PRIMARY SCHOOLS RESPONDING TO DIVERSITY: BARRIERS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Based on a review of research evidence, this report concludes that current national policy is limiting the capacity of the English primary education system to respond to pupil diversity. In so doing, it is failing to build on many promising practices that exist in schools. All of this is leading to the creation of a fragmented system in which schools lack effective support and where what look like gains in autonomy are undermined by a narrowing of the curriculum, by accountability regimes and systems of funding. The report provides an analysis of the factors that are creating these difficulties, as well as pointing to possibilities for moving policy and practice forward.

Changes in the pupil population:

- Pressures are building up in the English primary school system. In addition to concerns about population growth and the changing age structure of the population, attention is increasingly focused on the implications of patterns of migration.

- Regional variations mean that the stresses differ across the system, and there is good reason to believe that they may be acute in particular places.

- The task for schools of responding to diversity remains largely the same, but in some places may need to be undertaken under highly challenging circumstances.

- The task for policy makers is both to build the capacity of the system to respond to changing demographics before a crisis point is reached, and to support those schools and groups of schools that may already be in difficulties.

Encouraging developments:

- Recent policy changes mean that schools now enjoy an enhanced level of autonomy that provides space for them to determine their own responses.

- Schools are less beholden to central initiatives, less constrained by detailed curriculum and pedagogical guidance, and more likely to be operating independently of local authority oversight.

- As a result, there are greater opportunities for schools to respond to the diversity of their populations in creative ways.

Barriers to progress:

- National accountability requirements limit creativity and risk taking by their focus on a narrow conceptualisation of the purposes of education.

- Alongside the reduction of external constraints, there is now far less of the support to schools that went with them.

- Schools are more likely to be working in isolation, or as part of academy chains, federations and other networks that may or may not provide effective support.

- Whilst school budgets have been protected, they have failed to keep pace with rising costs, and the distribution of 'additional' funding does not match the educational challenges facing schools as their profile of pupil diversity expands.

- Much depends on what individual head teachers choose to do – and what the accountability systems allow them to do.

- As a result, the school system is a more fragmented one, in which substantial social segregation is reflected and reproduced.

Impact of the Pupil Premium:

- Whilst the Pupil Premium is by no means the only contributory factor, it has tended to narrow the ways in which schools understand and respond to diversity.

- It provides no encouragement for schools to respond to pupils from non-poor or marginally poor families who experience difficulties or have untapped potential.

- It only encourages interventions that can be shown to have an immediate impact upon attainment, and demonstrates no interest in a wider range of educational outcomes, in terms, for instance, of personal development, health, or longer-term engagement with learning.

- Teachers now commonly refer to 'Pupil Premium pupils', as though such a group can be defined meaningfully, when in fact it consists of no more than a highly diverse aggregation of individuals whose only common feature is that they have claimed free school meals.

- It is common that schools target these pupils for short-term 'interventions', often implemented outside the ordinary classroom, and typically focusing narrowly on attainment targets.

Building on promising developments:

- Despite a policy context that is largely unfavourable, there are primary schools that develop creative ways of responding to diversity.

- In order to build on these promising developments, there is a need for radical new thinking that will encourage greater collaboration and experimentation across the education service.

- This requires a recognition that differences can act as a catalyst for innovation in ways that have the potential to benefit all pupils, whatever their personal characteristics and home circumstances.

- In terms of national policy, this requires a move away from narrow definitions of the purposes of education.

- There is also a need to create a system in which schools are no longer divided one from another, and from their local communities.

- Such initiatives require area coordination, suggesting new roles and responsibilities for local authorities.

Conclusions:

- Strengthening the capacity of primary schools to respond to pupil diversity requires a new specification of the purposes of education, which must go well beyond a narrow focus on attainment, as measured by test scores.

- This in turn implies the development of accountability mechanisms that are also clearly specified and precisely focused, but which are built on the assumption that education is about more than passing tests.

- Space has to be created within which those who are closest to children and their communities can make decisions about how best they can all be educated in a way that is relevant – and, crucially, in which they can explore new ways of working in a disciplined manner, but without fearing for the consequences if outcomes are not immediately improved. Funding has to be distributed in a way which helps to maintain this space.

- There needs to an intermediary layer capable of interpreting national purposes at the local level, of promoting the networking of schools with each other and with other agencies, and also able to learn from creative local developments and feed them back into national policy.

An agenda for future research:

- Research is needed that encourages a broader understanding of the nature of diversity and of the purposes of education. This implies the development of research methodologies and designs that are capable of encompassing this breadth.

- In a situation where local exploration and experimentation in responding to diversity are crucial, more research is needed that is engaged in a particular way. This requires researchers to work with practitioners to support, evaluate and, ultimately, to learn from their endeavours.

- What matters is that these collaborative approaches are valued both by practitioners and by researchers themselves, but also by those who commission and/or reward researchers, and by policy-makers who may – or at least should – learn from research.

Related sources:

Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Priority 1:
http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-priorities-in-action/equity/

Cambridge Primary Reivew Trust, Priority 3:
http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-priorities-in-action/community/

Pickett, K., and Vanderbloemen, L. (2015) *Mind the Gap: Tackling Social and Educational Inequality* (CPRT Research Survey 4). York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

Cambridge Primary Review, relevant publications:

Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010), *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Reivew*, Routledge. Chapters 4 (Childhood today), 5 (Children's lives), 6 (Parenting, caring and educating), 8 (Children, diversity and equity), 9 (Children with special needs), and 20 (Schools, local authorities and other agencies).

Aledander, R. J. (ed) (2010), *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge. Chapters 3 (Children's lives outside school and their educational impact, pp. 49-82), 5 (Primary schools and other agencies, pp. 97-136), and 8 (Children in primary education: demography, culture, diversity, inlcusion, pp. 195-216).

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report is available at www.cprtrust.org.uk. The website also contains information about other surveys in this series, and those related to the Cambridge Primary Review.

Cambridge Primary Review Trust was established in December 2012 with the aim of consolidating and building on Cambridge Primary Review's evidence, findings and principles. Supported by Pearson Education, it is based at the University of York and chaired by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Trust has eight priorities (equity, voice, community, sustainability, aims, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) and four programmes (policy, research, schools, professional networking and development).

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