

# Making a difference in education: What the evidence says

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6/1/2015

**Robert Cassen, Sandra McNally and Anna Vignoles** write that, as regards reducing the social gap, there is evidence that points to good potential in redirecting educational spending. They also argue for introducing fewer policy initiatives into the education system without proper evaluation.



A new Conservative government has taken office in the UK since our book, *Making a Difference in Education*, came out. We have surveyed the evidence about what is effective in British education, and wonder whether forthcoming policy will be guided by the evidence more than it has often been in the past. The government has said it will be for 'One Nation' – surely that means they will seek to close the social gap in our schools, the impact of family background on educational outcomes?

If they really want to do that, the evidence indicates what the key priorities are: better quality early years care, more support for reading and numeracy, and improving the quality of teaching. These things cost money. But equally there is little evidence that some of the things that governments tend to spend their money on narrow the social gap. For example, governments of all persuasions tend to focus overly on school reform. This can be costly and may not help the disadvantaged. For example, as we note below, there is no good evidence that Free Schools will necessarily narrow the socioeconomic gap in pupil achievement. One of Cameron's last pledges during the election campaign was to build 500 more Free Schools. This has little evidence to back it.



'It's 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, and as far as education is concerned we know quite a lot about how to do that. Or you can bypass the evidence.



In more detail, *early interventions* can be valuable in helping children overcome the effects of a disadvantaged background – but they have to be of high quality and are likely to be expensive. The book also lists a number of effective *parenting* programmes that provide value for money and can help improve educational outcomes. Parental involvement with schools can also be effective, and is relatively inexpensive.

Research shows that poor *reading* can be brought down to 1 or 1.5 per cent of a year group, not 10 per cent as it is now. On average each secondary school takes in around eighteen 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 of not learning to read considerably outweigh whatever needs to be spent to bring reading up to standard. We know what to do, and the pupil premium may be helping some schools do more, but overall we are still not doing it as consistently as we should. Similarly with *numeracy*: mathematical ability can be improved with the right kind of intervention, though more research would be helpful, especially long-run evaluations that would assess particular teaching approaches.

Perhaps the greatest mileage in educational investment, after the early years, lies in raising *teacher quality*. This is partly a matter of initial teacher education, and partly that of improving the teaching of the existing work force by Continuing Professional Development, or CPD. Yet we do not know in terms of teaching quality and student 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 is pretty good, but practice is fragmentary and best practice not universally well pursued.

Research suggests that who teaches you matters much more than what school you go to. Yet a major proportion of educational spending has gone on fostering Academies and Free Schools. The Academies formed up to 2008-9 have been evaluated, and found to have positive results; but improved outcomes were mostly confined to better-

achieving students, with little or no benefit to the lowest achieving. At the time of writing, there was no comparable research on Academies founded after that, though an Ofsted survey of 2012-13 found half those inspected 'requiring improvement' or 'inadequate'. There has been little research on Free Schools or primary Academies, though DfE data do not show them to be providing more progress than local authority primaries. Research on their equivalents in Sweden finds only small positive effects.

Altogether, as regards reducing the social gap, there is evidence that points to good potential in redirecting educational spending. But we would also plead for introducing fewer policy initiatives into the education system without proper evaluation of their cost (not least in terms of teachers' time) and their impact.

**For more, see [Making a Difference in Education: What the evidence says](#), by Robert Cassen, Sandra McNally and Anna Vignoles.**

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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