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Setting children by ability could harm their education, says report

 16 May
2008

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Setting children by ability may restrict some pupils' access to significant areas of knowledge and cause divisions between them, a report for Cambridge University-based study has found.

The research survey for the Primary Review report also suggests that classroom size is a particular issue for very young children and for those who are struggling with literacy. It adds that children might have fewer problems at later stages if more efforts were put into their transition from preschool to school and from reception to the Key Stages.

The independently-funded Review is directed by Professor Robin Alexander and based in the University's Faculty of Education. It is the biggest inquiry into English primary education for 40 years.

The Classes, Groups and Transitions report by Peter Blatchford, Susan Hallam, Judith Ireson, Peter Kutnick and Andrea Creech found that "there has been a tendency to respond to poor pupil 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 divisions between them". It recommends that "much more effort be directed to the development of classroom-based social pedagogy, including the effective use of pupil grouping".

Two other reports on the processes and contexts of teaching in the primary school are also issued today. *Primary Schools: the Built Environment* by Karl Wall, Julie Dockrell and Nick Peacey looks at how the physical properties of schools and classrooms – light, noise, temperature and air quality - affect children’s learning and teachers’ ability to teach effectively.

It found that poor classroom acoustics can affect learning, particularly for pupils with hearing impairments, learning difficulties or English as an additional language. Excessive noise can affect test performance and poorly ventilated classrooms can affect pupils’ ability to focus on mental tasks. On the positive side, greater exposure to natural light was associated with enhanced pupil performance.

Learning and Teaching in Primary Schools: insights from the TLRP, by Mary James and Andrew Pollard, is a special report by the Director and Associate Director of the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme, the UK’s biggest-ever programme of research on learning and teaching.

It looks at 19 major teaching and learning projects and recommends ten 'principles for effective teaching'. They include the idea that informal learning, such as learning out of school, “should be recognised as at least as significant as formal learning” and that teachers need to train pupils in the skills of group working in order to get the most out of it.

For more information contact Richard Margrave at richard@margrave.co.uk or visit the Primary Review website (see sidebar).

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