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PRIMARY REVIEW
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS
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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ENGLISH PRIMARY EDUCATION

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 4/3 *Quality Assurance in English Primary Education* by Peter Cunningham and Philip Raymont. The report was commissioned to review procedures for monitoring, assuring and maintaining quality in primary education. The survey provides a broad overview of published research, organised at four overlapping levels:

- national policies and practices
- the role of the local authority
- experiences at school level with regard to teachers, curriculum and the trend towards self-evaluation
- the contribution of international and comparative research.

The report is based on a search of relevant literature in available databases of educational research, and the selection is designed to be representative of the themes listed above in terms of focus and research methodology. **The full report, including details of sources consulted, is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.**

Key findings

1. **Constant change in quality assurance procedures** has proved a great burden and cause for complaint by schools and teachers. While some change is inevitable, to meet shifting cultural and political expectations, the degree and pace of change has been exceptionally great in the last fifteen years.
2. National inspection monitors the schools, and generates data, but less overtly effects change by **influencing curriculum and teaching methods**. The aim is to 'raise standards' but, concealed within the inspection mechanism, the controversial nature of the standards measured and the effects on curriculum are not openly discussed.
3. As a means of achieving accountability for educational expenditure, inspection has been used more or less consciously to **control teachers as well as schools**. Consequently the methods and findings of national inspection have not gone unchallenged and have provoked a good deal of independent research as well as anecdotal evidence and criticism. **[See 2]**
4. Some research has **challenged official conclusions drawn about standards** based on inspection data, while other studies have **revealed unintended side-effects** of inspection such as distortion of the curriculum. **[See 2]**
5. Much published research has focused on teachers and the effect of different patterns of inspection on their **sense of professional fulfilment** and on the maintenance, especially in primary schools, of teachers' broader views of their role and their commitment to the 'whole child'. This negative impact of inspection on the teachers' role and perception of their role rarely receives public discussion.
6. The need to identify and address poor provision and poor teaching is undisputed, but empirical studies have revealed **flaws in the inspection processes** adopted and possibilities for

improvement. Some flaws have been addressed by modifications in the inspection process but these are not widely or openly discussed.

7. An **important role for local authorities** in providing support to schools following poor inspection outcomes has been demonstrated, as have the continuing merits of an advisory role that can be more effectively supplied locally rather than nationally. Well implemented, the Government's School Improvement Partner (SIP) scheme and new software such as Target Tracker could facilitate this. At the same time, local authorities are frequently represented by central government as the problem rather than the solution.
8. One positive development has been **research-based self-evaluation** and the exploration of ways in which this can be combined with rigorous forms of accountability. Valuable insights and possibilities have also derived from comparative international studies.

Implications

- It is important that national education policy on **quality assurance should inspire the maximum possible trust** between politicians, parents and professionals. Monitoring of standards has to be credible and transparent, to provide reliable data, and to be supportive of values that reflect a wide variety of aspirations. The development of a healthy research culture in the field of quality assurance would contribute to informed and reasoned argument about the issues.
- National inspection procedures **need more closely to address equality and equity** in education, monitoring factors such as gender, race, poverty, deprivation and special learning needs for their impact on achievement. This aspect of quality assurance is critical to the reduction of the well-documented gap in learning achievement in English schools.
- National agencies such as Ofsted **need to operate mechanisms for maintaining quality [of inspection]** which are demonstrably effective and efficient. One evident area for further development is proportionate inspection.
- Many research studies point to the tendency of narrowly-focused inspection to distort the curriculum. Inspection should therefore continue to **cover the full range of provision** and/or be alive to this danger where inspection is selective.
- Research indicates that **self-evaluation is one of the most promising ways of combining quality control with professional development**. Local authorities have a key role in making the SIP scheme effective. Primary schools should take advantage of advanced software incorporating both qualitative and quantitative evidence to become mature in self-evaluation and to communicate this to parents at the local level.

Further research

- There is continuing need for research that **critically scrutinises and challenges the principles** on which quality assurance mechanisms are founded.
- Mechanisms of quality assurance in a national education system need to be monitored constantly for their **effectiveness and cost-effectiveness**, and such monitoring needs to be seen to be independent. International and comparative studies will continue to be desirable, not only for comparing levels of attainment but also to provide access to **alternative models of quality assurance**.
- Research is an essential element in the development of **professional autonomy and the self-evaluation** of the processes and outcomes of teaching and learning. ICT has an important role, as does the growing literature on 'pupil voice'. It will be important to examine the impact of more localised modes of quality assurance on children and families, especially in the exercise of school choice.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Cunningham, P. and Raymont, P. (2008) *Quality Assurance in English Primary Education (Primary Review Research Survey 3/4)*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-23-0

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. It is supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. The Review is 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 **Quality and Standards**.

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