



... children, their world, their education

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CHILDREN'S LIVES OUTSIDE SCHOOL AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL IMPACT

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 8/1 *Children's Lives Outside School and Their Educational Impact*. The report focuses on children's out-of-school lives before and during the primary school years. It then examines the impact on children's school activities of their out-of-school lives and learning, and how schools respond to these.

This is a very large field, with many avenues of enquiry. The report provides a broad survey of the available literature, including both qualitative and quantitative research studies as well as other systematic reviews.

Our perspectives on children's lives are shaped by how we view children themselves. Since the Plowden report on primary education of 1967, new thinking in psychology and sociology has identified children as social agents who participate actively both in social relations and their learning. Sociology stresses children's contributions to the division of labour at home and school. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasises children's provision, protection and rights of participation.

Children's lives before they start primary school

Children are active agents in learning, in interaction with siblings and parents. They learn, through apprenticeship, the social, cultural and moral order of their home, and their responsibilities as moral agents. They learn at home that they are persons (rather than pre-social projects). They have more chance at home of being respected as persons than anywhere else. They participate in everyday household and neighbourhood activity. They learn speech that is adequate for communicating in the social environment of the family. They learn the health-related ideas and practices of their home.

These points are true for most children, but there are three main groups of children whose lives may be adversely affected by their living conditions: children in bad housing; 'looked after' children; and children whose parents cannot or do not look after them. The first two groups have been found to do less well at school.

Pre-school care and education

This has been a government priority since 1997, though most expansion has been in the private sector. Full-time daycare places have increased from one place for every nine children, to a place for half of all children. All 3- and 4-year-olds are now entitled to part-time free early education; the Foundation Stage provides guidance on the form that this should take.

Evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study suggests that pre-school education is more effective the sooner children start after the age of two years, when provision is of a high quality, and among disadvantaged groups. The home learning environment is influential. Better quality provision happens where staff have higher qualifications, have leadership skills, where there are long-serving staff, where trained teachers work alongside less qualified staff and where there is strong parental involvement. By Year 5, the EPPE study finds that the quality of the home learning environment and of the early years provision continue to affect children's school attainment. But the

school itself affects attainment too; and good schools compensate for children's poor or no pre-school experience.

An interim report on the impact of Sure Start programmes tentatively suggests that the most disadvantaged families (workless households, teenage mothers and lone mothers) use services less than slightly more advantaged families.

Children's lives out of school during the primary school years

Home and family provide structures and continuity rooted in past time and shared experience. Home is usually a safe place, in contrast to the dangers which children and parents increasingly perceive to be present in public space.

Children value their free time. Home allows for this, but school does not.

Children find that their relations with parents include elements of *dependence*, *interdependence* and *independence*. Over the primary school years, they become increasingly responsible – for self-care, organising their lives, jobs around the house and caring for family members. Parents (especially mothers) and siblings (also in some cases other relatives) provide children with confidants. Relations with siblings and friends vary widely, but help children understand their own identity. Siblings and friends are important for support, defence and fun, especially in public places and at school. Studies suggest that in times of hardship, including divorce and separation, children value being kept informed and participating in decision-making. Relational practices within the family are found to be crucial to children's well-being.

Studies have so far found no clear evidence whether nutrition may affect children's school work. However, researchers claim that a healthy diet and physical activity lead to better health.

Psychological theories have tended to conceptualise children's life at home and school as socialisation. Sociological approaches suggest that children's activity at home and at school should also be identified as work: children may contribute directly to the division of labour.

Little evidence is available across the board on how many children belong to organised groups. There seems to have been a small decline in membership of Woodcraft Folk and of Cubs, with a slight increase in membership of Rainbows. As for English children's leisure, play and sport, their lives have become increasingly scholarised and under adult surveillance in recent years, and their independent mobility in public spaces has diminished. The case for physical activity, including play, rests on long traditions – that it is natural to children and therefore good, and that children learn through play; this latter point has been difficult to prove. It is argued that physical activity has health benefits.

