

THE PRIMARY REVIEW: EMERGING PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDHOOD

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Introduction

My task today is not to repeat what you can read in your conference packs and in our interim reports (all of which you can download from the Primary Review website - www.primaryreview.org.uk). Nor do I have time to go through all our detailed findings on childhood and primary education. Instead, I want to pick out a few of the larger issues. These I shall present under the headings of *wellbeing, equity, happiness, childhood, intervention, learning and empowerment*.

For those of you who are not familiar with the Primary Review, I should briefly mention that it was launched in October 2006, is due to issue its final report late this year or early next year, and is currently publishing at three or four-weekly intervals a series of interim reports, some of which have provoked considerable media interest and not a little political flak - a sure sign, people tell us, that the Review is being taken seriously. Most of the reports published to date are comprehensive surveys of published research and other evidence which we have commissioned from our 70 research consultants in 22 universities. We have also published an account of the 87 meetings with people inside and outside education - including children - which made up our regional community soundings.

Media coverage, though extensive - and for that we are of course grateful - has also tended to look for the bad news in our interim reports rather than the good, and this in turn has prompted a more hostile response from the Government to some of the 23 reports we have published so far than is justified by what those reports actually say. So it's useful to be able to set the record straight.

I should also mention that the Review is conceived as a matrix of ten themes, four strands of evidence, and three overarching perspectives, one of which is childhood. These are all listed and explained in the leaflet in your conference pack, which also contains briefings and 'overview briefings' on the reports which we have published so far. In this talk I shall draw on the evidence we have published rather than on the considerable body of data which we are still analysing.

Wellbeing

And so to the first issue: children's wellbeing. On the basis of our regional community soundings¹, supported by many of the written submissions to the Review and some of the research surveys, we have reported a widespread concern that many primary-aged children are under excessive pressure: inside school from an overcrowded curriculum, a high-stakes national testing regime and the backwash of teachers' anxiety about league tables, inspection and the public and

¹ Primary Review (2007) *Community Soundings: the Primary Review regional witness sessions*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

somewhat punitive character of school accountability; outside school from the degrading of children's values and aspirations by consumerism, the cult of celebrity and pressure to grow up, or indeed adopt the trappings of adolescence, too soon.

We have also reported a perceived loss of children's personal freedom due to increased traffic and parental fears about their children's safety; and that although parents understand the importance of play in early childhood, many children lack outdoor play provision and many parents are unwilling to allow them to play away from home. This means that children are losing the opportunity to learn to cope with risk.

And we have reported considerable concern that children's exposure to commercial, uncensored, low-grade, violent or otherwise unsuitable media material, especially on television and the internet, may be developmentally and educationally harmful.

All these perceived trends can be summarised in the much-used phrase '*loss of childhood.*' What today this conference can and must do is tease out perception from reality, and here the Primary Review benefits from coinciding, more or less, with other enquiries - the Good Childhood Enquiry with which we share this conference, the UNICEF comparative study of Childhood Well-Being in Rich Countries, the Equalities Review, the Rowntree report on child poverty, the RSA *Risk and Childhood* project and the research review on vulnerable children undertaken by NFER for the Government's *Narrowing the Gap* project.

The RSA *Risk and Childhood* report is particularly relevant to the task of assessing the balance of perception and reality, for after carefully considering the statistical evidence its 2007 report concluded:

Parental concern is not necessarily in line with statistical risk. Parents show most concern about traffic accidents and abduction, but accidents at home, unhealthy living and becoming the victim of crime are much more common.²

Crucially, the RSA report also said:

Not all children are equally at risk, and age, sex, culture, social background and geography are among the characteristics that can make a difference ... There are some types of risk, such as falling downstairs, that almost anyone may face, but there are others which ... reflect the inequalities in our society. *In many ways, risk stands as a present-day proxy for inequality.*³

The same point is made, in different words, in *Narrowing the Gap*, which identifies the most vulnerable groups in relation to each of the *Every Child Matters* outcomes.⁴

Or, as we said in our own Community Soundings report:

The contrasts in children's lives were thought [by our witnesses] to be massive and widening. Those born into familial stability and economic comfort fare well, exceptionally so in many cases. For others, deprivation is profound and multi-faceted: economic, emotional, linguistic, cultural. *Our community witnesses believed that the accident of birth profoundly and often cruelly divides the nation's children.*⁵

² Madge, N. and Barker, B. (2007) *Risk and Childhood*, London: RSA, p 2.

³ *Risk and Childhood*, p 14.

⁴ DCSF (2007) *Narrowing the Gap*, London: DCSF.

⁵ *Community Soundings*, pp 31-2.

That being so, the intentions of the Children's Plan are clearly and unreservedly to be applauded: to 'secure the wellbeing and health of children and young people ... to safeguard the young and vulnerable' and especially, in this context, 'to close the gap in educational achievement for disadvantaged children.'⁶

Equity

The gap in educational achievement has featured prominently in the Primary Review's evidence too. When last November we published three surveys of national and international evidence on standards, testing and assessment by colleagues at Durham and Bristol universities and the NFER,⁷ there was much more public discussion about whether standards have risen or fallen overall, and of the millions spent on standards policies and national strategies, than of that characteristic which for decades has marked Britain out from so many comparable countries and has resisted all attempts to eliminate it. I refer, of course, to the long tail of low attainment in reading and maths, the gap between the high and low attainers, between those who reach Level 4 by age 11 and the 1 in 5 who in the case of reading do not.

This, clearly, is not just an educational issue, for - leaving aside for the moment the important question of whether SATs are the best way to define and assess educational achievement - educational *underachievement* as defined by SAT scores conforms closely with other inequalities: in wealth, health, social mobility, risk and opportunity; and among the low attainers certain groups - children from low socio-economic groups, white working class boys, looked-after children, children with disabilities, children from particular ethnic minority backgrounds, children of Travellers and refugees - are disproportionately represented.

Some have argued to us that poverty is the central issue here. The Rowntree enquiry reported that 'children from poor homes are nearly a year behind when they start school, and two years behind by age 14. Most never catch up.'⁸ The strong negative correlation between deprivation and attainment is further confirmed in the 2007 PIRLS report on reading attainment among 10-year olds.⁹ On the basis of such evidence, from the Primary Review and other sources, it is hard not to agree with the view of our own research report on parenting, caring and educating, by colleagues at Bath University, that child poverty represents one of the education system's biggest challenges.¹⁰

⁶ DCSF (2007) *The Children's Plan: building brighter futures*, London: DCSF.

⁷ Tymms, P. and Merrell, C. (2007) *Standards and Quality in English Primary Schools Over Time: the national evidence* (Primary Review Research Survey 4/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education; Whetton, C., Ruddock, G. and Twist, L. (2007) *Standards in English Primary Education: the international evidence* (Primary Review Research Survey 4/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education; Harlen, W. (2007) *The Quality of Learning: assessment alternatives for primary education* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/4), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007) *Experiences of Poverty and Disadvantage*, paper synthesising findings from eight reports from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Education and Poverty Programme, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

⁹ Twist, L., Schagen, I., Hodgson, C. (2007) *Readers and Reading: the national report for England 2006* (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), Slough: NFER.

¹⁰ Muschamp, Y., Wikeley, F., Ridge, T. and Balarin, M. (2007) *Parenting, Caring and Educating* (Primary Review Research Report 7/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

Others say that the problem is cultural and attitudinal, and reflects low parental aspirations and a lack of parental interest in or support for education, a matter in which England is said to compare unfavourably with, for example, countries in continental Europe and south-east Asia. Some argue that school admissions policies, by favouring the affluent and mobile, further disadvantage those to whom choice of school is denied by low income. Others look at the culture of schools themselves, and at the impact on children of attitudes towards children from particular social backgrounds. And others again question a pedagogical tradition in English primary schools which by celebrating individuality and respecting difference may have the opposite effect to that intended, and may widen rather than reduce the gap in outcomes.

Within the more familiar and narrow usage of 'inclusion' we have published a report by Harry Daniels and Jill Porter which uncovers excessive variation in special educational needs resourcing and provision between local authorities, slow and bureaucratic statementing procedures, and a shortfall in professional time and training for supporting SEN children in mainstream settings.¹¹

Another of our reports, by researchers at Manchester Metropolitan and Sheffield universities, cites evidence of stereotyping and indeed stigmatisation of those children and families deemed in need of support, and a failure of some service providers to understand and respect the considerable diversity of family values, structures and practices which now obtains.¹² In this context it's perhaps worth asking what, in 2008, is a 'normal' family?

This relates to the much larger question of England's rapidly-changing cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious demography. This not only demands constant and rapid professional re-learning and updating, but also appears to result in inaccurate statistics on migration and a consequent shortfall in funding and provision, especially in relation to EAL.¹³

Happiness

'Why' asked one national newspaper last week, 'are our children so unhappy?'¹⁴ It then cited in support of its contention the Primary Review, which last October reported children's anxieties about those local issues which affect their sense of security, especially in certain urban areas - traffic, the lack of safe play areas, rubbish, graffiti, gangs, bullying, knives - and about the national and international trends and events of which they were aware from the omnipresent media, including international terrorism, climate change and global warming.¹⁵

Despite these evident anxieties, the Primary Review's published evidence to date does *not* support the view, popular in the media ever since the 2007 UNICEF report on children's wellbeing, that England is a nation of miserable children. It's true that adults are worried about children, and about the world in which they are growing

¹¹ Daniels, H. and Porter, J. (2007) *Learning Needs and Difficulties Among Children of Primary School Age: definition, identification, provision and issues* (Primary Review Research Survey 5/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

¹² Barron, I., Holmes, R., MacLure, M. and Runswick-Cole, K. (2007) *Primary Schools and Other Agencies* (Primary Review Research Survey 8/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

¹³ *Community Soundings*, pp 31-32.

¹⁴ 'The anxiety epidemic: Why are children so unhappy?' *The Independent*, 4 March 2008.

¹⁵ *Community Soundings*, pp 12-13.

up, and that children themselves have expressed anxieties to us on the latter score, as they have to other enquiries. But - as we pointed out in our Community Soundings report - the children were also noticeably more upbeat about their lives than were the adults. It was the adults - especially parents and teachers - who were most worried. So perhaps the question should be not 'Why are British children so unhappy with their lives?' but 'Why are adults so unhappy about Britain's children?'

What we may well be witnessing at the moment, therefore, is in part a justified concern about the condition of childhood today - especially in relation to those children and families who are vulnerable and suffer poverty, disadvantage, inequality and marginalisation - and in part a projection onto children of adult fears and anxieties, not least about the kind of society and world which adults have created.

After all, it's adults who via the media and advertising daily ram celebrity down children's throats; it's adult commercial values which create the junk food which contributes to obesity, and the alcohol ocean which fuels teenage binge drinking; it's adults who vote into power governments whose policies exacerbate rather than reduce inequality; it's adults who take nations into wars in which children are among the most prominent and tragic victims; and I guess - though I've not seen any analysis along these lines - that the carbon footprint of adults is far greater than that of children. On this basis, adults may well feel not just *anxiety* about the society and world in which today's children are growing up, but also a degree of *guilt* about the social and environmental legacy which today's children have no choice but to inherit.

So I hope that today we can try to clarify the true nature of the childhood issue, strip away the needlessly alarmist talk, agree on the precise nature of the problems which many children face, and work out what needs to be done inside and outside school to address them.

I hope, too, that we can recognise that pursuit of a good childhood goes hand in hand with the creation of a good and just society, or - as Basil Bernstein said of the compensatory education schemes of the 1960s - 'education cannot compensate for society.' Actually, it can, but only up to a point, however far schools are 'extended'.

