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Look, listen, learn

Study after study finds that testing children at an early age hinders their learning. But the government ignores them

Sue Palmer
theguardian.com, Friday 8 February 2008 12.30 EST

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They must issue the people at the [Department for Schools, Children and Families](#) with blindfolds and earplugs as they enter the building. It's the

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Education

only way they could possibly miss the gathering storm of evidence that the English education system is going horribly wrong.

As Jenni Russell [pointed out](#) in the Guardian on Thursday, every submission to a recent government select committee on education (except, of course, the one from the DSCF itself) pointed out that our obsessive tests-and-targets culture doesn't work. Did they listen? No. Advice from exam boards, academic researchers, professional organisations, the government's own quangos, even the [General Teaching Council](#) - all was waved away in a cloud of complacency.

Then, yesterday morning, another big gun - the independent Alexander Review of Primary Education - [boomed](#) the same message that we're testing children far too much and starting them on the target treadmill far too early. Another airy wave. "Please go away - we've set up our own enquiry, and we'll listen to that, thank you very much."

Meanwhile, every year another cohort of bewildered four-year-olds is ushered into a system that is clearly failing. No one at DSCF acknowledges repeated research findings that an early start to formal education gives no academic advantage, and may be damaging for some children. Nor that children in countries which wait until children are six or seven before sending them to school tend to outperform our poor weary offspring by the time they reach the age of 11. They ignore the facts that, in these countries, the achievement gap between rich and poor is nowhere as wide as ours, and the drop-out rate in secondary school enviably lower.

Instead, the government insists schools treat education as though it were some sort of race - a steeplechase in which, sadly, many children fall at the first fence and never recover. This applies particularly to boys (who are often up to a year behind girls in terms of general development when they start school) and to children from disadvantaged homes who need more time to develop language and attention skills before starting on formal work.

And once they're up and running, all children spend large tracts of their primary careers joylessly chasing test scores. Learning to read these

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days isn't about discovering the pleasure to be had from books, or the joy of independent learning. It's about knowing which box to tick on the literacy SAT.

In the circumstances, perhaps it's understandable that the people responsible for this state of affairs prefer to cover their eyes and ears. It can't be comfortable to think that the strategy they hoped would improve standards of learning, help boys overcome the educational gender gap and make things better for children from the least advantaged homes is actually having exactly the opposite effect.

But earplugs aren't the answer. Neither is a DSCF-appointed enquiry, whose findings have already been anticipated by a directive. For the sake of the nation's children, Ed Balls and his minions should open their minds to the work of Professor Robin Alexander and his phalanx of independent experts. The [Primary Review: Children, Their World, Their Schools](#) is almost complete. Instead of waving it away, they should be inviting the Cambridge professor to present his findings in Whitehall.



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Finisterre

08 February 2008 5:53pm

Absolutely. (and sadly, yet another example of the increasing gap between politicians, reality, and public opinion.)

I pray to the god of reason (ha! can you tell it's been a long week!?) that these will be scrapped by the time I have children. Otherwise I would have to follow the brave stance of a friend and simply refuse to allow my child to take part.



iainmacl

08 February 2008 5:53pm

Well said. The industrialisation of childhood that is marked by this focus on testing, re-testing and larger and larger, semi-privatised schools is completely the wrong direction for education to be headed in. Bringing 'diversity of suppliers' in through faith schools, academies and other divisive institutions does little other than label and segregate. We've always had, through private education, means that facilitate the "secession of the successful" (in Robert Reich's phrase) but these additional options and layers will exacerbate the situation.

What's needed is a simple focus on ensuring that going to the local school is the norm and that all efforts (and funding) are built on ensuring that every school creates a nurturing and stimulating environment and not one that threatens, overtests and bludgeons enquiring minds into dull compliance or nihilistic disaffection.



freepoland

08 February 2008 5:55pm

Good piece: '...It's about knowing which box to tick on the literacy SAT.'

More to the point, if the teachers could be let off box-ticking and testing, they might be able to concentrate on the subjects they teach. Education is severely over-

managed and that management mostly consists of the idea that risk can and should be avoided in education.

The only good education is one which takes risks, and the most effective learning results from unintended consequences. And you can't plan or manage either.

Testing should be kept out of schools, left to exam boards, and reduced to a minimum. Like at school leaving age.



Asterix

08 February 2008 6:01pm

They are politicians with no science background. Politicians do what fits with their dogma . If they understood and followed the scientific method they wouldn't be politicians would they? Scientists are only interested in what works whereas politicians have appearance and fitting their beliefs to contend with. This is demonstrated in many areas not just education. They show themselves up even more when they get involved with IT based projects. There is no learning process- they are obliged to follow policy and when it doesn't work they can always fall back on spin.



RobertStanfield

08 February 2008 6:03pm

Good article, Sue. I fully agree with you. Children develop at different speeds, and even trying to sort them at age 11 is folly, in my view.

