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THE STRUCTURE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION: ENGLAND AND OTHER COUNTRIES

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 9/1, *The Structure of Primary Education: England and other countries*, by Anna Riggall and Caroline Sharp. The report was commissioned to place the structure and phasing of the English primary education system in international perspective. It considers changes during the years following the 1967 Plowden Report, and draws comparisons between England and five other countries. The full report, including details of sources consulted, is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk. The report covers:

- The current structure of the English primary school system
- Changes in the structure of primary education since 1967
- The structure of primary education in five other countries
- The impact of different school structures on learning and teaching.

This survey defines primary education as the first phase of compulsory education, comparable with key stages 1 and 2 of the system in England (ages four/five to 11). The report includes some information about structures of pre-school provision in the years directly preceding entry to school (ages three and four in England). Structure is defined as that which is decided for the schools by central or local government. The survey does not cover aspects of structure that lie mainly within the school's own control (such as management structures, timetabling, pupil grouping or allocation of resources) which are discussed in Primary Review Research Report 9/2, *Primary Structures and Phases: school level structures, pupil grouping and transition*, to be published later in this series.

Current structure of the English primary school system

The control of education in England lies with the national government and Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), recent successor to the Department of Education and Skills (DfES). However, many responsibilities lie with the Local Authorities (LAs), churches, voluntary bodies, governing bodies of schools and headteachers.

The legal framework in England divides primary schools into three categories:

- *Community schools*, which are established and fully funded by LAs (and are often referred to as 'maintained' schools).
- *Voluntary schools*, which were originally established by voluntary or religious bodies (mainly churches). These bodies still retain some control over the management of these schools although the schools are now largely funded by LAs.
- *Foundation schools*, which are also funded by LAs but are owned by school governing bodies or charitable foundations.

Primary schooling in England accommodates children aged from five to 11 years. Children must start full-time school the school term after they become five, although most children actually start school at age four. There are a number of different school types within primary schooling, including infant schools (typically age four/five to seven); first schools (typically age four/five to eight or nine); junior schools (typically age seven to 11); middle schools (typically age eight or nine to 12/13); primary schools with pre-schools or nurseries (typically age three to 11); and primary schools without pre-

schools or nurseries (typically age four/five to 11). Special schools take children of primary school age, as do schools in the independent sector.

The National Curriculum divides education into 'key stages' of learning. In the primary years these are 'the Early Years Foundation Stage' (EYFS - ages three to five), 'Key Stage 1' (five to seven) and 'Key Stage 2' (seven to 11).

In England, the school year comprises a minimum of 190 teaching days. The school year generally runs from September to July and schools are open five full days per week. Typically the year is divided into three terms, each with a half-term break. Term dates are determined by LAs or governing bodies.

Changes in primary education since 1967

One of the major influences in structural change was the Education Reform Act of 1988. This introduced a national curriculum and national assessment. It also divided education into key stages with different requirements and expectations at each stage. Other changes have been brought about by separate legislation or a combination of economic and social forces.

Key changes in the structure of primary education since the Plowden Report include:

- The introduction of a National Curriculum, national assessment and a national system of school inspection.
- Local financial management of schools.
- The introduction of different kinds of schools, including Foundation schools (funded by LAs but owned by school governing bodies or charitable foundations); and group arrangements such as federations and collaborations.
- An entitlement to free part-time pre-school education for three- and four-year-olds.
- An adjustment to the pattern of the school year, with a trend towards adopting a 'standard' school year.
- A reduction in the school starting age (from five to four years) and a move from three entry points per year towards a system whereby all children in the age-group start school at the beginning of the school year (annual entry to school in the year before statutory school age).
- A reduction in the size of the primary school population by just over 31,000 pupils between 1965 and 2004.
- A reduction of just over 3,000 in the number primary schools between 1965 and 2004, with a disproportionate reduction in the number of small schools (up to 100 pupils). The average size of primary schools during this period increased from 193 to 224 pupils.
- During the period 1997 to 2006 the number of primary schools increased whereas the number of infant, first, combined first and middle, junior and separate middle schools all declined substantially. The current (2008) number of primary schools is 17,300.

