The Primary Review
... children, their world, their education

PRIMARY REVIEW
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS
OVERVIEW OF
2/1a, 2/1b, 5/1, 5/2

CHILDREN IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS
Research on development, learning, diversity and educational needs

This briefing provides an overview of the next group of Primary Review Research Surveys to be published in the Review's series of interim reports. The surveys maintain the focus on children from the research surveys published on 23 November 2007 (*Children's Lives and Voices: research on children at home and school*) but this time look more closely at how children develop and learn, at the diversity of the child population of England's primary schools and at policies and practices in the related areas of inclusion and special educational needs.

The four reports to which this overview provides an introduction are among the thirty research surveys which the Primary Review has commissioned from its team of 70 academic consultants. Together with the Review's search of official data, these investigate published evidence from a wide range of sources: national and international research, government departments and statutory educational agencies. The research surveys and searches of official data are in turn complemented by the many written submissions which the Review has received since its launch in October 2006, and by the various programmes of face-to-face local, regional and national soundings.

The issues covered by these four research reports are complex and in many instances contested, and we would encourage readers to read the full reports and briefings rather than rely on this overview alone. *We would also stress that the views expressed in the reports and briefings are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Primary Review. They have been commissioned as evidence to the Review and the Review reserves judgement on the conclusions they reach pending its assessment of the full range of evidence from all the sources listed above.*

Children in Primary Schools: their development, learning and educational needs.

This group of interim reports includes the following four surveys of published research, specially commissioned for the Primary Review:

- *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 Frances Gallanaugh (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).

The reports and their accompanying briefings may be downloaded at **www.primaryreview.org.uk**. Between them they draw on almost 500 published evidential sources, both official and independent.

Children's cognitive development and learning **(2/1a)** draws on the substantial body of research evidence now available on children's cognitive development from birth to the end of the primary years. This was a major theme of the 1967 Plowden Report and this survey shows how much our

understanding of children's thinking and learning has advanced since then. The report highlights areas of consensus but also challenges some current beliefs about how children learn to think and reason, drawing on recent evidence from neuroscience and cognitive psychology. The authors stress the significance of language and pretend play for primary pupils as well as direct teaching and incremental, multi-sensory learning, and they highlight the importance of praise for effort rather than performance in order to sustain children's motivation for learning. Some of the implications of the research for children's learning experiences in the home as well as the school are considered, especially in the areas of reading and mathematics.

***Children's social development, peer interaction and classroom learning* (2/1b)** focuses on one critical feature identified in the previous report, namely the social dimension of learning. It does so in the context of the classroom, which provides unique opportunities, seldom as fully exploited as they might be, for children to learn from each other. The report identifies the positive contribution that structured pupil-pupil interaction can make not only to learning but also to children's social development. While the educational value of collaborative learning can be clearly demonstrated, evidence also shows that factors and current practices in many primary classrooms militate against productive interaction between children and therefore constrain children's capacity to learn. On the basis of the research surveyed, the report identifies ideal features of peer collaborative learning and their implications for teaching.

***Children in Primary Education: demography, culture, diversity and inclusion* (5/1)** moves beyond the classroom and the school to consider aspects of policy and practice as they relate to forms of provision made for particular individuals and groups of pupils. The report reviews research on the diversity of the English primary school population, by referring to official statistics, policy texts, and published research studies, as well as developments in school-based practice. It considers the implications of this evidence for policy, using the example of bilingual learners to identify alternative ways of understanding and responding to apparent differences between individuals and groups of pupils. Stressing that all accounts of pupil difference are constructs, and that these accounts both change over time and are shaped by the available procedures for defining them, the report warns against the dangers of simplistic categorisation and the deficit thinking that seems to inform policy in respect of pupil difference. The report proposes approaches to capacity building in schools which include an enhanced role for the classroom teacher, based on dialogue and resources in order to generate new thinking about inclusive practice – in short, a policy-practice partnership that balances support and trust for teachers.