Hothousing, testing etc of young pupils can just lead to bright pupils getting burnt out, and to less quick learners becoming discouraged.

Messing around with childrens' educational development in order to satisfy pointless government 'targets' and statistics - which few read and fewer actually believe - is a grotesque state of affairs.



GordonsAGoner

08 February 2008 6:14pm

For this bunch of bastards in power, a schoolchild is simply an economic unit. That's all. Just say no. And if you want an education that IS truly child-centred. then get

yourself to a Steiner school, and check it out. My ex and I sent all four our our kids to Steiner Schools, and have no regrets whatsoever. Penniless for 20 years whilst we did it, but again - no regrets



Iosher

08 February 2008 6:45pm

I am a qualified teacher but stopped teaching years ago when the politicians decided they knew better than the 'educational establishment', ie teachers, Prof. of Education etc. This system of education does not only not work, but is abusive to children and I will not be part of it.



jarrah

08 February 2008 6:47pm

Good article.

ianmacl: great post.

I've been aware of this Select Committee for a while, as I still teach part-time. It's largely a pointless farce, though it serves to point out how his government have simply hijacked almost every issue and killed off any notion that we have a participative democracy.

At this stage, with the DfES still ignoring everyone, the only thing to do is for teachers to ignore them. I am hoping the unions will help to co-ordinate a campaign of defying government policy and simply refusing to administer tests any more. We should not be engaged in harming children at the behest of this or any government - we are not in education to disadvantage and damage children. Teachers should from now do what is right, and teach in a way that is beneficial to children. Many teachers already do this in their own way, by refusing to 'teach to the test', i.e. by refusing to spend hours and hours going over practice papers and so stressing little children out all the time.



BishopHill

08 February 2008 7:13pm

ianmcl hilariously thinks that a report which shows that alternative schools (which

are all private) and none education (which has no government involvement) are both better for children than state education, somehow means that we need...state education.

If you trouble yourself to look at the Primary Review report published today you'll find that it refers to research which shows that poor children in home education outperform middle class children in schools.

Yes, Iain, more state education required.



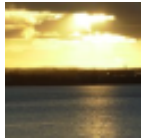
Jeremy James

08 February 2008 7:17pm

How many teachers like Iosif have given up and doing something they don't want to do rather than something they did?

How many parents are fed up to the back teeth with our grotesque education system?

They should set up their own schools. Somebody needs to get the two together and mount a massive movement of civil disobedience against the educational establishment.



Urism

08 February 2008 7:40pm

The English education system has gone horribly wrong because of far too much Government interference, poor training and substandard applicants for the work involved. Teachers these days deliver the curriculum with no interest in anything but gathering the proof that they have done so. The outcome of the lesson doesn't matter and as for follow up, differentiation, or allowing time for consolidation, what's that? The curriculum just rolls from one thing to another without the children being able to draw breath. The year before last the Government gave teachers another two hours a week outside of the classroom which means two hours less teaching for the kids if a member of support staff steps in. Just about everything Labour has done in the last ten years has been detrimental to education. If they go ahead with leaving kids in school for two years without teaching them much and allowing them to play, the only thing they will create is bad behaviour unless two more years of nursery is highly organised and much better supported. I looked back recently on my own children's work in reception, (now referred to as Foundation). It was immeasurably more advanced than what we see being delivered today and both of my children were ready

for the work when they started school. If I were a parent I would be very, very worried about placing my kids in school to play until they're 7. The vast majority of kids don't need that. Personally I think that Labour doesn't know how to fix the phenomenal drop in standards that they've caused with their constant drip feed of policy changes and now they're blaming the entry age of the children. It'll all come out in the wash anyway.



jarrah

08 February 2008 8:02pm

Urism: I agree with you.

jeremyjames - i believe you're right. We need to rebel, as teachers and as parents, indeed as concerned human beings.

What is needed is to abandon the insane scheme of raising the compulsory school leaving age to 18 (and the criminalising of children who don't comply), raise the school starting age to 6 or preferably 7, and give teachers the autonomy to teach as they know how to do, free from political interference.

this may be of interest.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/our-children-tested-to-destruction-779790.html>

more and more parents are leaving the state system and doing it for themselves. Look at the 'Education Otherwise' website.



north

08 February 2008 9:53pm

I've been in teaching for over 30 years and have read piece after piece of educational 'research'. Most of it is fit only as toilet paper. Methodology tends to be dodgy to the nth degree and the results are pre-decided to suit the researchers' prejudices and ideology. Until I can have a very, very good look at any new research findings and evaluate the competence and honesty of the research team I take it all with a sack, let alone a pinch, of salt.



jeremyjames



08 February 2008 10:11pm

@ Jarrah

Dreadful. (The piece you linked to, not you.) First time I've ever agreed with Steve Sinnot.

