



... children, their world, their education

PRIMARY REVIEW  
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS  
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## PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND OTHER AGENCIES

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 8/2 *Primary Schools and Other Agencies*. The report examines the shifting relationships that have obtained over the past four decades between education and the various agencies with which primary school children in the UK may come into contact. It deals primarily with agencies concerned with health, social care and the law. Based on an analysis of key policy texts, legislation and primary research studies, the report describes the changing configurations of provision for children deemed to be in need of support or intervention from agencies beyond the school. It identifies major shifts of policy and practice, culminating in the wide-reaching reforms of the post-1997 Labour governments. **The full report lists all sources consulted and is available at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).**

### The child in need of services

The changing picture of engagement with agencies can be sketched, with inevitable over-simplification, in terms of changing views or constructs of the child in need of services. These include:

- the '*deprived* child' of the 1960s and the Plowden Report, prevented from following her proper developmental path by adverse social circumstances;
- the '*vulnerable* child' of the 1970s and the Maria Colwell Inquiry, in need of protection from threat from inside as well as outside her own family;
- the individualised '*market* child' of the 1980s and early 90s, whose opportunities were shaped for good or ill by the consumerist choices of her parents;
- the '*distributed* child' who is eligible for Labour's integrated services, with her educational and economic potential linked to physical, mental and emotional well-being, protection from harm and neglect, and social and financial stability.

### The 'insufficient' child or family

However, Research Report 8/2 also notes that certain assumptions have persisted across the decades. One such is the view of the *insufficient child* or family as the legitimate target/recipient of services. Even though, as noted, definitions of need have varied over time, children and families who have recourse to agencies have generally been defined as deficient with respect to an idealised, if invisible, 'normal' child or family, whose status and competence are never contested and who is not deemed to be in need of additional support. This ideal family is tacitly assumed to be white, middle class, without 'special' physical or intellectual needs, and built around a heterosexual partnership. This normative construction of the family who does *not* need to engage with agencies is an idealisation that is out of touch with the diversity of contemporary familial and ethnic cultures, and may act as a barrier to uptake and effectiveness. There is evidence to suggest, for instance, that some ethnic minority communities make limited use of mainstream health and social care services, preferring to use voluntary, community and faith-based organisations.

## **The dream of co-ordinated services**

The desire for better co-ordination, collaboration and communication among schools and other service providers has been a goal of policy from the 1960s onwards. Yet, while the 'joined-up' architecture of the most recent reforms represents a significant move towards 'extended' provision and fuller collaboration, its effectiveness in serving the interests of children and providing value for money remains to be demonstrated. Early research suggests that while many families are benefiting from improved access to agencies and resources, barriers to communication and collaboration across the professions involved are deep-seated and resistant to change.

## **Tensions**

Research Report 8/2 notes that policy and practice relating to engagement with statutory services has been fraught with a number of tensions, some of which are the product of particular ideological moments, while others are of a more pervasive nature. These tensions include:

- psychological vs sociological constructions of 'deficit' and remedy;
- an idealised (and enduring) notion of the 'normal' family underpinning service provision vs change and diversity in community and family structures and practices;
- contested images of childhood: children as innocent and suffering vs children as unsocialised and deficient;
- a positive rhetoric of support for children and families vs a negative one of blame;
- policies aimed at sustaining cohesion at community and interagency levels vs the fragmenting tendencies of quasi-markets of parental choice and competition amongst schools and services;
- a commitment to inclusive education vs the differentiating effects of an academically-driven 'standards' agenda.

The ambitious programme of integration of services undertaken since 1997 appears especially susceptible to the ideological and pragmatic tensions inherent in Labour's 'third way' mission with its mix of not always compatible discourses. Neo-liberal commitments to competition, productivity and consumer (ie parental) choice sit alongside a social-democratic ethic of social justice, citizenship, rights and responsibilities, and a compensatory model of social amelioration based on an appeal to 'common norms of conduct' in a 'strong and decent community'.

## **Conclusions**

- The concept of the 'insufficient child' and her/his family continues to drive encounters between primary schools and other agencies.
- More research and development work is needed on the realities of inter-organisational and inter-professional collaboration in the new contexts of integrated provision in order to overcome institutional insularity and continuing conflicts of occupational structures, identities, practices and allegiances.
- The selective targeting of 'insufficient' children and families as recipients of services perpetuates a climate of stigma and censure that fails to mesh with the diversity of contemporary family practices, and may impede uptake and effectiveness.
- The rolling out of programmes nationally may help to de-stigmatise users of services, by 'normalising' service use. However this may be at the cost of diluting the resources available. Moreover, the 'normalising' of service use will need conceptual as well as pragmatic work, since provision is built on deep-seated notions of children as incompetent, credulous, powerless or incomplete.

- The provision and integration of services has become progressively more attuned to social and cultural diversity in terms of poverty, class, ethnicity, disability and sexuality. Nevertheless, there is still a gap between the fluidity and multiplicity of identities, practices and cultures that shape children's lives, and the ability of policy to handle such complexity in providing for children's needs.
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## FURTHER INFORMATION

**The report on which this briefing is based: Barron, I., Holmes, R., MacLure, M. and Runswick-Cole, K. (2007) *Primary Schools and Other Agencies* (Primary Review Research Survey 8/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-07-0.**

The report is available at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://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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**Note: the views expressed in this briefing and in the report which it summarises are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Primary Review, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge**