



... children, their world, their education

PRIMARY REVIEW
BRIEFINGS

COMMUNITY SOUNDINGS

The Primary Review regional witness sessions

This briefing relates to the report on findings from the 87 witness sessions which comprised the Primary Review Community Soundings. **The full report is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk**

The Community Soundings were regionally-based one or two day events. Their aim was to discuss matters central to the Review's remit with those at the education system's point of delivery; to explore the relationship between school and community; to uncover key areas of consensus and divergence across both constituencies and venues; and to identify issues and questions to take forward to the Review's National Soundings and on into the final report.

The soundings, which took place between January and March 2007, included meetings with those involved in the day-to-day work of primary schools (teachers, teaching assistants and other support staff, senior managers, heads and – notably – children themselves) together with parents, school governors, and people drawn from the wider community (local authority elected members and officials, members of statutory and voluntary agencies concerned with children's welfare, employers, religious leaders, community leaders, the police, legal officers and members of groups such as migrants and travellers who are perceived to be marginalised by the education system). There were nine Community Soundings in different parts of England, some of them multi-site. There were 87 witness sessions, attended by over 750 people in all.

Community Soundings summarises, constituency by constituency, what emerged from these witness sessions, starting with children and moving out from the classroom to the school and the wider community. Regional differences are noted, and the report ends by identifying issues and questions for the National Soundings, which in autumn 2007 will initiate the process of assessing evidence from all of the Review's sources, not just this one.

Community Soundings covers a wide range of themes, and this briefing cannot do justice to all of them. About the data as a whole, however, we report three striking findings:

- In spite of our careful attempts to elicit and record differences among the witnesses, there is a substantial measure of agreement on key issues such as the aims of primary education, the curriculum, assessment, the condition of childhood and society, and the world in which today's children are growing up. This consensus transcends both constituency and location.
- Although witnesses - especially children themselves - had much to say which was positive, the responses overall reveal a pervasive anxiety about the current educational and social contexts, including significant areas of recent policy, and a deeper pessimism about the world in which today's children are growing up.
- Despite this, the schools themselves provided optimistic and caring settings for children's development and learning, and were highly valued by children, parents and their communities.

The views which we most frequently heard were these:

- that today's children are under intense and perhaps excessive pressure from the policy-driven demands of their schools and the commercially-driven values of the wider society;
- that family life and community are breaking down;

- that respect and empathy both within and between generations are in decline;
- that life for young children outside the school gates is increasingly insecure and, in many areas, dangerous (though for many parents the chief perceived danger is traffic);
- that the wider world is changing rapidly and in ways which it is not always easy to comprehend, though on balance the changes give cause for alarm, especially in respect of global warming, environmental sustainability and geo-political stability;
- that the primary curriculum is too rigidly prescribed and, because of the pressure of SATs, too narrow;
- that primary pupils' educational careers are being distorted by the dominance of the national tests, especially in Years 5 and 6;
- that though some government initiatives, notably *Every Child Matters*, are to be warmly welcomed, others - especially in the domains of curriculum, assessment and pedagogy - may constrain and disempower rather than enable;
- that the task facing teachers and other professionals who work with children is, for these and other reasons, much more difficult now than it was a generation ago.

Negative responses might suggest negative questioning, or that respondents have been unduly influenced by the gloomy tenor of the news stories of the day. *Community Findings* examines both of these possibilities but finds that the line of questioning was open rather than leading, that witnesses frequently referred to specific local issues by way of illustration, and that the voices represented here are both authentic and - in view of their consistency across 87 sessions and nine very different regional venues - representative of a wider national mood.

Pessimism turned to hope when witnesses felt they had the power to act. Thus, the children who were most confident that climate change might not overwhelm them were those whose schools had decided to replace unfocussed fear by factual information and practical strategies for energy reduction and sustainability. Similarly, the teachers who were least worried by national initiatives were those who responded to them with robust criticism rather than resentful compliance, and asserted their professional right to go their own way. There is a lesson from such empowerment for government as well as schools. Of course, not even the most enterprising school can reverse some of the social trends which worried many of our witnesses. That being so, these Community Soundings have implications for social and economic policy more generally, and for public attitudes and values, not merely for DCSF and the schools.

