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Primary education 'too narrow'

Children in England are getting a primary education that is too narrow, because schools focus too much on maths and English, claims a major report.

The author of the Cambridge University report warns that too much emphasis on testing the basics could "impoverish" learning in areas such as the arts.



The review wants to see a more flexible primary timetable

Professor Robin Alexander says this could mean a "deficient" education.

The government has rejected the claim as "insulting" and says it "flies in the face of international evidence".

The Cambridge Primary Review's interim report is part of the biggest independent inquiry into primary education in England for 40 years.

It calls for an urgent debate about the purpose of primary education.

The report says inadequacies in the primary curriculum stem from a mistaken belief that breadth in the curriculum is incompatible with improved standards in the "basics" of maths, literacy and numeracy.

History, geography, science and the arts have been "squeezed out", it argues.

The report's authors suggest learning in primary schools is skewed towards subjects which are formally tested in the national tests, used to draw up league tables.

It calls testing "the elephant in the curriculum", noting that in Year 6 especially, the final year of primary school, "breadth competes with the much narrower scope of what is to be tested."

Professor Robin Alexander, director of the Cambridge Primary Review, said: "Our argument is that their [children's] education, and to some degree their lives, are impoverished if they have received an education that is so fundamentally deficient."

'Eight new domains'

The review suggests the primary curriculum should be "re-conceived" with 12 specific aims, which it arranges in three groups:

- The needs and capacities of the individual: wellbeing; engagement; empowerment; autonomy
- The individual in relation to others and the wider world: encouraging respect and reciprocity; promoting interdependence and sustainability; empowering local, national and global citizenship; celebrating culture and community
- Learning, knowing and doing: knowing, understanding, exploring and making sense; fostering skill; exciting the imagination; enacting dialogue.

These aims would be achieved through eight "domains", rather than a small number of subjects.

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The domains would be: arts and creativity; citizenship and ethics; faith and belief; language, oracy and literacy; mathematics; physical and emotional health; place and time (geography and history); science and technology.

Prof Alexander said there had always been a problem in primary schools with striking the right balance between the basic skills, such as numeracy and literacy, and other areas, such as history.

"All of them should be taught to the highest possible standard, raising the quality of educational experience across the board," he said.

"The key benefit to pupils is a retention of the statutory entitlement of a broad and balanced curriculum."

A spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families denied primary pupils were getting inadequate schooling.



The report warns that tests limit the last year of primary school

"To say our children are receiving a deficient education is insulting to hard working pupils and teachers everywhere and flies in the face of international evidence," he said.

"English children were recently recognised as being the highest achieving in maths and science among European countries."

The government has commissioned its own independent inquiry into primary education. Its interim findings - already published - called for a flexible, less-overloaded time table.

Sir Jim Rose, heading the review, suggested there could be six broader "areas of learning", rather than up to 14 individual subjects, such as history, geography and science.

'Freedom and flexibility'

The spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families continued: "We thank Professor Alexander for his contribution and Sir Jim Rose will no doubt read it with interest as part of his extensive, independent consultation into the primary curriculum, which is still gathering evidence from a wide range of experts and academics, teachers, parents and the public."

He added that the Rose Review's aim was to give teachers more freedom and flexibility, smooth children's transition between the stages of their education, and ensure the best possible educational outcomes for all children, he added.

Acting general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, Christine Blower, said it was a matter of "concern" that the government was keeping the Cambridge Primary Review "at arms length".

"His proposals for the primary curriculum have depth, credibility and, above all, respond to the realities of the primary classroom."

Nick Seaton, of the Campaign for Real Education, said children needed to be taught the basics at primary school, as well as a range of subjects.

"But if literacy and numeracy are taught well there should be enough time in the curriculum to teach the other subjects," he said.

The Cambridge Primary Review is an independent body which began its research on primary education in 2006.


The primary curriculum report is its 10th published study. A final report will be published later this year.

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