



Cambridge Primary Review
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CHILDREN, THEIR VOICES AND THEIR EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL: WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE TELL US?

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This briefing highlights key issues from the report *Children, their Voices and their Experiences of School: what does the evidence tell us?* commissioned from Carol Robinson by the Cambridge Primary Review Trust. The report reviews research literature published since 2007 which has explored children's perceptions and experiences of primary schooling, as recounted by pupils themselves. It builds on and updates 'Children and their Primary Schools: pupils' voices' (Robinson and Fielding, 2007 and 2010), a report commissioned by the Cambridge Primary Review to survey published research on what primary pupils and former pupils think of their experiences of primary schooling. The condition of contemporary childhood and the needs of children were prominent themes in the Cambridge Primary Review, and the Trust has maintained this agenda by making the advancement of children's voice and rights one of its eight priorities.

The influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UNCRC (1989) was ratified by the UK government in 1991, and since this time knowledge and understanding of the 54 Articles within it, and what these mean in terms of children's rights, have slowly attracted public awareness. Of particular significance within educational contexts is the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC which gives children and young people the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, and requires those views to be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. Specific attention is given to the increasing emphasis many schools now place on acknowledging the rights of children and young people as outlined in the UNCRC, and to the recent move by some schools to develop a rights-respecting school ethos.

UNICEF UK has been instrumental in promoting awareness of the UNCRC in schools through the development of its Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA). In excess of 3,200 schools in the UK are currently (2014) registered for the award, and over 2,600 of these are primary schools. The RRSA seeks to put the UNCRC at the heart of a school's ethos, and is based on the premise that schools will use the UNCRC as their values framework.

Pupils' views on the ethos of their primary schools

- Pupils from schools with an embedded rights-respecting ethos reported positive relationships between and among staff and pupils, and considered the introduction of a rights-respecting approach within their schools a significant contributory factor in the development of such relationships. Pupils from these schools also reported feeling valued, cared for, respected and listened to in school.
- Pupils feel a sense of belonging to their school community through the sharing of commonalities such as uniforms, friendships and school activities such as drama, sports, and music.

Pupils' views on learning within their primary schools

- Pupils feel motivated by lessons when work involves active participation and opportunities to be challenged, when there is an appropriate amount of teacher talk, where there is a firm, fair and positive environment, a focus on learning and achieving, plenty of variety of activities, and where activities are of an appropriate length.

- Pupils feel over-pressurised when they are rushed to get through large volumes of work.
- Where schools are actively working to build a rights-respecting ethos, pupils consider that this leads to the development of rights-respecting relationships, which in turn creates a climate conducive to learning.

Pupils' views on classroom organisation

- Pupils consider that learning collaboratively helps them to understand new ideas and to make friends. However, pupils also identify drawbacks to working collaboratively as they find it difficult to concentrate in noisy environments, and they express concerns over complications arising from personality clashes.
- Where pupils are taken out of their mainstream classes for additional support they report mixed feelings: enjoyment for the support they receive coupled with anxiety about missing out on what their fellow pupils are doing in their absence. They also express concerns about having difficulty in catching up on missed work.

Pupils' views on teaching, teachers and teaching assistants within their schools

- Pupils have definite views about what constitutes a 'good' teacher. They have high regard for teachers who are strict and fair, who have good organisational skills, enthusiasm, commitment and excitement for their work, and who makes everyone feel special. They also define as 'good' teachers, those who have subject expertise, provide stretching material and strategies for pupils to improve their work. Pupils dislike teachers who are moody and who shout.
- Pupils are in favour of having teaching assistants (TAs) present in the classroom and like the direct support with classwork these provide. Pupils also talk positively about their experiences of receiving additional support from TAs with specific aspects of work outside the classroom.
- Children value TAs who are caring, happy, helpful, friendly, kind, good at listening and of comparable intelligence to the teacher. TAs should also know how to tell people off without upsetting them too much, and be calm, patient, understanding, funny and not too strict.

