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# The Cambridge primary review's key findings

'Let teachers control lessons, scrap Sats and homework, and raise starting age to six'

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**Polly Curtis**, education editor  
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A teacher giving a maths lesson to pupils at Laindon Park primary school, Laindon, Essex. Photograph: Graham Turner

## **Childhood**

There is a "pervasive anxiety" about the pressure on pupils at school and from the commercial world, but these concerns are often overstated and mask the fact that poverty is the single biggest threat to children's lives, the Cambridge review has found.

Concern is fuelled by a media obsession with "toxic childhood", but children themselves report being happier than their parents and teachers give them credit for.

The review says: "Yes, English childhoods have changed in the past, say, 25 years. Family forms have changed, formal learning starts at younger ages and other education policy changes impact on children's school experience ... On the other hand, opportunities for children are greater than they have ever been. What is worrying is the persistence of a long tail of severely disadvantaged children whose early lives are unhappy, whose potential is unrealised and whose future is bleak."

Children's biggest concerns are about the environment, terrorism and about their personal safety – a minority in inner-city areas reported a fear of violent crime. The most entrenched problems are faced by children from disadvantaged homes.

"[Education] matters to all children, but especially to those who, in our divided society, lack the massively compensating advantages of financial wealth, emotional harmony and a home life which is linguistically, intellectually, culturally and spiritually rich," it says.

## **The system**

Although there should be an urgent debate about teaching ages, styles, curriculum and standards, the review concludes that "for many, schools are the centre that holds when things fall apart". But in many cases schools are succeeding in this despite government policy, not because of it. The review describes how, since 1997, the government has intervened in the way schools teach on an unprecedented level, instructing a "state theory of learning" with "Stalinist overtones".

### **Starting age**

The review says that England should conform to international practice by delaying the start of formal school until children turn six. This would extend the preschool, play-based curriculum to give children a stress-free grounding before they start formal lessons. It found a "strong and widespread conviction" that children are ill-served by starting formal learning at four, as currently happens in many areas of the country and as is being proposed by the government as a national policy. Starting formal learning before the age of six "dents children's confidence and risks long-term damage to their learning".

One local authority claimed that the combination of an early start, testing and pressure to reach government standards was creating a generation with mental health problems.

### **Curriculum**

Primaries have become too focused on the "three Rs" and the curriculum needs to be broadened. Today's report sets out plans for a new curriculum that includes 12 aims for each pupil: wellbeing, engagement, empowerment, autonomy, respect and reciprocity, interdependence, citizenship, celebrating culture, exploring, fostering skills, exciting imagination and enacting dialogue.

Children's learning should also cover eight domains, including arts and creativity, language, oracy and literacy, and science and technology, which would replace the current narrower subject areas. Schools would be given back part of the timetable reserved for teachers to design their own lessons locally.

### **Teaching**

Labour's national strategy for primary schools, which introduced the daily literacy and numeracy hours, has massively centralised the system and de-professionalised teachers. The school secretary Ed Balls's recent decision to scrap the private contract with Capita, which runs the National Strategies, will not take away that effect, the review argues, because there is now a generation of teachers who only know how to teach under the system. It has made teaching "inflexible and monolithic" and was an ill-informed political intervention, it concludes.

Teachers should be given back control over how they teach. Many parents surveyed argued that homework should be scrapped and researchers said it gave an unfair

advantage to children from more supportive, settled homes.

The model of the generalist teacher in primary schools has been in place since the 19th century when it was introduced to cut costs. This system should now be revised with the introduction of more specialist teachers, some of whom could be shared between schools. It acknowledges that this would be expensive.

The government's rules around teaching, designed to raise standards, could in fact depress them by robbing teachers of their independence. The review disputes Ofsted's finding that schools now have the best ever cohort of new teachers in history, saying there is no proof to back up that claim.

### **Special educational needs**

The review identified "serious concerns" about provision for children with special educational needs (SEN). Children are too often classified as SEN on the basis of "stereotyping and discrimination" instead of considered analysis. Parents and schools are deeply frustrated at the lack of support and unequal funding for their children across the country. It calls for a separate full and independent review of Sen provision.

### **Behaviour**

Researchers encountered widespread concerns about behaviour in the classroom, with many sources blaming changing social trends and "bad parenting". The review suggests that improved teaching rather than stricter rules is the best way to tackle indiscipline. "Those who feel a failure are more likely to team up with the class tearaways to gain at least some affirmation, if, indeed, they are able to make friends at all," it says.

### **Parenting**

A good relationship between home and school is a considerable bonus. However, over-zealous parents can be as problematic as disengaged ones. "Parents can over-control as well as under-control, and demotivate while attempting to motivate," it says. Nevertheless, children are far more affected by what happens at home than they are by what happens at school. "Family breakdown and poverty are huge influences on growth and development of children. When the two coincide, the effect is potentially dramatic," it concludes.

### **Testing**

Sats should be scrapped and replaced with new tests marked by teachers to inform them and parents of a child's progress. But they should not be used to measure their school's success in league tables or feed into national statistics to judge the progress of government policies. Instead, a sample of children in every school should sit a separate test to gauge progress, but this should be in a wider range of subjects than the three Rs, to encourage schools to teach more broadly. The review concludes league tables are so flawed they are "invalid", but says schools should be held accountable through Ofsted.

## **School buildings**

New primaries should give more space for specialist teaching as well as traditional multi-subject classes and better outdoor facilities to follow the Scandinavian example of holding more lessons outdoors. Libraries that are currently disappearing from schools should be preserved. Small schools, particularly in rural areas where they can be at the heart of a community, should also be protected.

Many of those canvassed pushed for smaller class sizes despite research suggesting that smaller classes are only beneficial in the early years of primary school. The government should consider shortening the long summer holidays, which can prove disruptive to children's learning.

## **Funding**

The money allocated to primaries should rise to match secondaries. Primaries require more money to introduce the specialist teachers needed to improve education. It suggests the debate about primaries needs to move beyond the traditional versus progressive discourse. "The politicisation of primary education has also gone too far. Discussion has been blocked by derision, truth has been supplanted by myth and spin, and alternatives to current arrangements have been reduced to crude dichotomy," it says.