***Learning Needs and Difficulties among Children of Primary School Age: definition, identification, provision and issues* (5/2)** reviews the published research on children of primary age with special educational needs (SEN) and gives a particular focus to SEN identification and provision. The report acknowledges the contested nature of special needs and the variety of interpretations that legislation and policy allow, and finds that evaluation of provision is problematic because of the paucity of research. The authors examine the reasons that research can give for the system's relatively slow progress towards a broadly understood inclusive practice in primary schools. They find that, among other features, there are clear inequalities within the system in terms of gender and levels of socio-economic advantage, with some groups of children with comparable abilities and needs more likely than others to be statemented. They also highlight a tension, running through the system from policy to the level of school and classroom practice, between the pursuit of a broad agenda of inclusion and the use of league tables and narrowly-conceived measures of pupil assessment as levers to raise standards.

Although each of these research surveys was independently conceived and undertaken, collectively they raise a number of important general issues. Here are some examples (the numbers refer to the research reports).

Ideas on thinking, learning and difference are complex

• Conceptions of thinking, learning and difference powerfully influence practice in schools, yet the complexity and socially constructed nature of these ideas are not always as well understood as they should be. If schools are to offer educational experiences through which all their pupils can learn and progress, some accepted practices and orthodoxies need to be revisited. For example: children think and reason largely in the same ways as adults, though without their experience, and

popular educational assumptions such as developmental 'stages' and 'learning styles' are now clearly challenged by research data (2/1a); commonly or officially described differences between children are constructs and may be consistent neither with children as they are nor with the ways they learn, and therefore may not provide a reliable basis for teaching (5/1)

Systemic tensions and the need for balance in policy and practice

- Valuable and productive educational ideas such as multi-sensory learning (2/1a), collaborative peer interaction (2/1b) and inclusion (5/2) can stand in tension with narrow definitions of what counts as valid pupil learning outcomes and the apparatus of tests and league tables which drives such definitions (5/2 and - from earlier reports - 3/4).

- Some policies and practices conceptualise learning in ways that generate constraints on the extent to which a school can be flexible and teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to support children identified with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools (5/1, 5/2)

- Teachers should be enabled to balance their attention to national policies and strategies with the need to base their classroom decisions on their unique local knowledge of contexts and children (5/1, 5/2). These judgements should be supported by knowledge and understanding of, for example: children's cognitive development (2/1a); the many contextual factors that affect learning (5/2); the educational value of peer interaction (2/1b); the way teachers themselves talk and interact with children, which can powerfully influence children's conceptions of themselves and their ability to learn (2/1a).

A greater appreciation of children's lives and needs

- Children have complex lives, cultural backgrounds and needs, and these are not readily reducible to simple, statistically or demographically-led categorisations (5/1). The experiences that children have at home and out of school are highly significant to their development and need to be properly understood (5/1 and - from earlier in this series - 8/1).

- A better understanding of how cognitive development occurs should inform both policy and practice. For example: learning is fundamentally a social activity that can be carefully and sensitively scaffolded and enhanced by adults from birth and throughout the primary years (2/1a, 2/1b); language development is fundamental to all learning so talk and collaborative activity and thinking about learning (metacognition) should be an intrinsic and integrated aspect of classroom life (2/1a, 2/1b); children are agents in making sense of their lives, taking action and shaping other people's understanding of their individuality and shared characteristics, so it is important to seek out children's views in terms of both in research and practice (5/1, 5/2, and - from earlier in the series - 5/3).

Persistent inequalities

- There is wide individual variation among children, for example in language skills from an early age.

- Since children's experiences out of school inevitably vary, some children will need more guidance than others in engaging in important educational activities such as reading for enjoyment, using talk in their learning and collaborating with each other in pursuit of common learning goals (2/1a, 2/1b, 5/2).

- Targeting inequality is difficult because statistically-based constructions of diversity can conceal the extent to which children with similar characteristics and educational needs can be found clustered together in particular schools and areas (5/1).

- Educationally relevant differences between children are best identified in their responses in school activities (5/1, 5/2).

FURTHER INFORMATION

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. Separate briefings are available for each report in addition to this briefing overview.

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 **Learning and Teaching** (2/1a and 2/1b), and **Diversity and Inclusion** (5/1 and 5/2).

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