Pupils' views on assessment in their primary schools

- Pupils report that national primary science tests helped them to understand the aspects of the subject in which they have made progress, and what they need to do in order to improve.
- However, national tests are also believed to impact negatively on pupils' home lives as they lead to family members applying pressure on pupils to perform well, while time spent on revision prior to tests means they have less time to socialise with their families.
- Formative assessment makes pupils feel more positive and confident about their work. It also helps them to attend more to the quality of their work.
- Pupils dislike traditional pen-and-paper tests and prefer assessment of a more active kind involving presentations, investigations, research, group work and project-based assignments.

Pupils' views on the transition from primary to secondary schools

- Pupils look forward to their transfer from primary to secondary school with a mixture of enthusiasm and anxiety. They look forward to gaining more independence, taking charge of their own equipment, using new and specialised equipment in science and sports lessons, and to making new friends. However, pupils worry about coping with the size of their secondary school, finding their way around, the timetable, the volume of work, and the possibility of bullying from older pupils.
- Pupils who move from a rights-respecting primary school to a non-rights-respecting secondary school report the noticeable lack of collegial relationships and rights-respecting language and behaviour. They also express a preference for schools that are working towards developing a rights-respecting ethos.

Conclusions

- While teachers are responsible for making decisions that are in the best interests of children, they also have a responsibility under Article 12 of the UNCRC to respect children's rights and to listen to, acknowledge and give due weight to their opinions in matters affecting them.
- Pupils from schools with a rights-respecting ethos report positive relationships between and among staff and pupils. They also report classroom conditions conducive to learning, positive attitudes towards diversity, and relatively few incidents of bullying.
- If pupils' perspectives are to be listened to and acted upon, adults in schools need to believe in children's capacity and competence to engage in dialogue and contribute to discussions on their learning and wider school issues.
- Current practices of listening to pupils commonly take the form of a discreet set of initiatives which promote participation within limited aspects of school life. All too often, these initiatives aim to elicit children's opinions to meet performativity requirements rather than enhance their experience of school. There is a need to reconceptualise the roles of pupils and teachers and act on current understandings and evidence about their possibilities and potential.
- When working to develop an ethos of participation in schools, it is vital to engage a diverse range of voices in deliberate dialogue about school-related issues. If marginalised, less powerful voices are eclipsed by the dominant voices then decisions made and actions taken will be based on only partial knowledge. This is an ethical issue which raises questions about how schools support, and in some cases, discourage or exclude particular groups and individuals from participating in school decision-making.
- Many pupils express conflict in their thinking between wanting to lead aspects of their own learning while wanting teachers to take charge of it, as teachers are recognised as more knowledgeable and able to provide the information pupils need in order to succeed in national tests and examinations. But if teachers are to build pedagogic cultures in which pupils are genuinely empowered to act as partners in their own learning, pupils need to be involved in reviewing their own progress and to participate in decisions bearing on the way they learn. If teachers and pupils are to move along this continuum away from total teacher control of pupils' learning towards a greater degree of pupil leadership of their learning, then a serious re-think of pedagogy as well as assessment and school accountability procedures is needed.
- A fundamental shift in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and training is needed to take proper account of the evidence, values and principles underpinning a rights-respecting approach. Training programmes should model these principles, and those entering the profession should understand the provisions of the UNCRC, the value of schools adopting a rights-respecting approach and ways of promoting children's voice and rights in schools.

Further research is needed in relation to:

- Pupils' views of their experiences of primary schooling, including the consideration of those elements of schooling which pupils themselves perceive as important.
- Ways in which schools work to embed the UNCRC into their school ethos, and how educators take account of children's rights within the UNCRC in school policies and practices.
- How primary pupils and teachers can work together to co-produce teaching and learning within schools.
- Pupils' views of how testing can be made more engaging and supportive of learning.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Robinson, C. (2014) *Children, their Voices and their Experiences of School: what does the evidence tell us?* (CPRT Research Survey 2), York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust. ISBN 978-0-9931032-1-6

The report is available at www.cprtrust.org.uk. The website also contains information about other surveys in this series, and those related to the Cambridge Primary Review.

Cambridge Primary Review Trust was established in December 2012 with the aim of consolidating and building on Cambridge Primary Review's evidence, findings and principles. Supported by Pearson Education, it is based at the University of York and chaired by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Trust has eight priorities (equity, voice, community, sustainability, aims, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) and four programmes (policy, research, schools, professional networking and development).

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