



Put the fun back into first lessons, urge heads

Anushka Asthana, education correspondent
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Children aged five are too young to start formal schooling and should be taught through play until they are at least six, according to an influential body of headteachers.

In a submission to the largest review of primary education in 40 years, the National Primary Headteachers' Association (NPHA) accused the government of an 'obscene rush' to get children producing academic work. It said that a playful approach to teaching seemed to 'disappear entirely in the vast majority of schools' as soon as children entered year one, regardless of the fact that those born in the summer months had just turned five.

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Instead, it called for the 'fun' methods used in nurseries and reception classes to be extended for at least an extra year. Research from Scandinavia, it argued, showed that delaying the start of formal education could boost academic success in the long run.

'Children learn better when they enjoy,' said Peter Price, chair of the association and a headteacher in Liverpool. He said that guided play was the best way for the younger children to be taught, and it should be maintained in the classroom until children were at least six.

It is a view that has won support from many parents. 'They seem like almost babies and then they are put in year one and all the good stuff they have been learning suddenly disappears,' said Margaret Morrissey, of the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations.

'Of course we would not advocate that year one children learn through nothing but play but it should be a balanced transition. After the foundation stage children can't cope with suddenly having formal learning. When I worked as a lay inspector for Ofsted, teachers told me that all the children wanted to do was fall asleep in the afternoon, but instead they would have to write.'

She pointed out that children in their first year varied hugely in age - a six-month difference accounting for one tenth of their lives.

The NPHA report is one of a number of submissions to the Primary Review, an extensive study being carried out by Cambridge University which will produce the first of a series of interim reports on Friday when the two-year project reaches the half-way point.

Nansi Ellis, head of education policy at the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, highlighted the fact that in Wales the play-based 'foundation stage' went on until children reached seven. In England, meanwhile, pressure on schools meant some teachers were starting to cut out the play-time in reception class.

A spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said: 'The formal school starting age of five has served children well for decades and standards in our primary schools have never been higher.'

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