

Evidence based policy?

It has been a feature of education policy-making for many years that policy decisions should be evidence based. The Department for Education has spent millions of pounds over the years on research. The present Minister for School Standards in England, Nick Gibb, often exhorts teachers to follow the research on various aspects of teaching. As by far the longest serving minister at the education department, he has read widely if sometimes selectively and has acquired a lot of knowledge.

That, of course, does not stop him from occasionally being wrong. He is by no means the first, and won't be the last, politician to welcome research that supports his views while being less embracing of research that does not. At least Nick Gibb is genuinely committed to education and is always prepared to engage in debate with those who disagree with him.

As we report in our research section, there is quite a bit of evidence emerging this last week that should be discomfiting for the Government. A report from an expert panel of the British Educational Research Association has set out the case against the Government's proposal to use a baseline assessment test of pupils in reception to hold schools in England to account for the progress that the pupils had made by the end of key stage 2. The report, *A Baseline without Basis: The validity and utility of the proposed reception baseline assessment in England*, concluded that the Government's proposals, which would cost upward of £10 million, were "flawed, unjustified, and wholly unfit for purpose." The authors warned that they would be "detrimental to children, parents, teachers, and the wider education system in England."

Also in our research section this week, Professor Margaret Clark produces an original research article on the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) and what she sees as the continuing domination of politics over evidence. She presents evidence on the effect of the PSC on the early literacy experiences of young children in England which should be a cause for concern. The PSC involves children of about six years old being tested on their ability to read out loud 40 words, half of which are not real words at all. In a survey conducted by Professor Clark teachers were asked: "Do you feel the phonics check provides you with information on individual children which you did not already have?" Only 71 of the 1,108 teachers polled answered 'Yes'. Only 20 of 180 Head Teachers said that they found the Check helpful.

The Education Policy Institute has just published an analysis of the Government's oft-repeated claim that there are currently 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than there had been in 2010. EPI concluded that the figure did not accurately represent the level of improvement in school standards over the period. They identified several factors that question the statistic's credibility. Increases in the pupil population and shifts in the schools that pupils attended accounted for 578,000 in the number of pupils attending good or outstanding schools, which was over a quarter of the total. Some 579,000 pupils attended schools that had been rated as good or outstanding but they had not been inspected since at least 2010. There are 124,000 pupils in schools that had not been inspected in the last 10 years. There are also 309,000 pupils in schools that had not been inspected since at least 2010, which are converter academies that are not inspected in the same way. The Government has also been highly and misleadingly selective in quoting research to support its policy on expanding grammar schools. It claims that pupils from poor backgrounds do better at grammar schools, while not mentioning that hardly any of these children ever get into a grammar school in the first place.

A report commissioned by the National Governors' Association found that an analysis of pupil premium strategies revealed a disconnect between the pastoral barriers to educational achievement facing children eligible for the pupil premium and the teaching and learning initiatives which schools are using the pupil premium to fund. Amongst the most commonly mentioned barriers were family life and low attendance, but amongst the most commonly identified initiatives were literacy and numeracy support, which showed that the strategies were not always targeting support where it was most needed.

There have been significant improvements in education in recent decades, and far more children are doing better now than they were years ago. But if this is to continue then ministers must take account of the research that does not support its policies as well as any that does.