I'd also suggest that the words 'happiness' and 'unhappiness' don't adequately capture what is going on here, and indeed perhaps they trivialise the problem. Viewed collectively rather than individually, the conditions hinted at by the current happiness debate are alienation, political and educational disengagement, powerlessness, meaninglessness, loss of community and that absence of shared social and moral standards for which sociologists use the term 'anomie'. These conditions are close to those portrayed by Archbishop Rowan Williams in his *Lost Icons*, and by Julia Neuberger in *The Moral State We're In*.¹⁶ The condition is indeed and fundamentally a *moral* one. Recovering meaning, engagement, shared values and community demands much more than lessons in happiness.

On the other hand, two major and more positive findings from our community soundings study are definitely worth repeating here. First, for many children and

¹⁶ Williams, R. (2003) *Lost Icons: reflections on cultural bereavement*, London: T & T Clark; Neuberger, J. (2005) *The Moral State We're In: a manifesto for a 21st century society*, London: Harper Collins.

families it is the *schools* which provide the security, support, sense of purpose, positive values and sense of community which may be in decline outside the school gates. Second, ‘Pessimism turned to hope when witnesses felt they had the power to act. So, for example, the children who were most confident that climate change would not overwhelm them were those whose primary schools had decided to replace unfocused fear by factual information and practical strategies for energy reduction and sustainable living.’¹⁷ As we said at the time, there’s an important lesson here, for Government as well as for schools.

Childhood

Just as we seem to be going through a period of confusion and concern about collective British identity and values - to which a compulsory oath of allegiance to the Queen is a peculiarly fatuous response - so we are witnessing growing uncertainty over how we should think about childhood itself. After all, when people deplore - as they regularly do at present - the ‘loss of childhood’ - they clearly have a particular view of what childhood is and how it ought to be. And when we worry about the ‘loss of childhood *innocence*’, we need perhaps to recall that historically, internationally and indeed legally, the age at which innocence becomes hard experience and culpability is very variable. Don’t forget that child labour, child soldiers and children treated under the law as harshly as adults are aspects of childhood not just in the distant past but also, in some countries, today. And as far as 1950s Britain is concerned - the period to which some politicians want the country to return - I can only say: beware nostalgia. I was a child then: I know what growing up in the 1940s and 1950s was like. The politicians in question, being mostly 40 year old youngsters without a wrinkle on their faces or their suits, do not.

For childhood, as sociologists and anthropologists are fond of saying, is a cultural construct. ‘Childhood’ is the label we give not just to a phase of biological development but to the set of cultural assumptions about the way humans at that stage of development are and ought to be, and about the way they ought to behave. At present there’s a decidedly negative set of constructs in popular childhood discourse running from *children as innocent victims* through *children as problems* to *children as threats* (especially in adolescence).

It’s surely time to forge a more constructive and positive view of childhood - and the evidence from the Primary Review, and indeed from other enquiries, amply supports this. That evidence, again without underplaying the problems, hardships and injustices faced by particular children, encourages us to concentrate less on what children *can’t* do, and much more on what they *can* do; and indeed on how much more they can do if we allow and empower them to do so. I shall return to this theme, which I believe in the context of early years and primary education is fundamental, shortly.

Intervention

Our evidence has a lot to say about when and how the state intervenes in childhood. There is interest in reconsidering the starting age for compulsory schooling - which everyone knows is earlier in England than in many other countries, including some countries whose children later go on to outperform

¹⁷ Primary Review (2007) *Community Soundings*, Primary Review Briefing, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, p 2.

Britain in the international achievement surveys. There is concern about the nature of the early years curriculum, about the proper scope and balance of the primary curriculum, squeezed as it is by the pressure of test preparation and indeed by its inherent logistical unmanageability, a problem which has persisted, despite Dearing, ever since 1988. (Good luck to Jim Rose, I say). There is concern that the state intervenes in too narrowly instrumental a manner, requiring schools to focus on the 'basics' from age five to the exclusion of too much else that is also essential. And there's concern, of course, about the impact on children of the national tests - an impact, it must be emphasised, which should be measured not just in terms of actual or perceived levels of stress, but also in terms of how far the tests may compromise the quality of children's primary education.¹⁸

On the other hand, there is widespread support for the aspirations and agenda of Every Child Matters, and for the need for the state to intervene to support vulnerable children and their families.

