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## To test or not to test - the big question

**BYLINE:** Sian Griffiths

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Robin Alexander, who is leading an inquiry into primary schooling, tells Sian Griffiths why he believes that parents are right to voice concerns about national tests, but that there are no easy solutions to the problem

It was hard to avoid parents' grumbles last week as they sent their little ones off to sit national tests in maths, English and science.

"I can't see why 11-year-olds should take these tests. It seems so unfair and my son is really worried about them. I never had to sit exams at his age - I was too busy enjoying my childhood," was a typical reaction, from one dad of my acquaintance. "He's done nothing but practise for the tests for weeks and now he's really bored with school."

Robin Alexander doesn't personally know any of last week's unfortunate examinees - "My grandchildren aren't at that age and they are being educated in Scotland, where they have a different system," he says. But this has not stopped the Cambridge don - who is leading one of the biggest investigations into primary schooling for nearly half a century - from adding his voice to the increasingly strident attacks on the testing regime.

The stakes are high: the league table positions of England's 17,000 primary schools depend on the test results for 11-year-olds, (the performance of seven-year-olds is assessed informally by their teachers). But the tests have been slammed by everyone from politicians to children's authors such as Philip Pullman.

"Research has found that in some schools the tests are dominating pupils' last two years. We have also reported a strong perception by parents and teachers that they are stressful for children," says Alexander, speaking down a crackly phone line from his home in north Yorkshire.

"People do not like 'high stakes testing', with its league tables in the press and all the pressure that goes with that... I think there is a pretty clear consensus that change is needed. The evidence is so strong... it points in the direction of radical reform."

Alexander, I soon realise, is a terrifyingly precise academic, who rather disapproves of newspapers' simplification of weighty education matters - but will speak up if he thinks something is worth fighting for. Unhappily for Ed Balls and his ministers, he seems to have decided that tests, and everything else going on in primary classrooms up and down the land, are just such a cause.

Alexander has been in the thick of the primary wars before - the debate that has raged over whether little ones should have creative, liberal-style classrooms, full of play and "magic moments" or more disciplined, regimented teaching with tests and formal lessons. Sixteen years ago he was one of the three wise men (see Chris Woodhead, right) whose contentious report heralded a swing from the former to the latter.

Now some believe that when the conclusion is written to his ongoing epic inquiry (his 70 researchers have produced dozens of studies on everything from school buildings to falling standards) it may recommend a swing back again, with some of those who have contributed even suggesting that children stay at home until they are six or seven.

Certainly Alexander is giving ministers a headache: findings from his army of consultants have been splashed over front pages several times: one study reported that unhappy British children are forced to grow up too soon and that there is a sense of "deep pessimism" about modern childhood, fuelled partly, at least, by testing.

"We did find in one study an anxiety about the kind of childhood today's children were experiencing, the pressures they were subject to, both inside and outside school," confirms Alexander. He is cautious about discussing other primary school problems before he publishes his conclusions, but on testing, he seems to agree with MPs on the powerful schools select committee, who, on Tuesday, called for tests to be scrapped in their current form.

But, hang on a minute, I say, remembering how I scanned league tables when trying to choose primary schools for my own children - and how helpful I found them. If tests are scrapped, then how will parents know how well their children are doing, or which are the best schools? "There are school inspection reports," says Alexander, "Ofsted inspections. Parents can read those."

Alexander's final report is due out at the end of the year. Can he give any clues about what it will say? No, he says firmly. And - predictably - he slaps down as simplistic any suggestion that the choice is between progressive and traditional styles of teaching. "It's a damaging division, to think you must have one or the other," he says.

But he does explain why he wanted to undertake the task in the first place. "The system in our primary schools, which has developed piecemeal and still has bits of its Victorian origins, is not necessarily suited to the world we live in. The big question is: what kind of education system should we give our kids so they can make their way successfully and make the world a better place. It's a bigger question than just testing."

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