

The Cambridge Primary Review

Schoolchildren's lives 'are being impoverished'

Too much testing and too little learning in primary schools has let down a generation, says major inquiry

By Richard Garner, Education Editor

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A generation of schoolchildren have had their lives "impoverished" by rigid testing and an over-emphasis on the "three Rs", the most authoritative investigation into primary education for more than 40 years has concluded.

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The Cambridge Primary Review warns today that Britain's schools are in "severely utilitarian and philistine times". As a result, primary pupils are missing out on the kind of broad education promised when the national curriculum was first introduced 20 years ago – with potentially disastrous results and fewer opportunities later on in their lives.

Instead, they face a rigid testing regime, with more than half of all class

room time spent on the core subjects of maths and English, with virtually all other topics squeezed out.

"The most conspicuous casualties are the arts, the humanities and those kinds of learning in all subjects which require time for talking, problem- solving and the extended exploration of ideas," the report concludes. "Memorisation and recall have come to be valued over understanding and enquiry – and transmission of information over the pursuit of knowledge in its fuller sense."

The conclusions of the researchers, led by Professor Robin Alexander, are a damaging blow for the Government, which trumpeted its achievements in primary schools as one of the successes of Tony Blair's administration. The report warns: "The initial promise – and achievement – of entitlement to a broad, balanced and rich curriculum (through the national curriculum) has been sacrificed in pursuit of a narrowly conceived 'standards' agenda.

"Our argument is that [children's] education and their lives are impoverished if they have received an education that is so fundamentally deficient."

In an attempt to drive up standards, creative lessons have been replaced by numeracy tuition and "literacy hours". These were expected to take up half of all classroom time but, because they ignore such crucial elements of English as speaking and listening, even more time has to be devoted to them outside literacy hour. Such strategies, argues Professor Alexander, must be brought back into the national curriculum to free up more time for other subjects.

He also criticises the Government's official review of primary education, due out next month, arguing that its author – the

former head of Ofsted, Sir Jim Rose – had a remit that was too narrow, had avoided issuing a verdict on testing and had accepted that most of the Government's reforms were right.

The Cambridge team, who received submissions from 800 organisations during their two-year study, said primary education was not a simple choice between raising standards or a broad curriculum. Attainment could be improved only if pupils were given wide-ranging, stimulating and enjoyable lessons, they said.

Some children questioned by the panel accepted that they needed to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, but stressed that this was not enough. Professor Alexander added: "They said 'we get really excited by the arts and history and science, and by being encouraged to be creative'. Their parents agree with them. Science, art, geography and history – we are saying these things should be [in the curriculum]. To argue that they should be removed is pure folly. Standards, breadth and entitlement have to go hand in hand. It is not good enough to say that because the basics are important, that's all that matters."

He cited two reports by Ofsted, the education standards watchdog, on high-achieving schools. "They appear to be saying you must concentrate on standards in the basics but, if you do so at the exclusion of other things, you actually shoot yourself in the foot."

At present, Professor Alexander reports, the national curriculum is seen by teachers as "overcrowded, unmanageable and, in certain respects, inappropriately conceived".

A review of testing at the age of 11 is needed, he adds, because "breadth competes with the much narrower scope of what is to be tested" in the last year of primary school. He says: "In these severely utilitarian and philistine times, it has become necessary to argue the case for creativity and the imagination on the grounds of their contribution to the economy alone ... We assert the need to emphasise the intrinsic value of exciting children's imaginations."

Professor Alexander recommends that only 70 per cent of lessons should be devoted solely to the core curriculum, with the remaining 30 per cent set aside for other topics such as local history.

Teachers' leaders and Opposition MPs welcomed the findings. Michael Gove, the shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, said: "I share the review's concerns about a narrow curriculum damaging standards. One in five pupils failed to get even one GCSE last year because they never got a proper start in primary school."

John Bangs, of the National Union of Teachers, said underachievement in schools would not be tackled as long as teachers felt "inhibited" about being more creative with their lessons.

A spokeswoman for the Government said Sir Jim would "no doubt" read the Cambridge Primary Review before making his own recommendations.

Curriculum report: Must do better

Key areas of concern:

- * Long-term educational goals have been replaced by short-term targets.
- * Curriculum overload – many teachers believe far too much is prescribed for the time available.
- * Loss of children's entitlement to a broad, balanced and rich curriculum – with arts, the humanities and science under threat.
- * Tests have led to memorisation and recall replacing understanding and inquiry as the key goal in the classroom.
- * "Politicisation" of the curriculum with accompanying rhetoric of "standards".
- * Pressure at start of primary school to begin formal lessons too early with tests for four and five-year-olds.
- * Excessive prescription has led to loss of flexibility and autonomy for schools.
- * Historic split between the "basics" and the rest of the timetable has led to "unacceptable" difference in the quality of provision between the two.
- * Mistaken assumption that high standards in "the basics" can be achieved only by marginalising the rest.

What needs to be done:

- * Scrap singling out time for literacy and numeracy strategies and reintegrate them into the national curriculum. At present they count for half of the timetable and elements of English (such as speaking and listening) have to be taught outside them.

- * Restore aim of original national curriculum that children are entitled to a broad and balanced education (giving equal weight to core subjects and elements like the arts and humanities).
- * Review assessment and testing arrangements – dubbed "the elephant in the room" – which overshadows the entire curriculum.
- * Devote just 70 per cent of time to national curriculum – with 30 per cent to a locally agreed curriculum (such as learning about local history).