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Thousands of pupils given wrong grade in 3R tests

BY **RICHARD GARNER**, **EDUCATION EDITOR** | Friday 02 November 2007



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As many as one in three primary school pupils may have been awarded the wrong grade in maths and English national curriculum tests for 11-year-olds, according to a major research study published today.

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The findings from the Primary Review Group, which is undertaking the first in-depth investigation into the sector for 40 years, mean that up to 200,000 pupils a year could have been given the wrong level.

In the national curriculum tests, pupils are graded into different levels according to their ability. Level four is the required standard for an 11-year-old to show they can read and write fluently and add up accurately.

The findings put a major question mark over government claims that standards have risen in the three Rs in primary schools because the percentage of pupils achieving level four has shot up since 1997

when Labour swept to power.

The study is one of three looking into testing and assessment in primary schools published today by the group, headed by the Cambridge-based academic Professor Robin Alexander and funded by the Esme Fairbairn Foundation charity. Its author, Wynne



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Harlen, from the University of Bristol, says the tests are "a rather poor measure for assessing an individual pupil".

Professor Harlen found that questions are limited in scope and therefore do not give an adequate reflection of the abilities of pupils.

The report says: "It is likely that a different selection of items [in tests] would produce a different result. It is estimated that for the end of key stage test [at 11] in England this means that as many as one third of pupils may be given the wrong level. Only an increase in the length of the test beyond anything that is practicable would materially change this situation."

Professor Harlen argues that a far more accurate method of assessing children's abilities in the three Rs would be teachers' assessments throughout the year of classroom work.

The findings come at a time of increasing controversy over the tests, with many teachers' leaders calling for their abolition, claiming they bore pupils because of their repetitive nature and switch them off learning. They also argue there is too much teaching relating to the tests as teachers try to ensure a good position for their school in government performance league tables.

Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, said: "With the publication of this report, there is now every reason to act to dismantle a testing system whose only effect seems to be to create stress for teachers and pupils."

Today's reports also put a question mark over whether what they term as "massive investment" in the national literacy and numeracy strategies for primary schools has produced value for money in terms



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of raising standards.

The research concludes that the gains have been "relatively modest" with two researchers, Peter Timms and Christine Merrell from the University of Durham, claiming the rise in standards could simply be the result of tailoring teaching to the test.

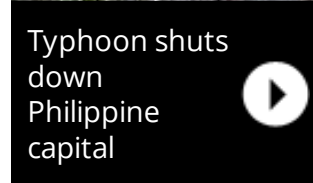
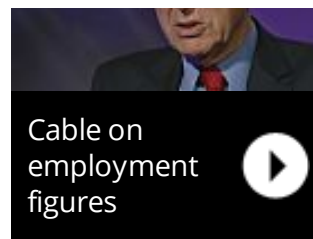
It also warns that gains in reading standards have been achieved at the expense of pupils' enjoyment of reading. Just 44 per cent of English pupils in the top band for reading ability in an international study enjoyed the experience – compared with an international average of 51 per cent.

The rise in primary school standards was Labour's proudest boast as a result of its first term in office. When Labour came to power less than 60 per cent of pupils reached the required standards in English and maths tests at age 11. This has now risen to 80 per cent in English and 76 per cent in maths. However, the target that the Government set for 2002 was reached only this year.

Professor Alexander's review will be completed next year. Its interim report published last month revealed the anxious state of today's primary school children – saying they were stressed by the tests and also worried by climate change.



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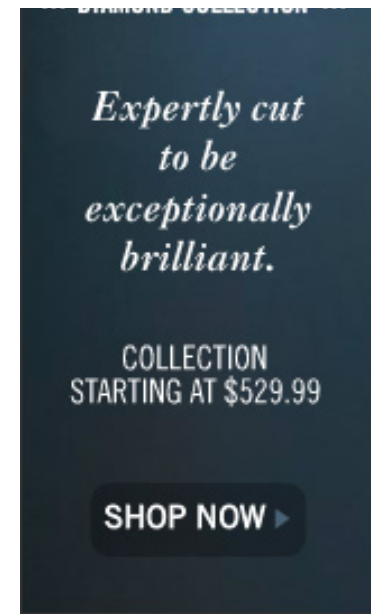
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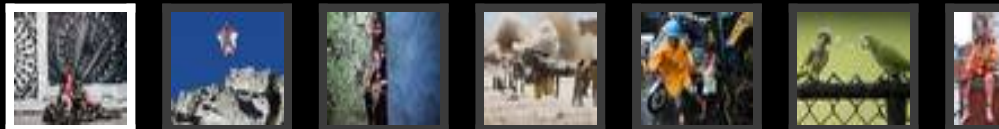
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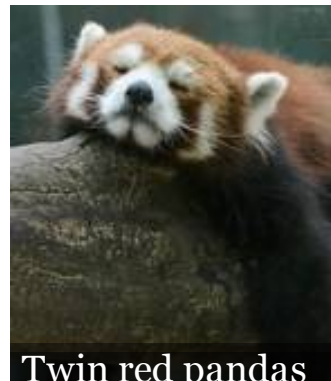
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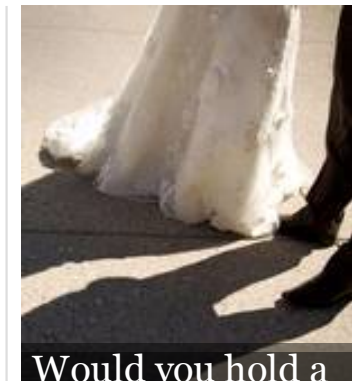
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