

PRIMARY REVIEW
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS
OVERVIEW OF
3/2, 4/3, 10/1, 10/2

GOVERNANCE, FUNDING, REFORM AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Policy frameworks for English primary education

This briefing provides an overview of the four Primary Review Research Reports published on 29 February 2008. The reports relate to three of the Primary Review's ten themes: *Curriculum and Assessment* (theme 3), *Quality and Standards* (theme 4) and *Funding and Governance* (theme 10).

As the subtitle of this overview briefing suggests, what links these four reports is their concern with the framework of policy and legislation within which contemporary primary schooling is set. Three of the reports - and several others in this series which have already been published - note the relatively tight degree of control, compared with many other countries, which the UK government exerts over the day-to-day work of English primary schools. In England, moreover, government policy does not merely frame or facilitate educational practice so much as seek actively to shape it via national initiatives, strategies, curricula, tests, teacher training standards and inspection arrangements. That being so, it is fair to say that in the matter of educational quality the decisions of ministers and the national agencies are in their way no less important than those of teachers themselves. This raises important questions about accountability, culpability and justice in the apportioning of credit and blame for what goes on in the nation's primary schools.

These four Primary Review Research Reports survey a wide range of published evidence - over 200 sources in all - on the following:

- the governance of primary education and the respective roles of national government, local authorities and schools (report 10/2);
- the mechanisms and levels of primary school funding (report 10/1);
- arrangements for inspection and quality assurance, including the roles of local authorities and schools as well as Ofsted (report 4/3);
- specific requirements, strategies and initiatives which have been introduced by central government over the past twenty years in order to exert leverage on the consistency and quality of educational provision in primary schools (report 3/2).

To extend the picture these latest reports from the Primary Review may usefully be read in conjunction with others:

- Reports 3/4, 4/1 and 4/2 on trends in standards of pupil attainment, judged by reference to both national and international data, and the character and impact of the tests through which standards are monitored (2 November 2007);
- Report 8/2 on the formal relationship of schools and other agencies, especially since the 2004 Children's Act (23 November 2007);
- Reports 1/1 and 1/2 on the aims set for primary education by successive governments and how these compare with those of other countries (18 January 2008);
- Reports 9/1 and 3/1 on the statutory frameworks of school starting and transfer ages, stages of schooling, national curriculum requirements and assessment procedures, again using comparisons with other countries (8 February 2008);
- Reports 6/2, 6/3 and 6/4 on the disposition, training, professional development and leadership of the primary school workforce, and recent initiatives aimed at workforce reform (to be published in March 2008).

All these reports, except the three yet to be published, may be downloaded from the Primary Review website, www.primaryreview.org.uk.

The Governance and Administration of English Primary Education, by Maria Balarin and Hugh Lauder (Primary Review Research Report 10/2) reviews the changing nature of educational governance, the new roles of national agencies, local authorities and school governing bodies, and the overall character of policy making under the current dispensation. It notes a fundamental change since 1988, accelerated since 1997, from a system based on local authority control to one where schools are nominally given greater autonomy but within very tight constraints imposed by central government. This system in effect amounts to what the authors call a ‘state theory of learning’. The report also assesses alternative models encouraged by central government, such as Academies and Foundation Schools, and identifies problems resulting from the paradox of ‘decentralised-centralism.’

The Funding of English Primary Education, by Philip Noden and Anne West (Primary Review Research Survey 10/1) reviews evidence on per pupil levels of funding for primary schools, how these have changed in recent years, and how they compare with expenditure on secondary education. It examines the funding assumptions and arrangements that underlie the expenditure and highlights variations between local authorities. It also compares funding and funding differentials between England and other OECD countries, thereby further extending the Review’s now substantial array of international comparative evidence on English primary education. The report judges that the historic primary-secondary funding differential, which has regularly featured in official reports since the 1930s, should once again be re-assessed.

Quality Assurance in English Primary Education, by Peter Cunningham and Philip Raymont (Primary Review Research Survey 4/3) examines evidence on procedures for monitoring, assuring and maintaining quality in primary education at national, local and school levels. Placing its analysis in historical context it considers the developing role of Ofsted since it replaced the old HMI system in 1992, and records some of the controversies which have attended the work of the current body. The report considers the changing part played by local authorities in quality assurance following the reduction in their powers during the 1980s and 1990s, and it considers the possibilities for school and teacher self-evaluation. The report identifies issues which remain problematic despite the many changes: trust between the parties concerned; procedural credibility; reliability of data; distortion in educational provision resulting from excessive selectivity of focus in inspection.

The Trajectory and Impact of National Reform: curriculum and assessment in English primary schools, by Dominic Wyse, Elaine McCreery and Harry Torrance (Primary Review Research Survey 3/2) reviews evidence on major government efforts at reform which have attended the development of English primary education during the past four decades, concentrating particularly on the period since 1988 during which the pace of government-initiated reform in the areas of curriculum, assessment and teaching quickened considerably and effectively extended government control from what is taught (after 1988) to how (since 1997). Examining research and inspection evidence on the impact of the reforms on the quality of classroom practice and standards of pupil attainment (on which see also Primary Review Research Reports 4/1 and 4/2), the report discovers a contested and uncertain picture, with evidence of negative as well as positive impact.

In drawing attention to major issues explored in these four reports, which we do below, we stress that the views expressed in them are the authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Primary Review. The reports have been commissioned as evidence to the Review and the Review reserves judgement on the conclusions they reach pending its assessment of the full range of its evidence.