Among the locally specific issues, which across the soundings represented differences more of emphasis than of substance, were the following:

- The loss of local employment opportunities, and educational routes to such employment, for what are often referred to as the 'less academic' children.
- The aggravation of the gap between high and lower achievers, already greater in England than in many other countries, by both local circumstances and an inflexible national curriculum.
- The extent to which the retention of selective secondary education in some areas adds to the difficulties faced by the lower achievers.
- The need to re-assess the case for the three tier system of education, and for middle schools in particular, before they are finally phased out (a strong case for their retention was made on developmental grounds).
- Differences in the way schools are perceived, valued and used in affluent and less affluent areas, with more affluent families establishing 'parallel' systems of coaching and other out-of-school support for their children, while less affluent families see the school itself as the best available resource, socially as well as educationally.
- Variation, within a common framework of deep concern about parenting and home-school relations, in respect of the form that such relations should take, the best ways to support parents of children with special needs, and ways that schools can engage with parents who are hard to reach or who have low aspirations for their children.
- The challenge of balancing respect for difference with the fostering of a shared sense of identity, especially in communities where there are concentrations of what in national terms are defined as ethnic and/or religious minorities.

- The failure of an essentially urban-oriented education system to address the distinctive challenges and needs of small and rural primary schools, and the difficulty which small schools have in responding positively to pressure towards school clustering for mutual support when the national system places them in competition with each other.
- The essential unreliability of national data on migration and the failure of resourcing to match local educational need in areas with growing migrant populations, especially when such groups are dispersed rather than concentrated.
- The need for an education system historically premised on stability to be more responsive to change and transience in school intakes, which for demographic and cultural reasons are now a fact of national life.

The report identifies 47 significant questions generated by the Community Soundings on which we argue that consultation is needed during the National Soundings, and which will also be examined in relation to evidence from the Review's other strands. These are grouped under eight headings:

- **Changing national and global contexts.** The question of how primary schools should respond to: climate change, environmental sustainability and global poverty; increasingly uncertain employment prospects; the decline in community, social cohesion and intergenerational empathy and respect; the growth in selfishness, materialism and anti-social behaviour; migration and growing ethnic and religious diversity; children's personal safety in increasingly dangerous urban environments; the benefits and dangers of the information society.
- **Children and childhood.** Children and childhood under pressure. The myth or reality of 'childhood innocence' lost. Strengthening and resourcing the implementation of *Every Child Matters*. Attending to the needs of mobile children (looked-after children, migrants and travellers) in a system premised on stability of pupil intake. Coping with a profile of special needs in which behavioural difficulties are increasingly prominent. Making school councils more than tokenistic and making 'children's voice' a genuinely equitable movement which empowers children as learners and future citizens.
- **Parenting, caring and educating.** Parenting in decline: reality or myth? Strengthening home-school partnership and building the necessary relationship of mutual trust and respect. Addressing the perennial challenge of parents who have low educational aspirations for their children, and/or are hard to reach. Securing parental interest and involvement in children's education throughout compulsory schooling, not just in the early years.
- **Aims, values and the curriculum.** Re-assessing the aims of primary education and the values by which it is underpinned. Shifting from the currently narrow view of utility to one which is based on a more comprehensive and humane analysis of what is necessary for a productive adult life. The place of creativity and alternative views of a rounded and balanced primary education. The balance of knowledge and skills and the current vogue for reconfiguring the curriculum in terms of the latter. The place of religious faith in the primary school. The early and later years curriculum: different in degree or nature? The relationship of the foundation stage to KS1.
- **Assessment.** How best to address the perceived problems of SATs: excessive pressure on children and teachers; distortion of the primary curriculum. The uses and abuses of tests. The relationship and balance of assessment for accountability and assessment for learning. Establishing who needs to know what about children's progress and achievement.
- **Learning, teaching and teachers.** The relationship between common sense and research-based views of effective learning and teaching. Re-assessing the pedagogical basis of recent official interventions in primary teaching. The adequacy of primary teacher training for the job which primary teachers perform; standards of entry to training courses and to the profession. The adequacy of CPD arrangements for supporting primary teachers' transition from novice to expert roles. The relationship between the roles of teacher and teaching assistant, and the training and remuneration of the latter. The impact of workforce reform.

- **Schools, structures, ages and stages.** Starting compulsory schooling: is age five too young? Revisiting the three tier system in light of children's developmental and social needs. De-stressing school transfer. The tasks and roles of primary heads: are they too many and too diverse, and on what should they really concentrate? Supporting small schools: balancing support through clustering with respect for individuality.
- **Funding and governance.** Eliminating funding inequities and anomalies between local authorities and schools. Making funding more responsive to the uncertain demographics of migration. Achieving qualitative consistency between local authorities. The National Literacy, Numeracy and Primary Strategies: what is the truth about their quality, implementation and impact? Centralisation, national agencies and the balance of control and responsibility between national government, local authorities and schools. The reality of recently announced 'flexibilities' and 'freedoms' offered by government to schools.

12 October 2007

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these – this and the report on the written submissions received by the Review – 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 69 academic consultants. The reports are being published both to increase public understanding of primary education and the challenges it faces 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. It is supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. The Review is 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 **Community Soundings** strand.

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For the text of the full report, and for other interim reports in this series, go to www.primaryreview.org.uk