



## THE INDEPENDENT

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### Generation of pupils being put off school, report says

By Richard Garner, Education Editor

A devastating attack on what is taught in primary schools is delivered today by the biggest inquiry into the sector for more than 40 years.

Too much stress is being placed on the three Rs, imposing a curriculum on primary school pupils that is "even narrower than that of the Victorian elementary schools", it says. The inquiry is recommending sweeping changes to stop children being left disenchanted by schooling at an early age.

Children should not start formal schooling until the age of six - in line with other European countries - the 600-page report on the future of primary education recommends. It was produced by a team directed by Robin Alexander of Cambridge University.

Tests for 11-year-olds and league tables based on them should be scrapped, and instead children should be assessed in every subject they take at 11.

The report is heavily critical of successive Conservative and Labour governments for dictating to teachers how they should do their jobs. Professor Alexander cites "more than one" Labour education secretary saying that primary schools should be teaching children to "read, write and add up properly" - leaving the rest of education to secondary schools. "It is not good enough to say we want high standards in the basics but we just have to take our chance with the rest," said Professor Alexander.

The report concludes: "Such a diet, after all, is even narrower than that of the Victorian elementary schools, whose practices most people claimed the country had outgrown."

Gillian Pugh, a former head of the National Children's Bureau who chaired the review, added: "There is no research evidence that an early access to formal learning does children any good and a lot of evidence that it can actually do some harm."

The report recommends that children should largely be left to learn through play, with the foundation stage of learning extended until six, followed by formal lessons in primary schools from six to 11.

"Children in England start their formal schooling at a younger age than in most other countries and there is strong support for the view that England should conform to international practice by starting formal school at age six or seven," says the report.

It rejects the findings of a previous inquiry into primary schooling by the former Ofsted inspector Sir Jim Rose on behalf of the Government, saying it should be put on ice because it failed to tackle key issues.

It is equally scathing about government attempts to control the curriculum and dictate to teachers how they should teach, citing as an example the formal literacy and numeracy strategies introduced by Labour which spelled out how lessons should be conducted. "The Stalinist overtones of a 'state theory of learning' enforced by

'the machinery of surveillance and accountability' - league tables, testing targets - are as unattractive as they are serious," says the report. "The general air of pessimism and powerlessness [among teachers] could be an accurate reflection of how people feel, anywhere, when their freedom of action and thought in the area which lies at the heart of their work is reduced."

Professor Alexander's team question whether the rise in the percentage of pupils achieving the required level in maths and English at 11 does, in fact, indicate that standards have improved.

Instead, the report argues, "memorisation and recall have come to be valued more than understanding and enquiry and transmission of information more than the pursuit of knowledge in its fullest sense".

Other recommendations include an end to central prescription by the Government of how teachers should teach.

The report rejects the notion - put forward in a report by the UN agency Unicef - that British children are among the "unhappiest" in the West. The real crisis of childhood, it argues is the "crisis of disadvantage and poverty".

"The divide between the poorest households in Britain and those with relatively high levels of income widened dramatically during the 1980s," says the report. Despite a reduction since then, the gap is now widening again, it continues. Children from disadvantaged homes tend to get shouted at more at home and feel a sense of failure on starting school, it says. As a result, they are more likely to seek out the "class tearaways" for friends than those from a better-off environment.

Good quality teaching is essential for giving pupils a chance to escape from a poor environment, it argues, questioning whether the claim by Ofsted, which is often seized upon by ministers, that "we have the best quality teachers ever", can be verified.

The report advocates more use of specialist teachers in the latter years of primary schooling, arguing that it may be necessary to extend the PGCE primary training course from one to two years to give new staff the necessary expertise.

Last night the main plank of the report - raising the formal start of schooling to six - was rejected by the Government. The Schools minister Vernon Coaker said the Rose review had recommended a less prescriptive curriculum, adding: "It's disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed on major changes in primaries."

However, its findings were widely welcomed by teachers' leaders. "How much more evidence does the Government need before it realises that this [the national curriculum tests] is a useless system for assessment which does nothing but bring unwelcome and unnecessary pressure on schools which are self-evidently successful?" said Christine Blower, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers.

The report, funded by the Esme Fairbairn Foundation, is the largest study into primary education since the Plowden report in 1967.

### **Victorian education: How it compares**

The Victorian elementary schools, like those today, concentrated on the three 'R's much, as official reports would have it in both eras, to the detriment of a broader curriculum. But they were better at making sure children were well placed for employment, with girls doing sewing and boys more manual work.

Victorians started compulsory schooling at the age of five, because they wanted to get education of the working classes over quickly so children could start work at the age of 10. Yet no-one has questioned this starting age in the 140 years since it was introduced.

### **The parent's view: 'Three Rs aren't everything'**

Caroline Morgan said she likes the sound of the Alexander review's main recommendation - that the start of formal schooling should be put back to six.

Ms Morgan, who lives in Dorchester and has three children, two of whom are of primary school age - William, nine, and Alice, seven - said the move "can only be a good thing".

"Starting school can be very difficult for some children. It is important to build their confidence so that it doesn't impact upon their learning."

This was one of the key forces behind the review's recommendations - the belief that beginning formal education before a child is ready for it can lower their confidence and leave them floundering in class.

She also believes that too much concentration on the "three Rs" can be counter-productive. "Our school head aims to get dirty with the school curriculum with the children going on regular trips, teaching the pupils in interesting hands-on ways, which is also fun," she said.

"It should not be just about literacy and numeracy. By moving away from this we can help to improve children's perception of school and make them want to go."

### **The teacher's view: 'A step in the right direction'**

Primary school teacher Lesley Ward professes she is "delighted" with the key recommendations of the report. "I think this is wonderful news and a step in the right direction that will allow children to be children again," she said.

She said the move to begin formal schooling at six would "allow children to settle in before they are set the challenges of literacy and numeracy".


Ward, a primary school supply teacher from Doncaster, South Yorkshire, added: "These changes will no doubt improve children's happiness and commitment to school in future years."

She also welcomed the scrapping of the national curriculum tests in maths and English for 11-year-olds. "They are not an accurate measure of a child's ability and can demotivate a child if they score a 'level three' [one level below the required standard], even if that is a great result for the child.

"Too much emphasis is placed on working through the curriculum rather than allowing children to learn in an active, enjoyable manner."

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