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Primary Policy Watch – All aboard the primary reform bus

'Reforms in the primary sector – and early years too – have never had ... political gravitas.' So states a report released last week by the think tank Policy Exchange. It is heartening then, for those of us with a particular interest in primary education, to see not one but two influential primary-focused reports released last week. You wait for ages for a bus, and all that.

The Policy Exchange paper, [*Primary Focus: the next stage of improvement for primary schools in England*](#), explores some of the current issues facing primary schools, and suggests a radical approach to tackling those issues. The second report, [*Exploring Effective Pedagogy in Primary Schools: Evidence from Research*](#), published by Pearson, reports on findings from a large scale research study into what the most effective schools do.

So what answers do these reports have to the question of how we ensure our children get off to the best possible start?

Answer 1: Require all primary schools to become part of academy chains

This is the radical solution proposed by Policy Exchange. In a thoughtful, coherent paper (one of those arguments that has you nodding along in agreement then suddenly finding the logic has carried you somewhere unexpected), the authors paint a picture of a relatively successful sector about to be hit by a 'perfect storm' of challenges: a new curriculum and new assessment models, a raised floor standard, diminished support from local authorities and a crisis in headteacher recruitment. This set of challenges, the report argues, threatens the continued success of primary education in England, with too much headteacher and teacher time needing to be spent on implementing these changes, to the detriment of teaching and learning.

Policy Exchange's solution, to proactively group all primary schools into academy chains, is rather apocalyptically described as 'the only viable opportunity for the sector to mitigate against the risk of mass failure'. It would, the report argues, improve outcomes as a result of 'establishing collaborative practices around teaching and learning, supporting teachers and individual school leaders to focus on what happens in classrooms, and supporting a culture of continuous improvement and development'.

Specifically, the report recommends that:

- Primary schools should only be allowed to leave local authority control if they become part of a formal chain or partnership. Existing standalone primary academies should be required to join a chain.
- Local authorities should be able to set up their own chains.
- Academies should be allowed to switch to another chain after an initial period of three years.
- The government should expand the remit of the Regional Schools Commissioners or Directors of School Standards to establish and oversee this newly autonomous system.

This structural change, they argue, will free up capacity in primary schools to focus on things that will directly impact school performance.

Answer 2: Emulate the practices of the most effective schools

So what *are* the things that directly impact school performance? That's where ~~bus~~ report number two comes in. *Exploring Effective Pedagogy in Primary Schools: Evidence from Research*, is the latest paper from a large scale research study that has followed the progress of 3000 children from the age of 3 to 16, looking at the impact of their education. In order to investigate practices in effective schools, a sample of Year 5 classrooms in 125 primary schools was studied. Standardised assessments were used to measure children's academic

attainment in reading and maths, and information about classroom practices and processes was collected.

The researchers used this data to identify the factors that contribute to effective classroom practice, and boiled them down into eleven 'essential pedagogic strategies' employed by teachers in effective schools:

1. **Organisation** – teachers' resources were prepared ahead of time and were tailored to the needs of their pupils; they maintained a good pace in lessons and ensured every second counted.
2. **Shared objectives** – teachers ensured all concepts and ideas presented in lessons were understood by all children, and intervened when this was not the case, even if that meant changing a lesson or activity part way through.
3. **Homework** – homework set was meaningful and clearly linked to what the children were learning.
4. **Classroom climate** – teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships were strong.
5. **Behaviour management** – teachers used humour or a quiet reminder to correct behaviour.
6. **Collaborative learning** – children spent more time in collaborative learning situations.
7. **Personalised teaching and learning** – teachers were sensitive to the individual needs of children, provided learning materials that were rich and varied, had high expectations and differentiated appropriately.
8. **Making links explicit** – teachers were better able and more consistent in making links with areas outside the specific lesson.
9. **Dialogic teaching and learning** – teachers used discussion more effectively in maths, and had better instructional conversations in literacy.
10. **Assessment for learning** – teachers provided evaluative feedback and opportunities for pupils to reflect on their learning through review.
11. **Plenary** – teachers regularly included plenaries, using them to provide opportunities for further discussion, to explore issues in more depth and to extend work and concepts covered in the lesson.

Of these, the elements most prevalent in teachers in excellent schools were:

- strong organisational skills;
- positive classroom climate;
- personalised, highly interactive approaches to teaching and learning;
- use of dialogic teaching and learning;
- more frequent and effective use of the plenary.

Fasten your seatbelts

So there we have it. Are the strategies identified in the EPPSE report already being implemented in good primary schools around the country? Undoubtedly. Will that get harder as the reality of the 'perfect storm' of policy changes hits schools over the next few years? Possibly. Is mass academisation the answer? The jury's still out on that one, but it looks like we're in for a bumpy ride. Hold on tight.

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