

in brief...

Making a difference in education

Which policies and practices are working in UK schools – and which ones aren't? A new book by **Robert Cassen, Sandra McNally** and **Anna Vignoles** surveys the research evidence, and argues that fewer policy initiatives should be introduced into the education system without proper evaluation.

David Cameron has said that the Conservatives will govern as a party of one nation. One way of achieving such an ambition would be to use schools as a means of closing the 'social gap' – the notable impact of family background on educational outcomes. If they really want to do that, research evidence indicates what the key priorities should be: better quality early years care; more support for reading and numeracy; and improved teaching.

Of course, these things cost money. But equally, there is little evidence that some of the programmes on which governments typically spend money are effective in narrowing the social gap. Governments of all persuasions tend to focus excessively on reforming the institutions of education, which can be costly and may not help the disadvantaged. For example, there is no good evidence that free schools will narrow the socio-economic gap in pupils' academic achievement, and even Sweden's experience (which inspired the policy) is not encouraging. One of the prime minister's last pledges during the election campaign was to build 500 more free schools, but there is little evidence of the benefits.

'It's all political' might be the rejoinder. It certainly is. There is a real political choice to be made: you can help

disadvantaged children and families in ways that we know are effective; or you can bypass the evidence. Our book surveys the latest research findings about what is effective in UK education, and asks whether future policy will be guided by the evidence more than it often has been in the past.

One conclusion for which there is strong evidence is that early years interventions can be valuable in helping children to overcome the effects of a disadvantaged background – but these interventions have to be of high quality and they are likely to be expensive. The book also lists a number of effective parenting programmes that provide value for money and can help to improve educational outcomes. For example, parental involvement with schools can be effective, and is relatively inexpensive.

Research also shows that with appropriate programmes, the share of poor readers in a year group can be brought down to 1-1.5% from the current level of 10%. On average, each secondary school takes in around 18 11-year-olds who can't read properly, half of them with a reading age of 7. Struggling readers commonly need individual support in primary school, which can be costly – but the costs later on of not learning to read considerably outweigh whatever needs to be spent to bring their reading up to standard. In this respect, the pupil premium, which provides additional funds for more disadvantaged pupils, may be helping some schools to do more. We know what to do, but overall we are still not doing it as consistently as we should.

Similarly with numeracy: mathematical ability can be improved with certain interventions, though more research would be helpful in consistently identifying which these are. In particular, we need long-run evaluations to assess the relative effectiveness of particular teaching approaches beyond their initial impact.

Perhaps the greatest mileage in educational investment, after the early years, lies in raising teacher quality, which empirical studies show to be very effective. This is partly a

Redirecting school spending could help to weaken the impact of family background on educational outcomes

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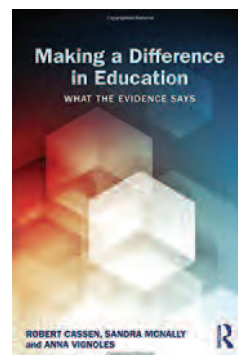
matter of initial teacher education; and partly one of improving the teaching skills of the existing workforce through continuing professional development (CPD). Yet we do not know in terms of teaching quality and pupil outcomes which type of training is best: the university-based route or the more school-based route known as School Direct. The latter was given a big impetus in recent years without any supporting evidence. On CPD, the research evidence is strong, but practice is fragmentary and best practice not universally well pursued.

Research suggests that who teaches you matters much more than the school that you attend. Yet a significant proportion of educational spending has gone on fostering academies and free schools. The academies formed up to 2008-09 have been evaluated and found to have had positive results, although improved outcomes were mostly confined to better-achieving pupils, with little or no benefit for lower achievers.

As yet, there is no comparable research on academies founded subsequently, but an Ofsted survey of 2012-13

found that half of those inspected were 'requiring improvement' or 'inadequate'. And to date, there has been little research on free schools or primary academies, although Department for Education data do not show them to be achieving more progress for pupils than local authority primaries. Research on their equivalents in Sweden finds only small positive effects.

If the government wants to reduce the social gap, then it would be wise to redirect educational spending initiatives towards changes that evidence suggests would bring about the greatest benefits. At the same time, our book argues that more benefits would be derived and fewer costs incurred (not least in terms of teachers' time) if only properly evidenced and costed policy initiatives are undertaken.



Making a Difference in Education: What the Evidence Says by Robert Cassen, Sandra McNally and Anna Vignoles is published by Routledge.

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