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CHILDREN AND THEIR PRIMARY SCHOOLS: PUPILS' VOICES

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 5/3 *Children and their Primary Schools: pupils' voices*, by Carol Robinson and Michael Fielding. The report was commissioned to review representative published research on what primary pupils and former pupils think of their primary schooling, focusing in particular on their perceptions of the purposes of primary education and on learning, teaching, the curriculum and assessment. Though 'pupil voice' is a relatively new field of research, and now has a growing literature which is proving increasingly influential in educational policy as well as schools, the field is still relatively under-researched. **The report, which concentrates on findings from British studies, lists all sources consulted and is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.**

Pupils' views of the purposes of their primary schooling

Primary pupils see the purposes of primary schooling in mainly instrumental terms:

- to prepare them for eventually getting a job;
- to prepare them for what is seen as the more serious business of secondary schooling;
- to equip them with the lifeskills they will need when they leave school.

Pupils also view primary schools as a place where they can meet their friends and where there may be, as a consequence, more entertainment than at home. Former school students who are now unemployed view their primary schooling, and schooling in general, as being of little help in equipping them with the skills needed for employment and for the world in which they now find themselves.

Pupils' views on the culture of their primary schools

- Children say that they are normally very happy at primary school. They value and enjoy all subjects, though this enthusiasm tends to wane as they grow older.
- Pupils feel that they must respond to, and obey, the head teacher and teachers without question. However, as children move through the primary school they may begin to question, and sometimes challenge, such authority.

Pupils' views of the organisation of their primary schools

- Pupils, especially those in Key Stage 2, believe themselves to be under pressure to get through a large workload in preparation for SAT tests. They believe that such pressure results in their teachers placing more emphasis on the completion of work than on the understanding of it; and as a consequence they tend to prefer teachers who determine what they should do rather than allow them to exercise choice, on the basis that teachers know what needs to be done to ensure that the large workload is covered.
- Pupils tend to be unhappy with pupil groupings in situations where they are separated from friends; when they have to work with children they find uncongenial and uncooperative; or when the grouping results in too much or too little being demanded of them.

Pupils' views of learning within their primary schools

- Pupils say that they learn from working with peers by giving help and exchanging ideas. However, working with friends can hinder learning if friends talk rather than work.
- Pupils feel motivated when they find the work interesting, challenging, useful and purposeful, when they achieve success, when they gain satisfaction from it and when they are praised for their achievements. Pupils become de-motivated when they find their work boring, repetitive or unchallenging, when they cannot see the purpose of it, or when it involves a large amount of writing and little physical movement.
- In some instances pupils believe that learning in primary schools is almost entirely focused on achieving good grades in SATs.

Pupils' views on teaching within their primary schools

- The expectations placed on pupils by teachers vary according to the status and / or stage of the work, the teacher's views of pupils' capabilities and indeed the teacher's mood.
- Pupils believe that primary teachers are more concerned with the outcome of the tasks set than with learning for its own sake.
- Pupils say that where teachers' intentions are clear and explicit this helps their learning.

Pupils' views on the primary curriculum

- Pupils believe that the Key Stage 1 curriculum is dominated by English/literacy, while Key Stage 2 is dominated by Maths, with English still significant though not quite so prominent. Relatively little time is spent on science until years 5 and 6. In the later stages of Key Stage 2 the curriculum tends to be subject-based and teacher-determined, with a heavy focus on the three National Curriculum core subjects. These are experienced mainly through sitting, listening and writing rather than through more active forms of learning.
- There is no consistent pattern of gender-related curriculum preferences through the six years of primary schooling. In year 6 Maths is the subject most enjoyed by boys and least enjoyed by girls. Boys dislike English more than girls and girls dislike science more than boys - that is, until Year 6, when preferences become more evenly balanced.

Pupils' views on assessment within their primary schools

- In the early years of schooling pupils feel positive about teachers looking at their work because they believe that it will be evaluated sympathetically. However, as children move through the primary school they become less eager to show teachers their work as they are worried about the consequences of 'getting it wrong'.
- Pupils believe that teacher assessment can help teachers to determine whether pupils can remember what they have been taught.
- Some pupils enjoy the challenge of testing, while others become worried, fearful and anxious.
- SATs figure prominently in the minds of pupils in years 2 and 6. Children are generally aware that SAT results constitute some sort of official judgement of them.

Pupils' views on the transfer to secondary school

- Aspects of secondary schooling to which primary pupils look forward include the study in depth of specific subjects and opportunities to extend their friendship groups.
- Aspects of secondary schooling about which primary pupils tend to be anxious include being bullied and picked on, and the demands of the work to be undertaken. Pupils are also concerned about the comparatively large size of secondary schools and the challenge of getting used to different teachers teaching different subjects.

Aspirations and preferences in respect of pupils' own futures

- Primary school children perceive 'work' as what adults do. They also realise that different work attracts different rewards, and that rewards are hierarchically determined.

- Pupils consider that there is a direct link between working hard at school and getting ‘good work’ in the future.

Conclusions

- The *Every Child Matters* (ECM) ideal of equipping learners for life in its broadest sense appears to be at odds with the current emphasis at the primary stage on target setting and academic achievement in a narrow range of subjects. Further consideration needs to be given to what the prime purposes of primary schooling are and how these purposes are conveyed to pupils, families and the communities they serve.
 - Pupils confirm what teachers themselves believe: that primary education is constrained and to a degree determined by the emphasis on SATs and SAT results. Pupils seem particularly concerned about the loss of curriculum breadth as their teachers concentrate on the tested core subjects.
 - Pupils find themselves under considerable pressure to perform well in the national tests. If external accountability is the aim, then alternative systems are needed which gauge the performance of both pupils and schools in rather broader terms.
 - Pupils would like more control over their learning, though towards the top of the primary school the pressure of SATs often prevents this. Where pupils are listened to on teaching and learning issues, teachers can gain insights into what motivates, helps and hinders learning.
 - The move towards listening to the voices of pupils is beginning to affect power relations in primary schools. In some schools pupils are participating more actively in decision-making in a range of areas. In others, however, the voices of pupils remain unheeded, and many schools still have a long way to go if pupils’ perspectives are genuinely to be taken into consideration. Much can be learned from developments in those schools and local authorities where pupil voice is treated seriously. At the same time, consideration must be given to staff apprehension about possible loss of control or erosion of professionalism.
 - How pupils see themselves affects the degree to which they engage in learning. For learning to take place, pupils need to develop an identity as learner as well as child, and fostering such learner identity depends in large measure on the relationship between pupils and their teachers.
 - Further research is needed on the profound changes in teacher–pupil relationships as pupils move from primary to secondary school, on the effect such changes have on the extent to which pupils feel they ‘belong’ to or identify with their secondary schools, on how they see themselves as learners, and on ways of developing and sustaining a strong learner identity.
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FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Robinson, C. and Fielding, M. (2007) *Children and their Primary Schools: pupils' voices* (Primary Review Research Survey 5/3), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-04-9.

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 **Diversity and Inclusion**.

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