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Leading article: A better way to educate primary school children

This seminal report makes the case against government interference

The most extensive study of the state of the primary education system since the 1960s has delivered its final report. And it does not pull any punches. The Cambridge Primary Review paints a picture of a sector suffocated by diktats from Whitehall and crushed by the populist meddling of ministers.

The Government's entire "apparatus of targets, testing, performance tables, national strategies and inspection" is accused of distorting primary schooling. Ministers are criticised for formulating educational policies on the basis of "questionable evidence".

Nor is the Review afraid to take on those other grand panjandrums of the education realm, the regulators. Oftsed's assertion that we now have the best generation of teachers ever is taken apart. The fallacy that a regime of constant testing is a means of driving up educational standards is firmly nailed.

The report is also scathing about the general tendency in our political culture to regard maths and English as the only elements of the primary education system worth worrying about. It makes a compelling plea for a broad primary curriculum to stimulate children's imagination and stoke a genuine passion for learning.

The report is, however, less sure-footed when it moves from diagnosing ills to advocating solutions. The review lapses into silliness when it urges schools to build up pupils' sense of "empowerment". And it loses credibility when it starts fussing over minor issues such as the design of school buildings.

Two recommendations, however, stand out: raising the formal start of primary schooling to age six and scrapping standard national tests at age 11. The first, though it will probably alarm parents, is actually sensible. Commencing children's formal education at six would move us in to line with the rest of Europe, where a later learning age does children no harm, and even has some measurable benefits.

But ending all national testing at primary school level would be an excessive response to the present stifling examination regime. The report is right to argue that numeracy and literacy - the focus of the present national tests - should not be treated as "proxies for the whole of primary education". But they are central skills nonetheless and it is not unreasonable to expect children to emerge from primary education with a firm grounding in them, assessed by a standard examination process. The report's authors are also guilty of ignoring the wider benefits of a formal assessment at the end of a child's years in primary education, in particular the fact that the results allow parents to evaluate a school's performance.

However, the central thrust of the review - its call for an end to the "state theory of learning" - is certainly to be welcomed. The role of government in primary education is to demand decent standards and a stimulating curriculum and then to step back and let teachers and heads deliver them. As the review concludes, "teaching

should be taken out of the political arena and given back to teachers".

When Labour came to power in 1997, ministers were justified in concentrating time, energy and investment on our primary school system. They were also right to take steps to make these schools more accountable to parents. But they went too far. Interest became interference. Help became hindrance. As the Primary Review argues, what schools urgently need now is to be given space to breathe.