However, questions are also raised about the extent and nature of the state's intervention in the lives of the child population as a whole. This matter was explored in one of our research reports, by Professor Berry Mayall, who undertook a detailed study of research on children's lives outside school and their educational impact.¹⁹ Coining a term used in the sociology of childhood, she charted the growing 'scholarisation' of early childhood in England and the way home is increasingly being seen as an extension of the school, and homework reduces the time available to children to spend time in non-school activities, many of which may be, in their way, no less productive.

Berry Mayall used the research literature to raise a question of crucial and illuminating importance: outside the context of those vulnerable children and families for whom intervention is essential, how far should the state define what young children should do when they are not in school, and to what extent should the relationship between home and school be viewed as one in which the home supports the school rather than *vice versa*?

Learning

One of the reasons why this relationship is so important is that research shows us that productive learning doesn't just take place at school. Berry Mayall's Primary Review research survey said:

Home and family provide structures and continuity rooted in past time and shared experience ... Children are active agents in learning, in interaction with siblings and parents. They learn, through apprenticeship, the social, cultural and moral order of their home, and their responsibilities as moral agents. They learn at home that they are persons (rather than pre-school projects). They have more chance at home of being respected as persons than anywhere else. They participate in everyday household and neighbourhood activity. They learn speech that is adequate for communicating in the social environment of the family. They learn the health-related

¹⁸ *Community Soundings*; Hall, K. and Øzerk, K. (2008) *Curriculum and Assessment Policy: England and other countries* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/1); Riggall, A. and Sharp, C. (2008), *The Structure of Primary Education: England and other countries* (Primary Review Research Survey 9/1); Harlen, W. (2007) *The Quality of Learning: assessment alternatives for primary education* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/4), Cambridge: University of Cambridge faculty of Education.

¹⁹ Mayall, B. (2007) *Children's Lives Outside School and their Educational Impact* (Primary Review Research Survey 3/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

ideas and practices of their home.²⁰

Berry Mayall then properly stressed that because these things are true for most but not all children, Government has a duty to provide appropriate support for those children for whom and home and family do not provide this kind of learning.

Starting from a different body of research, from cognitive psychology and neuroscience rather than sociology, the Primary Review research report from Usha Goswami and Peter Bryant also underlined the extent of the learning which takes place outside school:

Children possess and demonstrate all the main types of learning (statistical learning, learning by imitation, learning by analogy and causal learning), even as babies ... ²¹

However, they stressed that such learning is conditional:

Learning in young children is socially mediated. Families, carers, peers and teachers are all important. Even basic perceptual learning mechanisms require social interaction to be effective ... Children think and reason largely in the same ways as adults, but they lack experience, and are still developing the ability to think about their own thinking and learning (meta-cognition) and to regulate their own behaviour. They need diverse experiences ... to help them develop these self-reflective and self-regulatory skills.²²

We tend to configure 'social mediation' in children's learning in terms of what can be done by adults. But a further Primary Review research report, from Christine Howe and Neil Mercer, argued:

Talk and social interaction *among children* play a key role in children's social development and learning ... Social interaction and collaborative activity among children in class can provide valuable, complementary and distinctive opportunities for learning and conceptual development ... Encouraging children to pursue joint goals, explain their understanding, express different points of view and attempt to reach consensus through discussion have all been found to help learning and understanding.²³

Empowerment

The messages of the substantial bodies of research surveyed by those of our research consultants whose reports I've just briefly quoted are clear: children are natural and active learners; learning takes place everywhere, at home as well as in school; learning is a social process and children learn from each other as well as from adults; language - especially spoken language - is what animates this process; and the task of parents, carers and teachers is to provide the most productive kinds of mediation.

