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CLASSES, GROUPS AND TRANSITIONS: STRUCTURES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 9/2 *Classes, Groups and Transitions: structures for teaching and learning*, by Peter Blatchford, Susan Hallam, Judith Ireson and Peter Kutnick, with Andrea Creech. **The full report, including details of sources consulted, is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.** With particular reference to the primary phase, the report surveys published research on:

- different grouping arrangements and the factors influencing them;
- the impact of different grouping arrangements on pupil learning and adjustment;
- differences between grouping at the class and within-class levels, and how these are reflected in pupils' educational attainment, behaviour and attitudes to schooling;
- problems of coherence, transition and continuity within and between phases;
- the educational benefits of small classes.

Research field, and scope and character of research surveyed

We are interested in ways in which pupils are organised into classes and groups within classes, and whether transitions into, within and from the primary sector influence classroom teaching and pupils' progress.

We argue that teaching and learning in schools take place in distinctive social contexts – classes and groups – that need to be recognised and studied carefully because of the effect they have on teaching and learning.

This survey provides an analytical and evaluative account rather than a full summary of the research in these fields. It focuses mainly, but not exclusively, on the UK.

Most important outcomes from the survey

Over the long history of research into school structures and classroom grouping, there has been little transfer from research findings to their widespread classroom application. In particular there is a gap between current practice and the potential for using within-class pupil groupwork to enhance pupil learning.

Pupil grouping strategies operate at two main levels – grouping at the class or school level ('structured/ organisational grouping'), and grouping *within* the classroom. Both levels are important but the latter has more measurable effects on pupil learning.

Structured grouping practices

- Primary schools have tended to resist the introduction of structured ability grouping, preferring within-class groupings. Most primary school children are taught in mixed ability classes with within-class ability groups for some subjects. Setting tends to occur in large schools, in the higher year groups and for those subjects that are subject to national assessment, particularly mathematics.

- The evidence suggests there are no consistent effects of structured ability grouping, such as setting, on attainment, although there can be detrimental effects on social and personal outcomes for some children. The quality of the teaching seems to be the most important factor in determining pupil outcomes, although pupils in the top groups can have an enhanced educational experience.
- While in theory movement between groups is possible, in practice it is frequently restricted, limiting some children's educational experiences, and having adverse long-term effects on some of those children who start in the lowest groups.

Within class grouping

- Recent pressures relating to the curriculum and the classroom context have resulted in an increasingly heavy emphasis on whole class teaching with little room for group work. Pupils are likely to be seated in an arrangement that does not facilitate their learning. Pupils usually sit *in* groups but rarely interact and work *as* groups.
- Groups in classrooms are often formed without a strategic view of their purpose, and there is little support for pupil-pupil interactions within groups. Pupils and teachers are not trained for groupwork, and often have difficulties implementing it.
- Classroom contexts supporting exploratory talk, argumentation and participative discussion need to be encouraged. Effective learning is developed in relationships between teachers, children and peers rather than the individual child.
- When teachers put a long-term commitment into developing groupwork within their classrooms, pupils respond with improved attainment and classroom behaviour.

Transitions

- During their primary school careers children pass through a number of important year-to-year and between Key Stage transition points.
- While moves to coordinate curriculum arrangements and relationships between school and year levels have helped to alleviate some transfer problems, little consideration has been given to a coordinated, systemic view of children's schooling through all its statutory phases.
- In England, unlike most of the rest of Europe, children make the transition from pre-school environments into Reception classes and then just one year later undergo a second transition, to Key Stage 1, which involves having to adapt from a play-based environment to more formal subject and teacher-directed learning.
- Research on the primary to secondary transition provides evidence on ways in which it may be supported by school management teams, teachers, parents and carers. This transition can be a particularly difficult time for disaffected pupils or those who are at risk of exclusion from school.

