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Schools should look to alternative scene

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Primary schools should emulate "alternative" schools that have a greater emphasis on reading and creativity rather than working on computers, according to University of Glasgow researchers who looked at the Steiner and Reggio approaches and home-schooling systems.

Previous research has found that children taught at home do better than their counterparts in the state system, with the gap widening as they go through school. This was true for children from lower-income families as well as those from reasonably prosperous backgrounds.

Professor James Conroy, Moira Hulme and Professor Ian Menter, the report's authors, said that one reason for this might be that home-schooled children watched less television, used computers less and read more.

They said: "It is at least clear that having only moderate access to technologies is unlikely to be injurious to a child's educational attainment. Arguably, the reverse is the case, so it may be that the imagined primary curriculum of the future need be rather less reliant on technology than the rhetoric would have us believe."



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This note of caution is in contrast to the Government's announcement that all families need broadband internet access at home to help with school work. Jim Knight, schools minister, has pledged £30 million over the next three years to help move towards this goal.

The report said that the academic success of alternative schools was not simply explained by economic advantage. Instead, they share the following characteristics: spending less time using computers and television and more time reading; greater emphasis on imagination; and closer relationships between pupils and their teachers.

Steve Hurd, of the Open University, found in 2006 that spending on books was linked to a small rise in test scores, while spending the same amount on technology had half the effect.

The Primary Review report also identified two broad changes taking place in primary education: a stronger focus on skills as opposed to content, and a renewed interest in helping children manage emotions.

The authors also warned against the current fashion for empowering pupils and boosting their self-confidence to improve performance, saying that therapeutic approaches to tackle self-esteem issues were little more than "snake-oil remedies".

Sir Jim Rose, former director of inspection at Ofsted, has recently been appointed by Ed Balls, Children, Schools and Families secretary, to carry out a review of the primary curriculum. It is due to report next March. The review will look at issues such as the transition between reception and Year 1 and primary and secondary. It will not consider assessment.

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