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PRIMARY REVIEW  
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS  
OVERVIEW OF  
2/4, 6/1, 9/2

## LEARNING AND TEACHING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: PROCESSES AND CONTEXTS

This briefing provides an overview of the three Primary Review Research Reports published on 16 May 2008, the last in the current series of interim reports from the Review. These three reports survey some of the vast body of published research on teaching, with particular reference to the primary phase. They approach this all-important topic from three standpoints:

- the organisational context (Report 9/2)
- the physical context (Report 6/1)
- the teaching process itself (Report 2/4).

The Primary Review has ten themes, one of which is 'learning and teaching' (theme 2), but learning and teaching are synoptic and for that reason we find ourselves linking research surveys which have been commissioned under the themes 'structures and phases' (theme 9) and 'settings and professionals' (theme 6) as well as 'learning and teaching' itself. Context, then, is no less important a determinant of teaching quality than process.

*In drawing attention to issues explored in these reports, we stress that the views they express are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Primary Review, the University of Cambridge or Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The reports have been commissioned as contributions to the wider body of evidence on which the Review's deliberations, conclusions and findings will be based, and judgement on them is reserved pending the Review's assessment of all this material.*

***Classes, Groups and Transitions: structures for teaching and learning (Primary Review Research Report 9/2), by Peter Blatchford, Susan Hallam, Judith Ireson and Peter Kutnick, with Andrea Creech, Institute of Education and King's College, University of London.*** This report, as its title suggests, examines evidence on the school and classroom conditions which frame the core processes of learning and teaching. It considers:

- different grouping arrangements, the factors that influence them and their impact on pupil learning;
- differences between grouping at the level of the class as a whole (for example, setting) and grouping practices within classes;
- the several transition points within the primary phase (year-on-year and between Key Stages);
- transitions from pre-school to primary and primary to secondary, the problems such transitions pose for pupils and how they can be minimised;
- latest evidence on the long-running debate about the impact of class size on learning, teaching and attainment.

***Primary Schools: the built environment (Primary Review Research Report 6/1), by Karl Wall, Julie Dockrell and Nick Peacey, Institute of Education, University of London*** surveys research on the ways in which the physical properties of school buildings and grounds affect children's learning and development at the primary stage and the work of teachers. Read in conjunction with DCSF material relating to the Primary Capital Programme and the *Every Child Matters* outcomes it provides systematic and detailed evidence on optimal conditions for the built environment of teaching and learning in respect of:

- noise and classroom acoustics;
- temperature, humidity, air quality and ventilation;

- natural and artificial classroom lighting.

***Learning and Teaching in Primary Schools: insights from TLRP (Primary Review Research Report 2/4)***, by Mary James and Andrew Pollard, Institute of Education, University of London, is a special synoptic survey of evidence to date from the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), the UK's biggest-ever programme of research on teaching and learning. 19 major projects within the TLRP portfolio relate to the primary phase and key findings from these are grouped within the following themes:

- learning and teaching in specific areas of the curriculum (spelling and number);
- learning and teaching across the curriculum (thinking skills and assessment for learning);
- the use of ICT to enhance learning;
- environments for better learning (pre-school, early years, group work, home and school);
- school conditions for the improvement of teaching and learning (pupil consultation and participation, classroom-focused enquiry and autonomous learning, educational networks, and teacher commitment).

The implications of the various project findings are then synthesised in ten 'principles for effective teaching and learning.'

A selection of extracts from the separate briefings on these three reports follows:

***From Primary Review Research Briefing 9/2, on structures for teaching and learning:*** 'Over the long history of research into school structures and classroom grouping, there has been little transfer from research findings to their widespread classroom application ... There has been a tendency to respond to poor pupil attainment, lack of pro-school attitudes and exclusion by calls for more pupil differentiation (usually by ability/attainment). But this has not generally been associated with positive learning outcomes and it may restrict some pupils' access to significant areas of knowledge and enforce divisions between them ... A great deal of effort has gone into curriculum development and school/classroom structures; much more effort now needs to be directed to the development of classroom-based social pedagogy, including the effective use of pupil grouping ... Directing research at the earliest primary transitions could have longer term implications for pupils' successful negotiation of transition at subsequent stages ... In order for Year 7 teachers to capitalise on their pupils' previous learning, greater standardisation across the primary curriculum and collaboration and continuity between primary clusters and secondary schools are needed ... The age of the pupil is important when considering class size effects. There is a clear case for small classes in the reception year, but research also shows where resources could be further targeted: that is, on achieving classes smaller than 25 for those children with most ground to make up in literacy.'

