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## Our education system leaves me baffled

No one outside the Establishment can keep up with all the changes

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If I had care of a four-year-old right now, I think I'd go and live in France. Even though I'm not that fond of France and I hate speaking the language, I'd be able to pop my four-year-old into the nearest *ecole maternelle* and relax. He'd stay there until he was six, by which time they'd teach him to read. And then he'd go to primary school and learn to write – with accents on and everything.

Here in England, everything I hear, read or watch on telly about education is too baffling to understand. I say this as a governor of a small village primary school. I'm not being funny, nor boasting about my idleness or lack of care. I'm saying the education of England's children is too baffling to understand for anyone who is not an educationist.

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Nobody could blame me, I hope, for being baffled by news of the Cambridge Primary Review, the biggest and most detailed study of primary education for 40 years. I listened carefully to Jim Naughtie talking to the review's lead author, Professor Robin Alexander, on the *Today* programme yesterday. Naughtie said the review found primary education was "in good heart", but it challenged the Government over the uselessness of its cherished Sats. Also, they want "formal schooling" to begin at six, not five. The Prof did his best to condense 500 or so pages into 12-second sound bites, and I listened in that vague early-morning way, thinking: Goodness, this is dense.

At least Naughtie sounded apologetic, if not faintly embarrassed, about the few "points" he could raise in his eight minutes and three seconds. Vernon Coaker, the schools minister (actually, the minister for schools "and learners"), is unembarrassable, I think. He told GMTV: "It's disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed." He didn't like it one bit: it was "at best, woolly and unclear", it was "a backward step" (and for good measure "a retrograde step") and he said he refuted it. I hope he's read it. I couldn't get through 500 pages of educational theorising in less than a week.

I found a clip of Robin Alexander later, talking to BBC morning television. A pretty girl on a sofa was nagging away about why he wanted to raise the school age from five to six. "What we're arguing for," said the Prof, "is the upward

extension of the Government's Early Years Foundation Stage to age six, and then a debate about whether formal schooling should start later, which is a bit different from saying that formal schooling should start later." Eh? What? He clarified, ve-ry care-fully and slow-ly: "The Government has a scheme for all children, the Early Years Foundation Stage, which goes up to age five." Girl on sofa said (doubtfully): "Mmm."

Alexander: "We want that to go up to age six."

"Mmm."

I know what the Early Years Foundation Stage is, though few people over 35 do, unless they're teachers or governors. Most of us call the places attended by three-year-olds "nursery" or "pre-school", because that's what they are. The Government calls them... I don't know... EYFS delivery units? Most people who aren't parents of toddlers believe that "primary" school starts at five, though you can be four and in primary school too. The Cambridge Review authors think even five is too young. I think it's too young, too.

What strikes me about what we governors call EYFS, and everyone else has to spell out as Early Years Foundation Stage, is that it's routinely referred to on the BBC and in the press as "the Government's Early Years Foundation Stage". Why? No one ever says "the Government's A-levels" or "the Government's Sats", do they? It's because a) no one outside the educational establishment can keep up with this Government's permanent educational revolution. And b) they talk in a stupid language of their own.

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