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DAVID ROBSON

At Large

SCHOOLS DON'T PASS CHECK-OUT



OLD HANDS: By the age of six, our children are school veterans

Saturday October 17, 2009

By David Robson

MUCH talk about schools this week: how early should children start? What should they know when they emerge? Sir Terry Leahy, head of Tesco, says too many come out lacking the basic equipment for the world of work and that employers have to take up the slack. He describes the standards as "woeful" and goes on to explain why. Sir Terry is not an educationist, he's a manager and his criticisms are about management: "too many agencies, too many instructions to teachers".

I think we can assume that if the Government ran supermarkets, it would take hours to get round, we wouldn't be able to find what we wanted, there would be multiple forms to fill in before we could pay and we'd be totally depressed by the time we got out. Certainly, the people I know who go into schools to work with teachers have found them incredibly demoralised by all the directives and bureaucracy. When government manages, every little hinders.

Meanwhile, another authoritative- sounding report suggests that British children start their schooling too young, earlier in fact than any other advanced country. Ours start at four or five. Elsewhere they start year or two later. According to this report from the Cambridge Primary Review, primary schooling is too limited and formal, too restricted to the three Rs and with too much testing. We are taking the fun out of early childhood and not giving enough room for creativity. I did knitting at primary school though I suppose reading and writing had more impact.

The swirl of conversation and concern about education is confused (though as parents we know exactly how we feel). Too much close-focused rigour in the early years and too little in the later years seems precisely the opposite of right.

Early on, things are held too rigidly together then later, when young people are being prepared to go out into the outside world of work, things are allowed to fall apart. That can't make sense. Theories and fashions in education change, evolving then changing back again, but nothing like so often as government policy. Constant politicking, endless attitudinising, constant tinkering is the bane of teachers' existence, and therefore of pupils'. Each new education secretary, of either party, wants to make a mark. Labour has had 12 years to improve things, lots of money has been spent, but have things improved?

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