of quality and standards should be more closely tied to the research evidence and should be more rigorously trialled and evaluated (research survey 4/1).
- The research agenda relating to quality and standards in primary education should become both broader and more focused; more detailed information is needed on a broader range of educational outcomes (research survey 4/1).

Research surveys 3/4, 4/1 and 4/2 in the context of the Primary Review as a whole

Research Surveys 3/4, 4/1 and 4/2 resonate strongly with concerns about the character and impact of the current system of national assessment at the primary stage which were expressed during the Community Soundings witness sessions (see *Community Soundings*, published 12 October 2007). Yet for the time being the Primary Review reserves judgement on these matters, pending analysis of its full range of evidence. Meanwhile, we trust that these reports will generate constructive discussion together with ideas about future policy and practice which are both workable and educationally sound.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The reports on which this briefing is based:

Tymms, P., Merrell, C. (2007) *Standards and Quality in English Primary Schools Over Time: the national evidence* (Primary Review Research Survey 4/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-01-8.

Whetton, C., Ruddock, G. and Twist, L. (2007) *Standards in English Primary Education: the international evidence* (Primary Review Research Survey 4/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-02-5.

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. ISBN 978-1-906478-03-2.

These reports are available at www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/Interimreports and form part of the Primary Review's series of interim reports. Two of the 32 interim reports 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 reports summarised in this briefing relate to the **Research Survey** strand and the themes **Quality and Standards** (4/1 and 4/2) and **Curriculum and Assessment** (3/4).

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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.