***From Primary Review Research Briefing 6/1, on the built environment of learning:*** 'The school environment and the organisation of classrooms and offices have perceived and identifiable effects, both positive and negative, on pupils and staff and on the quality of pupil learning ... There is now a growing body of research available to inform the appropriate design and physical organisation of primary schools ... Poor classroom acoustics can create a negative learning environment for many students, especially those with hearing impairments, learning difficulties or for whom English is an additional language ... Excessive noise has a direct effect on test performance and reduces performance in SATs ... Hot, humid classrooms affect concentration on the task in hand and impair children's learning ... In the case of humidity there may be health risks as well ... Poorly controlled classroom ventilation may lead to raised carbon dioxide levels which in turn are associated with a reduction in concentration and the ability to focus on mental tasks ... Adequate lighting levels for particular types of classroom tasks have been precisely identified and defined ... Greater exposure to natural light is positively associated with enhanced pupil performance ... Guidance documents now exist for each of the environmental parameters considered by Research Surevy 6/1. However, bearing in mind that the variables to which they relate need to be considered not just separately but also in combination, they may be difficult to implement.'

***From Primary Review Research Briefing 2/4, on insights from TLRP:*** 'Teaching and learning should engage with the big ideas, key processes, modes of discourse and narratives of subjects so that they understand what constitutes quality and standards in particular domains ... Learners should be encouraged and helped to build relationships and communication with others for learning purposes, in order to assist the mutual construction of knowledge and enhance the achievements of individuals

and groups. Consulting pupils about their learning and giving them a voice is both an expectation and a right ... Informal learning, such as learning out of school, should be recognised as at least as significant as formal learning ... Assessment for learning helps teachers promote learning how to learn by providing ideas for practical strategies that enable pupils to become autonomous learners. However, it is difficult to shift teaching from reliance on specific techniques (the letter of AfL) to practices based on deep principles integrated into the flow of lessons (the spirit of AfL) ... Effective teaching and learning with ICT involves building bridges between 'idiosyncratic' learning, arising from extended periods of individual engagement, and 'intended' learning that often needs to be supported by the teacher ... Effective group work in both primary and secondary schools, and across the curriculum, has a positive effect ... provided that teachers take the trouble to train pupils in the skills of group working ... pupil consultation benefits: pupils, by enhancing engagement with learning ... teachers, by deepening insights into pupils' abilities ... schools, by strengthening policies in substantive ways.'

In the synoptic spirit which has informed this juxtaposition of reports we remind readers of the several other Primary Review research reports, already published, which contribute to the Review's research evidence on learning and teaching, all of them now available on the Primary Review website [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk). They include:

- Report 2/1a (Usha Goswami and Peter Bryant): research on children's cognitive development and learning and implications of this evidence for teaching;
- Report 2/1b (Christine Howe and Neil Mercer): research on children's social development and the key role of pupil-pupil interaction and collaboration in classroom learning;
- Report 5/2 (Harry Daniels and Jill Porter): research on learning needs and difficulties among primary pupils and its implications for teaching;
- Report 3/4 (Wynne Harlen): research on the ways that children's learning can be assessed and the relationship between such assessment and the character and effectiveness of learning and teaching;
- Report 5/3 (Carol Robinson and Michael Fielding): research on pupils' perspectives on learning, teaching and teachers;
- Report 4/3 (Peter Cunningham and Philip Raymont): research on defining, inspecting and assuring quality in teaching;
- Report 3/2 (Dominic Wyse, Elaine McCreery and Harry Torrance): research on the impact of government initiatives, including the National Strategies, on the quality and outcomes of teaching;
- Report 4/1 (Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell): research on the impact of government reforms on standards of pupil attainment.

A further research report on the theme of teaching (Report 2/2, by Robin Alexander and Maurice Galton) is listed in the Primary Review literature but has been delayed. It will either be published later or its findings will be incorporated directly into the Review's final report. Report 2/2 (*Primary Teaching and Teachers*) is likely to cover: teacher thinking and professional knowledge; teacher expertise in relation to primary teaching roles; teacher development; classroom interaction; aspects of teaching not investigated in other reports (such as the use of time); and conceptual and empirical problems of research on teaching in general.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

The reports on which this briefing is based:

Blatchford, P., Hallam, S., Ireson, J. and Kutnick, P., with Creech, A. (2008) *Classes, Groups and Transitions: structures for learning and teaching* (Primary Review Research Survey 9/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-29-2.

Wall, K., Dockrell, J. and Peacey, N. (2008) *Primary Schools: the built environment* (Primary Review Research Survey 6/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-24-7.

James, M. and Pollard, A.J. (2008) *Learning and Teaching in Primary Schools: insights from TLRP* (Primary Review Research Survey 2/4), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-30-8.

These are available at [www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/Interimreports](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/Interimreports) and form part of the Primary Review's series of interim reports. Two of the 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 or early 2009. Separate briefings are available for each report in addition to this 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 to Themes 2, 6 and 9: **Learning and Teaching** (Report 2/4), **Settings and Professionals** (Report 6/1) and **Structures and Phases** (Report 9/2).

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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.**