Partnerships and markets: tensions arising from the current model. Report 10/2 shows how ‘since the arrival of New Labour central control in key areas of educational action has been strengthened within a framework of administrative and fiscal devolution and a growing emphasis on ‘partnerships’ aimed at bridging traditional private/public and market/state divides.’ However, ‘research suggests that the paradoxes involved in this model of “decentralised-centralism” are at the core of the application of government policies. The notion of partnership, too, is problematic and evidence suggests that private involvement has not produced the changes claimed by its advocates.’

Funding for primary education: has it risen and how does England compare with other countries? Report 10/1 uses Government figures to show that ‘in real terms, spending per pupil in primary schools was relatively flat from 1992-98 and even declined during the latter half of that period. Spending then rose markedly from 1998-9 onwards.’ Judged internationally, and ‘taking into account the different costs of goods in different countries, the UK is ranked 12th out of the 29 OECD countries for which comparable data [on primary school funding] are available.’ However, ‘when expenditure is expressed relative to gross domestic product (GDP) per capita the UK appears 18th out of the 29 countries.’

Primary and secondary funding: a continuing anomaly? The primary-secondary funding differential is deeply rooted historically, and is greater than in many other OECD countries. It reflects contrasting ways of organising teaching - the primary generalist class teacher and the secondary subject specialist - and the assumption that these are inevitable, right and permanent. Both the generalist pattern and its associated educational and financial assumptions have been questioned in major national enquiries going back to 1931. Reviewing this matter once again, Report 10/1 concludes: ‘Historically, in England primary schools have been less generously funded than secondary schools. It is by no means self-evident that this should be the case. Government should consider the potential benefits of improving levels of resourcing in the primary phase given that later progress and achievement are highly dependent on earlier attainment.’

A state theory of learning? Report 10/2 shows how since 1997 ‘government has strengthened its hand through what may be called a “state theory of learning” ... based on the idea that the repeated high stakes testing of pupils, a national curriculum, and in primary schools mandated pedagogy in numeracy and literacy, will raise standards ... There is little doubt that the machinery of surveillance and accountability makes it difficult for schools to deviate from focusing on test performance’ Report 3/2 makes a similar point and both surveys raise obvious questions not just about whether the assumptions behind the ‘state theory of learning’ are correct, but whether it is right or sensible for governments to intervene to this extent in the detail of professional practice.

What has been the impact of the reforms on teaching? Reviewing evidence from research, inspection and official evaluations, Report 3/2 offers its assessment of the efficacy of the reforms up to and including the literacy, numeracy and primary strategies and current policy on the teaching of reading. It concludes: ‘All studies show clearly that change has occurred, and that in 2007 primary classrooms are very different places from the way they were in 1988, or even 1997. However, while one major study reported significant changes in teachers’ practice, a much larger number showed that at the deeper levels of classroom interaction there had been little movement away from the cognitively-restricting kinds of interaction noted ... during the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, the range of teaching methods employed is probably narrower now than hitherto.’

Cause, effect and unintended consequence in educational reform: a note of caution. However, Report 10/2 warns that tracing causation between particular reforms and children’s learning and attainment is ‘extremely difficult’ and that ‘there is likely to be a range of tensions and contradictions between and across the various levels of management which have a bearing on outcomes ... One of these tensions concerns the way that head teachers have to deal with multiple external agency requirements and relationships, while also conforming to test performance demands. This is clearly difficult and may explain the significant number of vacancies for headships.’ In any case, Report 10/2 also asks ‘whether these outcomes represent the sum of children’s education or merely their ability in taking tests.’

Inspection: a question of stability and trust. Report 4/3 notes that ‘constant change in quality assurance procedures has proved a great burden and cause for complaint by schools and teachers. While some change is inevitable to meet cultural and political expectations, the degree and pace of change has been exceptionally great in the last fifteen years ... The need to address poor provision and poor teaching is undisputed, but empirical studies have revealed flaws in the [Ofsted] inspection processes and possibilities for improvement. Some flaws have been addressed ... but these are not widely or openly discussed ... It is important that policy on quality assurance should inspire the maximum possible trust between politicians, parents and professionals.’

Inspection: relevance, selectivity and distortion. Report 4/3 argues from the evidence that 'national inspection procedures need more closely to address equality and equity in education, monitoring factors such as gender, race, poverty, deprivation and special learning needs for their impact on achievement' (see also Reports 7/1 and 8/1). The report also warns that 'many research studies point to the tendency of narrowly-focused inspection to distort the curriculum. Inspection should therefore continue to cover the full range of provision and/or be alive to this danger where inspection is selective.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

The reports on which this briefing is based:

Balarin, M. and Lauder, H. (2008) *The Governance and Administration of English Primary Education* (Primary Review Research Survey 10/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-20-9.

Noden, P. and West, A. (2008) *The Funding of English Primary Education* (Primary Review Research Survey 10/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-21-6.

Cunningham, P. and Raymont, P. (2008) *Quality Assurance in English Primary Education* (Primary Review Research Survey 4/3), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-23-0.

Wyse, D., McCreery, E. and Torrance, H. (2008) *The Trajectory and Impact of National Reform: curriculum and assessment in English primary schools* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-22-3.

These reports are available at www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/Interimreports and form part of the Primary Review's series of interim reports. Two of the 32 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. Separate briefings are available for each report in addition to this briefing 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 Theme 3 **Curriculum and Assessment**, Theme 4 **Quality and Standards** and Theme 10 **Funding and Governance**.

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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.