²⁰ Mayall, B. (2007) *Children's Lives Outside School and their Educational Impact* (Primary Review Briefing), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, p 1.

²¹ Goswami, U. and Bryant, P. (2007) *Children's Cognitive Development and Learning* (Primary Review Research Briefing 2/1a), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, p1.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Howe, C. and Mercer, N. (2007) *Children's Social Development, Peer Interaction and Classroom Learning* (Primary Review Research Briefing 2/1b), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, pp 1-2.

To discover and devise appropriate mediation we need to engage with and listen to children, not just talk at them. This points to a pedagogy which is very different from the simple transmission which is the historical and international default. It also requires the attitudinal shift encapsulated in the growing body of research on 'pupil voice' (or voices). Our community soundings included many children, as indeed did our submissions, and we also commissioned Carol Robinson and Michael Fielding to review research on children's voices for us.²⁴

Out of all these consultations came not only the anxieties about life inside and outside school to which I have already referred but a clear sense of what children look for in their teachers. For Tony Blair it was 'Education, education, education'. For the children we met it was a rather different three Es': *equity, empathy* and *expertise*. Children wanted schools and teachers to be fair, to care for their pupils and encourage them to care for each other. But they also wanted their teachers to know their subject, to make clear precisely what they are doing and why, and to find ways of structuring and sequencing what is to be learned with clarity and appropriate graduation.

At the same time, and in line with the view of children as active learners, the Robinson and Fielding report on pupil voice for the Primary Review noted that 'children would like more control over their learning, though towards the top of the primary school the pressure of SATs often prevents this'.²⁵

We might, then, add a fourth 'e': equity, empathy, expertise and *empowerment*. That, after all, is the thrust of the recent research on children's learning. It is also the claimed purpose of school councils.

The concern with empowerment takes me to my two final points. The first is to remind you of the need to move from a negative or deficit view of childhood - children as victims, problems or threats - to a positive one which celebrates and builds on what children *can* do as learners and social beings. The second is to recall the argument, conveyed in a number of the submissions to the Primary Review, that in determining the aims of education we might start not with the kind of vacuous statement which has appeared in successive National Curriculum documents since 1988, but with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The Government ought to be sympathetic. *Every Child Matters* claims to be underpinned by the UNCRC and DCSF has mapped the ECM outcomes onto the UNCRC Articles. DCSF also regularly reports on progress towards full implementation of those articles.²⁶

The UNCRC, as you know, doesn't concern itself only with the vital good childhood pre-requisites of children's rights to care, protection, health and development, but also with education, participation and freedom of expression. Thus, in the context of what we know about children's learning:

²⁴ Robinson, C. and Fielding, M. (2007) *Children and their Primary Schools: pupils' voices* (Primary Review Research Survey 5/3), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

²⁵ Robinson, C. and Fielding, M. (2007) *Children and their Primary Schools: pupils' voices* (Primary Review Research Briefing 5/3), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, p3.

²⁶ UK Government (2007) *The Consolidated 3rd and 4th Periodic Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*, London: TSO.

All children have a right to be able to give their opinion when adults are making a decision that will affect them, and adults should take it seriously (Article 12) ... All children have a right to find out things, and say what they think (Article 13) ... All children have a right to information (Article 17) ... All children have a right to an education (Article 28) ...

and, by the way:

All children have the right to relax and play (Article 31).²⁷

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, I haven't attempted to summarise the vast quantity of evidence on children, childhood and primary education which the Primary Review is currently processing, and some of which it has published. Instead, I've identified broad themes under which that evidence can be grouped for the purposes of this conference, and with the overlapping concerns of the Good Childhood Inquiry also in mind: wellbeing, happiness, equity, intervention, learning, empowerment, and childhood itself. The notion of *empowerment*, it seems to me, is what bridges children's wellbeing, children's primary education and children's rights. Empowerment - underpinned, as our child witnesses insist, by equity, empathy and expertise - is an educational cause well worth fighting for.

²⁷

United Nations (1989) *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.