

Leading article: Our primary schools are short-changing their pupils

A new report is right to raise alarm over a narrowing curriculum

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Scarcely a month seems to pass without a review of some aspect or other of our education system. This preoccupation with the way our children learn, and the contradictory advice that is all too often dispensed, sets us apart from most Continental countries, where teachers are, by and large, left to teach.

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If any report deserves to be taken seriously, however, it is one published today: the Cambridge Primary Review, headed by Professor Robin Alexander. This is, firstly, because it is the most comprehensive inquiry into primary schooling since the Plowden report of 1967, and, secondly, because inadequacies in primary education naturally feed through into secondary schools and beyond. Those who arrive at secondary school ill-prepared tend to be at a disadvantage, not just for the rest of their formal schooling, but often for life.

This is one reason, of course, why the national curriculum was devised. But it was also a reaction to what had gone before: the permissive, learn-by-discovery primary schooling that followed Plowden, and an attempt to even out a system where standards were thought to have become unacceptably disparate. The consensus, while never entirely accurate, was that a generation of children had passed through state schools without ever learning to spell or add up.

Among the guiding principles of the national curriculum was that every child should be taught the basics – by which was meant, mostly, the "three Rs" – but there was also balance and variety. The Labour Government's increasing preoccupation with testing skewed the original intent, as schools were judged on test scores alone. The burden of this report is that the return to fundamentals has gone far too far, to the detriment of children's early education generally. So narrow has the curriculum become, the report warns, that a whole generation has had their lives impoverished.

We have long argued that today's children are over-tested, and that the testing regime, especially in primary schools, has subverted the original purpose of the national curriculum. Teaching to the test has become endemic, sapping the enthusiasm of teachers and pupils alike. As the Cambridge review finds, the result, in too many cases, is a new form of rote learning in which pupils memorise the answers that are required, without understanding the hows and whys. Professor Alexander argues that standards and breadth are not incompatible and pleads for the return to the curriculum of creative subjects and approaches that have been progressively squeezed out by the requirements of testing. He goes so far as to suggest that stressing standards above all else is actually counterproductive to raising those very same standards, because a sterile focus on tests can have the effect of depressing achievement, while a broader approach can foster an additional measure of interest and enthusiasm that raises standards of its own accord.

He is right, and the Cambridge Primary Review deserves to be taken seriously. It will strike a chord with teachers and pupils, probably with parents, too. To stifle interest and curiosity in primary pupils risks stunting their development quite as much as an inability to spell. Breadth and creativity are overdue for a return. At the same time, we cannot help asking why primary education in Britain is so regularly buffeted by conflicting political and educational winds. It has produced a climate of turbulence that does no one any good.