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Published: 14 December 2007

- Warning against ethnic, class and gender stereotyping - Children chatting can assist learning - Piaget's approaches to child development are out of date. Targets are pushing teachers into basing their judgments of pupils on race and class rather than their individual abilities.

The latest batch of studies from the Primary Review includes a report by academics from Manchester and Leeds which says that the drive to meet targets for tests and Every Child Matters "outcomes" has altered the relationship between schools and families.

The report, published today, warns that government methods to tackle underachievement with broad solutions based on ethnicity, gender or even learning styles, are too simple to work well, can reinforce prejudice and underestimate children's abilities.

The differences between pupils are now rarely regarded by teachers as "neutral", it says. Instead, children's ethnic group, social background or gender is valued according to how it affects targets.

The report warns this attitude is also starting to affect primary schools' relationships with parents. It says: "Primary schools have long prided themselves on what they see as their positive relationships with parents. Recent policy has begun to cast these relationships in a particular light.

"The evaluative nature of this approach is clear. Some parents - those with 'high aspirations and expectations' - deserve a respectful approach from public services. Other parents - those who lack the 'capacity to parent responsibility' - demand intervention and, ultimately, compulsion."

The study is part of Cambridge University's Primary Review, the largest study of primary education for 40 years. It says the Government has a "categorise and intervene" approach to the differences between children. Data is collected about certain characteristics linked to low attainment. They are identified and an intervention for that group is created.

The advantages of this approach, the researchers say, are that it has enabled teachers to target efforts on individual children in need through, for example, the special educational needs system, or on schools where needy groups are concentrated.

But they say that understanding differences between children is not straightforward and should not be the job of central government.

The researchers point out that because the data collected has to be easy to quantify and to collect, significant factors are overlooked and what is collected is prone to be simplified and can be unreliable. Schools tend to be less diverse than the national picture as variations are not evenly spread.

One example cited is a study in Bradford among children who were labelled as "English as an additional language"; in fact the pupils were second or third generation ethnic minority pupils who used English as their dominant language. They concluded that teachers, who know children as individuals, should be trusted to cope with diverse pupil needs in class while the Government should concentrate on providing resources and training.

"Looking back at the history of primary practice over the past 40 years, it is difficult not to see it in terms of a pendulum swinging first from faith in schools and teachers, to faith in central direction, and now, perhaps, beginning to swing back again," they said.

The significance of regional differences between primary schools was also highlighted in another Primary Review by Bath University, which focused on special educational needs. It found wide variation in the likelihood that a primary pupil would be statemented, with the proportion as high as 3.1 per cent in some areas and as low as 0.3 per cent in others.

The review said that the identification of children with special educational needs was "resource driven" and "open to a multiplicity of interpretations and practices across local authorities and geographical regions".

Boys were more likely to have their special needs recognised and supported than girls, regardless of whether they had a statement. Children from middle-class homes were also more likely to receive support.

"There are inequities within the system with respect to gender, class and ethnicity, and as a result of the influence of single-interest lobby groups, certain SEN groups are over-represented," it said.

The study found that the number of pupils with special needs in mainstream primaries was dropping, despite the Government's stated goal of inclusion.

The proportion of children with statements who have been placed in special schools has increased by 0.5 per cent during the past five years while the level of statementing in primaries has remained unchanged.

The proportion of children who have special needs but no statement has increased steadily to almost a fifth of the primary population. The study also found that methods used to teach pupils with special needs are often effective for all pupils.

Patrick Draper, head of Bentfield Primary in Essex, has several pupils with severe physical disabilities or learning difficulties. But the facilities provided for these children, such as a multi-sensory room and time-out quiet areas, are used by all pupils.

"It's a continuum, isn't it?" said Mr Draper. "Children are all different. They have differing needs. It's about identifying their needs and producing strategies to move them to the next stage. For children with severe difficulties those are tiny steps. For more able children the steps are bigger. But it's all part of the same process."

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- Children, identity, diversity and inclusion in primary education, by Mel Ainscow, Alan Dyson and Jean Conteh;

- Children of primary school age with special needs: identification and provision, by Harry Daniels and Jill Porter.

KEY POINTS OF THE LATEST REPORTS

Differences between pupils

- Making assumptions based on ethnicity, gender or learning styles reinforces prejudice and is not an effective means of tackling underachievement.

- Understanding differences between children should be the job of teachers, not central government.

Special needs

- Over the past five years, the percentage of pupils with special needs in mainstream primary education has dropped.

- Identification of children with special needs varies widely according to geographical region and local authority.

Children's development

- Learning in young children requires social interaction. Children cannot learn to talk from the television. E-learning has limited use.

- Pretend play is vital for developing an awareness of thinking.

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