The structure of primary education in five other countries

A consideration of the structure of primary education in six countries (England, Scotland, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and New Zealand) reveals considerable variations in its organisation. The following characteristics are apparent.

- There are differences in the extent to which decision-making about educational structures is delegated from central government to national agencies, local areas, or schools themselves
- The length of the school year across the six countries ranges from 176 days in Germany to 200 in the Netherlands.
- There are considerable differences in school starting ages (ranging from four to seven years old).
- Most systems make decisions on school entry based solely on chronological age, although Sweden allows parents to request an early starting age for their child and Germany requires children to be 'ready' for formal schooling.
- Although most countries take children into school at the beginning of the school year, children in New Zealand start school on their fifth birthday.
- Most of the six countries have lowered the age of entry to school in recent years.

- Pre-school provision is commonly available for children from the age of three, although Sweden and the Netherlands make pre-school education available for children under one.
- In most countries, primary schooling lasts for seven or eight years, although Germany has only four years of primary school and Sweden's schools encompass both primary and secondary ages. In four of the six countries, children transfer to secondary school at age 13.
- The average primary school size ranges from 128 in Scotland to 224 in England.

The impact of different school structures on learning and teaching

There is very limited evidence available on the effectiveness or impact of different primary school structures. International comparative studies have not routinely considered the influence of primary school structures on assessment results. There is little evidence to support common-sense assumptions that spending longer in primary schools (due to a lower age of starting school, longer period of primary schooling and/or a longer school year) results in higher attainment. However, it has been suggested that changes to primary school structures have been introduced in response to the findings of these 'high stakes' studies.

Two aspects of school structure have attracted more evaluative consideration in England and elsewhere: school size and the starting age for formal schooling. The available evidence suggests that neither of these has a strong positive impact on children's attainment or progress at school. Nevertheless, school starting age is a contentious issue: proponents of an early start argue that it raises standards; opponents argue that it may detract from other kinds of experience and activity which are important to young children's development and learning.

In any event, research continues to raise questions about the appropriateness of the curriculum, pedagogy and environment offered to children during the early years of English primary schooling, especially to four-year-olds in primary school reception classes.

Conclusions

After examining the research evidence Primary Review Research Report 9/1 concludes that:

- Since the 1967 Plowden Report there have been a number of significant structural changes in English primary education, many of them initiated by or as a consequence of the 1988 Education Reform Act. These have resulted in an increased standardisation of primary school curriculum, teaching, assessment and inspection arrangements across the country.
 - There has been an increased participation in educational provision among younger children. The number of small primary schools has decreased markedly during this period.
 - A comparison of structural features across the six countries included in this study shows considerable variation in such features as age of starting school, length of the school year, average size of school and length of primary schooling. This diversity may be of potential interest to those wishing to consider alternatives to the prevailing structures in primary education in England.
 - While it has been relatively straightforward to collate information about elements of primary school structure, it is much more difficult to find evidence to evaluate their impact and effectiveness. One issue that has received greater attention from researchers is the impact of school starting age on attainment. The assumption that an early school starting age is beneficial for children's later attainment is not well supported in the research and therefore remains open to question, while there are particular concerns about the appropriateness of current provision for four-year-olds in school reception classes.
 - The general lack of evidence on impact does nothing to reduce the relevance of structural issues for children, parents, teachers and decision-makers. Further research may help to illuminate some of these issues. It is, however, inherently challenging to identify the influence of specific structural arrangements when considering the many different factors that influence learning and teaching in primary schools.
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FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Riggall, A and Sharp, C. (2008) *The Structure of Primary Education: England and other countries* (Primary Review Research Survey 9/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-17-9.

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 **Structures and Phases**.

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