

Richard Garner: Pupils have a right to a varied education

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The Cambridge primary review deserves more than a cursory glance after landing in the in-tray of the Schools Secretary, Ed Balls.

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Professor Robin Alexander, who headed the inquiry team financed by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation charity, argues the education of many primary school pupils has been "impoverished" because key subjects have been squeezed out of the curriculum (dance, music, PE, history, geography and science).

He makes the point often made by teachers that rigid concentration on the three R's and teaching to the test for 11-year-olds has robbed pupils of their right to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Even the children who gave evidence to the inquiry believe their schooling is missing something – they like the excitement they get during the few times they are allowed to pursue creative ideas in arts and drama lessons.

Professor Alexander acknowledges – as does Ofsted, the education standards watchdog – that the best schools manage to deliver a rich and varied education even within the current constraints.

To a certain extent, that is because they are confident enough about what they are delivering to ditch some of the Government's directives. They also know they do not have to do too much teaching to the test to do well in league tables.

It is those children in the most disadvantaged areas who are most ill-served by what the inquiry team terms this "utilitarian and philistine" approach to education.

It is not an easy conundrum to address because these are the very children who most need a concentration on the basics of literacy and numeracy so they can access other areas of the curriculum.

What does make sense is the inquiry team's call for the national strategies in literacy and numeracy (already taking up half the curriculum time) to be re-integrated into the curriculum. For instance, the omission from the strategy of oracy – developing communication skills – means an extra portion of remaining curriculum time has to be devoted to English.

Today's report has not tackled the "elephant in the room" – the SATs taken by all 11-year-olds which dominate the last two years of primary schooling – other than to say assessment arrangements must be reviewed. Exactly how will be the subject of the inquiry team's final report later this year.

Until that is tackled – and I would advocate keeping testing but removing primary league tables – many schools will find it hard to return to the broader curriculum that I am sure almost all would agree would stimulate more pupils into enjoying their learning.