

Pressure of tests 'means primary school pupils lose their childhood'



Alexandra Fread, Education Editor

Children at primary schools are being forced to grow up too soon and face "intolerable pressure" from both the regime of testing in schools and fears about commercialism in the outside world, research suggests.

There is widespread concern that family life is breaking down and the culture of respect is disappearing, according to a review of primary school education published today by Cambridge University and the Esm[?]e Fairbairn charitable foundation.

The review, based on discussions with children, teachers, parents and community groups, revealed a "pervasive anxiety" and a "sense of deep pessimism" about modern childhood.

It also raises questions about whether starting school at 5 is too young and suggests that the creation of more middle schools, taking children from age nine to 13, may help to ease the transfer to secondary school.

Robin Alexander, director of the review, said the general unease discovered by researchers as they travelled around the country, could not be easily explained away. "What struck us was that the overall message everywhere was the same. People are very worried about childhood," he said.

The researchers conducted 87 in-depth discussions about primary education at schools across England. In all, 750 people took part.

Many children said they were very worried about the effects of climate change and global poverty, but this was countered by the optimism felt by those whose schools were actively involved in environmental issues.

Pupils, parents and teachers were also concerned about national curriculum tests. Children were arguably the most relaxed on this issue, describing SATs tests as "scary", but necessary.

Teachers said that the Key Stage 2 national curriculum tests sat by children in Year 6 of primary school put the whole school under pressure and instead advocated informal assessment of the pupils by teachers.

Teachers and teaching assistants thought the national curriculum was too rigid and left them with insufficient time to teach others things that they believed to be important.

Parents complained that too many tests induced "mental shutdown", putting children off learning. Most groups expressed concern about "the commercially-driven values" of society.

Professor Alexander said that ministers may need to accept that improving school "standards" through tests and Ofsted judgments is not the same thing as raising the quality of education.

The report, *Community Soundings*, is the first of a series of studies that will be published by the Primary Review in the lead up to a final document next year. Michael Gove, the shadow children's secretary, said that the findings confirmed the Tory view that "society is broken".

But a spokeswoman for Department for Children, Schools and Families said that children at primary schools were not overtested.



The head

Tim Benson has been a head teacher for 20 years. He now runs Nelson Primary School in East Ham (Nicola Woolcock writes).

Mr Benson, 52, described excessive testing as his bugbear. "There are now 130 criteria for assessing each five-year-old pupil, it's absolutely ridiculous," he said.

“It’s not improving standards but making them more skilled at passing tests. The only people who can’t grasp this are in the Government.”

The school is extremely large for a primary, with 900 pupils. A high proportion of children are from Sri Lanka, Africa, the Caribbean and, increasingly, Eastern Europe.

Mr Benson said that behavioural standards of pupils had changed little during his career – but that some parents were now more in need of discipline than their children.

“Behaviour has improved over the last five years, because part of the indigenous white population that used to be here caused most of the bad behaviour,” he added.

The parent

Caroline Morgan

lives in Dorset with her husband and three children. William, 7, and Alice, 5, are at the Prince of Wales School in Dorchester, which caters for pupils until they reach year four (nine-year-olds). Isabella, 10, left last term and has just started at middle school.

Mrs Morgan, 42, said: “The school has a fantastic head teacher who is sympathetic to the Scandinavian model, where children don’t start school until the age of 7. When Isabella was in her final year, she had one optional piece of homework a week. Now she has compulsory homework twice a week, it’s a shock to her.

“I think the school’s ethos and atmosphere is lovely because once you get on that treadmill there’s no turning back. The school still gets really good academic results, but there is a balance and it also prioritises other things. They do a lot of school trips.

“I do think children start school too young. They just look so tiny at four and it’s a long day.”

The pupil

Molly Webb,

10, is in Year 6 of St Andrew’s Church of England Primary School in Skegby, a village near Mansfield, Nottinghamshire. She said: “I like school because everyone is really nice and friendly and always really helpful. All the teachers are really nice.

“I like learning about numeracy and literacy, and also doing drama, art and design and technology. I use the computer and we store data in it and learn how to find things out. It’s very useful.

“At playtime we play things like stick-in-the-mud, skipping and hand-clapping games.

“I’ve taken a mental maths test and my SATs tests in year two. I like tests because I like to see how I’m getting on. I don’t feel like there is too much pressure.

“We’ve learned how to recycle in schools and use different bins in the classroom. We were asked, if we were in charge of the world how we could change it to stop pollution. I would make it so there weren’t so many cars causing pollution.”

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