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THE TRAJECTORY AND IMPACT OF NATIONAL REFORM: CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT IN ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Dominic Wyse, University of Cambridge

Elaine McCreery and Harry Torrance, Manchester Metropolitan University

This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 3/2, *The trajectory and impact of national reform: curriculum and assessment in English primary schools*, by Dominic Wyse, Elaine McCreery and Harry Torrance. **The full report lists all sources consulted and is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.**

Research field and scope and character of research surveyed

The research report which this briefing summarises concentrates on evidence on reforms to the primary curriculum and its assessment during the period since 1988, with some attention to earlier studies by way of comparison.

Themes, questions and issues covered, and the character of the coverage

The report covers:

- the historical context of recent reforms
- research on teaching and learning in primary classrooms
- pupil assessment and the impact of statutory testing on teaching and learning
- the national curriculum and the national literacy, numeracy and primary strategies
- test result data
- consideration of the impact of the reforms on educational standards

The report surveys a number of large-scale empirical studies, together with several smaller scale studies and reports from Ofsted. The survey is selective rather than comprehensive, though representatively so.

Main findings of the survey

The period from 1988 to 2006 was characterised by increasing government control of the curriculum, the assessment of pupil attainment, and mechanisms for assuring system effectiveness. The establishment of a national curriculum in 1988 was followed by a further tightening of control over the curriculum and teaching methods in primary schools through national testing at Key Stages 1 and 2 and the national literacy, numeracy and primary strategies, the first of which was implemented in 1998. In 2006, this process continued with the requirement that reading should be taught with the use of government-approved methods. The reasoning behind this increased intervention has been that it, combined with a rigorous system of national testing, will raise educational standards.

The evidence on the impact of the various initiatives on standards of pupil attainment is at best equivocal and at worst negative. While test scores have risen since the mid 1990s, this has been achieved at the expense of children's entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum and by the diversion of considerable teaching time to test preparation.

Research evidence on the effects of the reforms shows:

- Some arguable improvement at the system level with respect to the establishment of a more transparent and consistent curriculum with increased teacher planning for coherence and progression.
- Some improvement in the educational standards achieved by many primary pupils.
- A decrease in the overall quality of primary education experienced by pupils because of the narrowing of the curriculum and the intensity of test preparation.

These tendencies are most marked in a series of large scale studies of primary education which found that over a twenty-year period classroom organisation may have changed, and sometimes radically, but teacher-pupil interaction remained teacher-dominated and concerned mainly with factual recall and routine matters, rather than with higher-level interaction of a kind which challenges children's thinking.

There is also evidence that the quality of teacher-pupil interaction has been negatively influenced by the pedagogy of the national strategies introduced from 1998 onwards, and by the statutory testing system and its associated target-setting.

There is evidence, too, that high stakes testing has led to a narrowing of the curriculum.

There is some evidence that teachers have gained a sense of enhanced professionalism following the introduction of the national curriculum and national strategies, because of the need for more collaborative lesson planning and management, but this appears to be counterbalanced by the increased workload and need for test and inspection preparation.

Main findings from the research surveyed:

- Government control of the curriculum and its assessment strongly increased during the period from 1988 to 2007, especially after 1997.
- The quality of teacher-pupil interaction on which much learning depends has shown little sign of improvement and there is some evidence of decline.
- The amount of whole class teaching has increased but without changes to the dominant didactic form of interaction.
- The primary curriculum has become narrowly focused on literacy and numeracy at the expense of the broader curriculum; even time devoted to science, which was one of the success stories of the post-1988 national curriculum, seems to be in marginal decline since 1997.
- The high stakes testing system has had a narrowing effect on the curriculum and has also adversely affected the quality of teacher-pupil interaction. International research from other systems including the USA also demonstrates these effects of high stakes testing.

Divergence in the research surveyed

While there is little disagreement that the primary curriculum, as taught rather than as prescribed, has narrowed to focus on 'the basics' of English and Maths at the expense of other national curriculum subjects, including science, to which primary pupils have a statutory entitlement, there is less consensus about the impact of the reforms on the character of teaching and learning in primary classrooms.

All studies show clearly that change has occurred, and that in 2007 primary classrooms are very different places from the way they were in 1988, or even 1997. However, while one major study reported significant changes in teachers' practice, a much larger number showed that at the deeper levels of classroom interaction there had been little movement away from the cognitively-restricting kind of interaction noted in studies undertaken during the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, the range of teaching methods employed is probably even narrower now than hitherto.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Wyse, D., McCreery, E. and Torrance, H. (2008) *The Trajectory and Impact of National Reform: curriculum and assessment in English primary education* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-22-3.

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 **Curriculum and Assessment**.

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).

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