

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, PEER INTERACTION AND CLASSROOM LEARNING

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 2/1b *Children's Social Development, Peer Interaction and Classroom Learning* by Christine Howe and Neil Mercer. The report focuses on the social and cultural processes that shape children's learning in primary classrooms, and may be read in conjunction with Primary Review Research Report 2/1a, *Children's Cognitive Development and Learning*, by Usha Goswami and Peter Bryant.

Report 2/1b covers a wide range of research material taking account of different approaches to the study of children's learning, but it adopts the socio-cultural view that we cannot understand the nature of learning and cognitive development without taking into account the intrinsically historical, social and communicative nature of human life. The report concentrates on research on *collaborative activity and interaction in classrooms among children themselves*. It does not include the substantial body of research on interaction between teachers and pupils, or on children's interactions when out of school. These are explored in Primary Review Research Reports 2/2 (*Teaching in Primary Schools*), 2/4 (*Learning and Teaching in Primary Schools: insights from TLRP*), both of which will be published later in this sequence, and 8/1 (*Children's Lives Outside School and their Educational Impact*) which is already available. The full report, including details of all sources consulted, is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.

The social contexts of learning

- Social interaction and collaborative activity among children in class can provide valuable, complementary and distinctive opportunities for learning and conceptual development. This challenges the traditional view that talk and social interaction among children are irrelevant, if not disruptive to learning.
- Talk and social interaction among children play a key role in children's social development and learning. Social development influences patterns of interaction, which in turn affect learning, the development of ways of thinking and social development itself.
- The educational value of collaborative learning has been clearly demonstrated, by research from more than one line of enquiry. In particular, 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.
- Research on collaborative learning across the arts, science and mathematics supports the view that joint activity among pupils should be an intrinsic and integrated aspect of classroom life.

Effective peer interaction in the primary classroom

- Observations in primary classrooms, however, suggest that children seldom have the opportunity to engage in productive social interaction. Group- or pair-based activity is rarely organised in ways that will best achieve productive interaction. Teachers may not monitor this kind of activity effectively or prepare children well for it.

Task design and classroom climate for productive peer interaction

- Teachers need to design/provide suitable activities and to help children develop the necessary communicative skills for engaging intellectually with each other. Merely providing opportunities for children to work and talk together has no discernible benefit for learning.
- Generally speaking, tasks should be designed to encourage cooperation and group cohesion, rather than competitiveness.
- Tasks which include controversial elements, that is tasks which are amenable to different perspectives, are most likely to lead to productive interactions especially when
 - they cannot be completed by individuals working independently;
 - they challenge children's current levels of understanding;
 - group members believe that both their own and their partners' contributions are important.

Organisation for collaborative pupil learning

- Gender, temperament and the social relations between members of class can affect the ways in which children engage in joint activity, as can situational factors like the existence of a competitive or co-operative environment. Teachers need to take such factors into account when organising collaborative work.
- Research on the effects of competition and rewards intended to foster learning and motivation is inconclusive. Co-operation without inter-group competition led to better attitudes to the subject, more positive inter-personal relationships and more effective exchange of ideas and information.
- Children can engage in more productive interaction when tasks are appropriately designed, and teachers structure the tasks and encourage the use of ground rules for collaborative group work. For example, significant but subtle effects on interaction and learning gains have been found in science tasks in which children are asked to predict the outcome jointly, to observe and to interpret the results jointly learning according to whether a consensus is required, whether or how this is recorded and the order of the tasks from easy to difficult.
- Productive peer interaction depends on the nature of the talk among pupils in their groups, and in particular the achievement of what Barnes and Mercer call 'exploratory talk'. This involves children in sharing, challenging and evaluating their views.
- On the other hand - using Mercer's definition again - 'disputational talk', which is highly competitive and full of disagreements, is not conducive to learning in the particular context of pupil-led group work.

Children's social histories and learning in class

- Social experience outside school may prepare children more or less well for the kinds of ways they are expected to talk and interact in the classroom. Some children may therefore need more guidance than others on how to engage productively in the dialogue of joint activity.
- Friends working together are more likely than non-friends to engage in interaction where knowledge is shared, ideas are challenged, evidence is evaluated and options are reasoned about. Friends, therefore, are more likely than non-friends to succeed in the task, and working with friends may be more likely to promote exploratory talk, than working with non-friends. However, separating the role of friendship from that of other social relations, for example popularity, currently presents some challenges.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Howe, C. and Mercer, N. (2007) *Children's Social Development, Peer Interaction and Classroom Learning* (Primary Review Research Survey 2/1b), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-09-4.

The report is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these 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 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education 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. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and 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 Research Survey strand and the theme Learning and Teaching.

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Research has helped identify some key qualities of successful collaboration and dialogue among pupils during group problem-solving and similar peer learning activities. This information can be used to help develop both teachers' and pupil's awareness of what constitutes effective peer interaction. Research suggests that raising children's awareness of how to interact productively leads to more inclusive activity and to individual learning gains.