Class size effects

- Class size effects are most evident with the youngest pupils in schools, particularly in literacy for those pupils with most ground to make up. There can be a negative effect on the attainment of these pupils if they move at the end of the year into larger classes.
- It is possible that smaller classes may be advantageous at later strategic points of transition in students' school lives, for example in the first year of secondary education.
- Class size has been found to affect aspects of teaching and teacher-pupil interaction throughout the primary years.

Main areas of divergence, controversy and consensus in the research surveyed

There has been a tendency to respond to poor school attainment, lack of pro-school attitudes and exclusion by calls for more pupil differentiation (usually by ability/attainment). But this has not generally been associated with positive learning outcomes and it may restrict some pupils' access to significant areas of knowledge and enforce social divisions between them.

Consideration of circumstances that affect the individual child's learning in the classroom tends to focus on structural/organisational effects rather than more immediate pedagogic relationships within the classroom.

Key implications for policy and practice

- Schools need to look more deeply into their current practices regarding differentiation (especially setting and inflexible within-class grouping) and identify best practice on the basis of actual effects on pupil learning rather than rhetoric.
- A great deal of effort has gone into curriculum development and recommendations for school/classroom structures; much more effort now needs to be directed to the consideration and development of classroom-based social pedagogy (including the effective use of pupil groupings).
- Varying pupil within-class grouping for different activities offers more flexibility, facilitates movement between groups structured by ability, and avoids limiting the opportunities for some children.
- Given space and time to use within-class organisation to develop pupils' relational and group working skills, teachers can bring about a transformation in the teaching and learning environment. They can thereby address national concerns about pupils' engagement, classroom behaviour and attitudes to work. These matters deserve to be given a much more central place in educational policy and school practice.
- Directing research and resources at the earliest primary transitions could have long term implications for pupils' successful negotiation of transition at subsequent stages of their school careers.
- In order for Year 7 teachers to capitalize on their pupils' previous learning, greater standardization across the primary curriculum and collaboration and continuity between primary clusters and secondary schools are needed.
- The age of the pupil is important when considering class size effects. There is a clear case for small class sizes in the reception year, but research also shows where resources could be further targeted: that is, on achieving classes smaller than 25 for those children with most ground to make up in literacy. Another important implication is to maintain smaller classes from one year to the next where possible.
- Some have argued that teacher professional development is a better focus for investment than class size reduction, but it is better not to place these in opposition. Rather, professional development should be used to help teachers to exploit the learning opportunities of small classes, while developing strategies for realising their educational objectives in large classes.

Suggestions for future research

Primary Review Research Report 9/2 concludes that:

- Much existing research on classes, groups and transitions is limited by lack of comparability and explanations of causality. In view of the complexity of schools and classrooms, research must be carefully designed to uncover and take account of multiple factors that may interact with, or mediate, the effects of different school structures and pupil grouping arrangements.
- With newer methods of analysis and the handling of data, more large-scale and longitudinal studies should be encouraged, especially since the effects of transitions and grouping practices may be cumulative.
- Research on the impact of different patterns of school and classroom organisation should not focus solely on children's attainment but should consider other outcomes such as their health, wellbeing, social adjustment, motivation and attitudes to learning.
- Research needs to examine how flexibility in classroom groupings can best be developed and its impact on pupils and teachers.
- Longer term studies are needed to examine the transferability of groupworking skills over time and between classes.
- Research on transition has tended to concentrate on primary-secondary transfer. More is needed on the early key transitions and on transition between year groups in primary school.
- Evidence is needed on the proposition that smaller classes may be advantageous at later strategic points of transition in student's school lives, for example in the first year of secondary education.

- There is a need for studies that compare the educational effects of class size reduction with other contextual and organisational interventions, for example reduced pupil teacher ratios, the use of teaching assistants, and the flexibility in classroom grouping argued for here.
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FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Blatchford, P., Hallam, S., Ireson, J. and Kutnick, P., with Creech, A. (2008) *Classes, Groups and Transitions: structures for teaching and learning* (Primary Review Research Survey 9/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-29-2.

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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