The main modern medium with which children engage is television, but many will also engage with computers in the pre-school and school years. 53 per cent of 9-11 year olds have a mobile phone and home ownership of computers is perhaps at 75 per cent, though poorer families will lack the computer and internet. Family ownership is greater where children are older. Access is mediated by children's and parents' wishes, and family practices. The main sites of access are the home and the school.

The impact of children's out-of-school lives on their school work, and how schools respond

Few studies have engaged with these two issues. On the first, children's success in facing the challenges of making relations with other children, and with the learning agendas of the school, is found to depend on the resources they bring to bear from their home learning. On the second, it is argued that schools should build on children's home learning.

Studies show that variation in children's achievement is profoundly rooted in schools' social attitudes, including racism. The moral order of the school really matters. Parents may vary in what they think schools should do, and some may misunderstand and/or reject school agendas.

Schools have tended to remove routine health care from children's control. Though recent initiatives to promote healthy schools are underway, there is no clear evidence on how far children's knowledge impacts on school agendas, nor whether schools respond to their knowledge.

Over time, children have consistently emphasised what is a key theme in child-adult relations at school: they wish for but generally fail to get respect for themselves as persons. Some schools have developed classrooms as learning communities, as collaborative and mutually respectful environments, where children work together and move forward together. Studies show that children in such settings are happier and that academic results improve.

Studies show that parents and especially mothers are key players in negotiating for their children at school. Parental involvement is found to be key to children's learning.

Proving links between play, physical activity and school performance is difficult, but commentators agree that schools should maintain and promote spaces and times for activity outside classroom-based work. Cultural activities are low on national curriculum agendas but many schools compensate by offering a range of experiences. The government has acknowledged the importance of children's creative engagement with school activities; but has not adequately grappled with the implications for policy and practice.

There is no clear evidence that prior experience of television or computers affects children's work at pre-school. Though systematic reviews indicate no clear evidence that where schools build on children's ICT knowledge this affects literacy learning, practical guides on using ICT across the curriculum provide many examples of good work resulting. Given the ubiquity and importance of ICT, children have a right to computer literacy; and schools have a responsibility to compensate for variations in home ownership in this regard.

Studies have found increased motivation where children's own cultural knowledge is acknowledged at school. Many arguments are proposed in favour of working with children's popular culture in school, in order to develop critical skills. Such work respects children's knowledge. It may also motivate them and build on their knowledge of how stories work. However, many factors militate against school media education: the demands of the National Curriculum; teacher suspicion of the value of media education; resistance to new technologies; the challenge of keeping up with the pace of media development.

Issues for policy, practice and research

- On the basis of both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and what we know about children's development and wellbeing, those responsible for primary education have a duty to respect children's rights at school.
- If children's proper place up to age 5 is in 'early years' provision, then the government should work towards a properly trained workforce across the range of this provision.
- Evidence from modern psychological, sociological and human rights perspectives indicates the importance of building on children's experiential knowledge. The education service should consider how to respond to and build on what children bring to school. For their part, teachers need to balance their duty to the national curriculum with their duty to respect and build on children's knowledge and experience.
- As children's lives become increasingly scholarised, they may wish to defend the home as their private space. Children and parents may also resist current moves to increase 'parental involvement' by turning the home into an educational environment. Parents will have to consider how far to protect their children against scholarisation and how far to help them engage with it. Free time for young children is an important issue here. So too is the need for the education service to accept that many children contribute to the family division of labour and that school work is not the only educationally productive activity in which they engage.
- Parenting classes may improve parenting, but, together with moves to increase parental involvement, they may also increase suspicion of parental practices. Emphasis on the role of parents may inadvertently increase inequalities for children in their access to education.
- Schools have a duty (within the terms of the UNCRC) to work towards democratising their ethos and practices.

- Research Report 8/1 demonstrates the continuing relevance of research on relations between children's out-of-school and school lives.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Mayall, B. (2007) *Children's Lives Outside School and Their Educational Impact* (Primary Review Research Survey 8/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-05-6.

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 **Beyond the School**.

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