Were my children of school age - they're not, they're having to agonise over theirs - I would find a few similar minded parents and someone like 'north' and set up my own little school.

It is all such nonsense. If you can't get children interested, they won't learn. If they want to, they will. I was reading about David Livingstone today - twelve hours tying thread in a textile mill and he still had the energy and interest to go to school and even study science.

Thinking of my primary school - all thirty two of us and two and a half teachers - and I can't remember a moment's tedium but I can remember we kids helping each other. Private, it was; good socialists, my parents, until it came to their offspring. Bless them.



gavinbullock

09 February 2008 2:32am

You are so right. "[How]... they could possibly miss the gathering storm of evidence that the English education system is going horribly wrong". I think something is going horribly wrong with government, or has been for a long time. They seem to be caught in the cage of group-think, with an intolerance to dissenting voices added for good measure. This subject was touch on in 'Any Questions' on Radio 4 on Friday. JIM KNIGHT, Minister for Schools was answering a question about the Finnish practice of starting school at 7 years and frequent testing was raised. He scooted over the Finnish experience and went straight to Alberta where they have excellent results and just as much testing as we have.

New Labour used to say, What works! Unfortunately they rarely take time and trouble to find out. Gordon Brown's tube part-privatisation was not believed in by anyone in the business except the Treasury (Christian Wolmar). Modern governments have to tackle extremely complex problems - education, drugs, antisocial behaviour - and need all the help they can get to formulate policies that stand any chance of success. They have half destroyed their help within - the civil service - in favour of half-baked policy wonks who are often still on their first razor blade. Consultants abound, undermining the civil service. Plus they get rid of loads at la Gershen. The internal advisory system has been hollowed out, neutered and fragmented.

Outside 'experts' are chosen on ideological grounds. Adonis at education and, a while ago, market orientated professors of health policy. Prof. McGrand advised while Prof. Allyson Pollock (anti-PFI) was pilloried by the Select Committee on Health in their report in one of the most disgraceful publications to come from the House of Commons - ad hominem argument par excellence protected by parliamentary privilege. The government does not consult a range of experts, it cherry picks to match its own preconceived ideas. The new accelerated process of evidence collecting - to save time! - is an odious device to legitimise this.

No wonder Gordon has so many policy reviews going on. Ten years of sofa government has led to so many ill conceived policies - some eating away at our institutions (NHS, education), some abandoned (the CPA, the merging of prisons and probation) some stillborn. Tory blunders like rail privatisation reeked their chaos from the start. The policy failures of New Labour are on a slow fuse. Some will blow up soon, others will go on causing grief for decades (PFI). With education, of course, it is only our children's life chances that are being affected.



easterman

09 February 2008 10:07am

Fear is driving teacher's to cheat. I hope the kids latch on . They will need this skill in a globalised economy.



cowgirl

09 February 2008 10:41am

old farmers saying you can't make a sheep heavier by weighing it

The products of this country's education system are enough to tell us that it is rotten. Those children who come out of it well do so inspite of e system, usually because of good parental involment- those children with disengaged or disinterested parents are lost. A vicious circle is being set up as the teachers of the future are are poorly educated, and drastic action is needed now. There have been far too many changes, far too many government initiatives- we now need a panel of experienced educators to take over the role of the politicians, set a course for the future and introduce consistency, stability and higher standards, with less testing and a less prescriptive curriculum.



cowgirl

09 February 2008 10:42am

old farmers saying you can't make a sheep heavier by weighing it

The products of this country's education system are enough to tell us that it is rotten. Those children who come out of it well do so despite the system, usually because of good parental involvement- those children with disengaged or disinterested parents are lost. A vicious circle is being set up as the teachers of the future are poorly educated, and drastic action is needed now. There have been far too many changes, far too many government initiatives- we now need a panel of experienced educators to take over the role of the politicians, set a course for the future and introduce consistency, stability and higher standards, with less testing and a less prescriptive curriculum.



Nunovalente

09 February 2008 11:41am

Read this book by Dr Leonard Sax on gender differences
<http://www.whygendermatters.com/>



jarrah

09 February 2008 11:52am

cowgirl: agreed. Well put, and true.

I believe the role of government is all but over. We see daily how much harm they do, how wrong they are, how arrogant, dismissive and contemptuous they become. Let alone how corrupt, and how much of our money they waste.

When governments cannot govern, when they harm children, then we must do things for ourselves. We must not only defy this authoritarian regime and say, as teachers, 'no, we will harm children no longer, we will test no more'; as parents, we can also leave the poisonous state system. Hundreds of thousands already do, and organise themselves into small community based groups, and do the teaching for themselves.

See this link for an example,

<http://www.education-otherwise.org/>

and for those interested, read 'De-schooling Society' written in the 70s by Ivan Illich

(who was a priest I believe) - and still very relevant today.

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