WHAT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CAN TELL US ABOUT EFFECTIVE PRE-SCHOOL PRACTICES AND PRIMARY SCHOOL PEDAGOGY?

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Background to the topic

As a mixed methods study, EPPSE has consistently used qualitative techniques to answer questions posed by the quantitative analyses. EPPSE undertook two qualitative sub-studies to explore the day to day characteristics of effective settings that promote better outcomes for children. One was set in pre-schools and the other in Year 5 classrooms in primary schools. This paper will look at these investigations and highlight the unique contribution that mixed methods bring to educational research.

Research questions/focus of the enquiry

EPPSE investigated practice and pedagogy, observing 'real life' settings during both the pre-school and late primary phase of children's education. In pre-school, the research focused on the characteristics of effective pre-school settings. In primary school, the research explored the pedagogical strategies applied in high, medium and low academically effective primary schools.

Research methods/or mapping the literature

In both phases, quantitative and administrative data sets were used to identify settings across a range of 'effectiveness' measures based on the statistical analyses of student outcomes. Field researchers were sent into settings to conduct in-depth observations to explore aspects of classroom pedagogy. Twelve pre-school case studies were conducted in the middle and upper range of effectiveness settings. The case studies explored six areas that were particularly important when working with children aged 3 to 5 years. In the primary phase, 125 primary classrooms were identified across a range of effectiveness levels derived from national assessment data. Two American observational instruments were used to identify 11 pedagogical strategies evident in the most 'effective' schools.

Analytical and/or theoretical framework

EPPSE's quantitative analyses adopted a multilevel modelling approach to identify the relationships between children's outcomes, background characteristics and classroom/school practices. Techniques such as analyses of observations and data reduction were employed for the qualitative analyses, which built on field researcher's logs and field notes, and explored these in relation to the research literature on pedagogy (including national and international studies on successful pedagogical strategies). These were then further explored in relation to the school's residual effectiveness rating.

Research findings and /or contribution to knowledge

The findings of these different approaches to studying effective classroom/school practices illustrate the importance of mixed methods and longitudinal research to illuminate the complexity of influences on children's outcomes. Both analyses produced findings of relevance for practitioners and policy makers concerning topics such as 'sustained shared thinking', behaviour management, classroom climate, quality of teaching and use of plenary sessions.