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Primary review commentary: tough on standards, tough on tests

Children should be assessed and schools should be accountable. Of that there can be not a shred of doubt.

By Prof Robin Alexander

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The issue, then, is not whether but how these jobs should be done.

On these matters, the Cambridge Primary Review is no soft touch. The Review has investigated the current system of testing and the evidence on standards in the primary phase.

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On the latter, the picture is neither as bleak nor as rosy as opposing camps claim. Within the limitations of the current approach, primary pupils' performance can be shown to have risen during the past decade.

But the rise has been less spectacular and more uneven than some would claim, and there are problems with the way standards are approached. Meanwhile, to say merely that 'standards are rising' is to ignore the fact that far too many children under-achieve.

What are the problems? First, the definition of 'standards' itself is too narrow.

Primary education should amount to much more than basic literacy and numeracy, supremely important though these are, and to claim that tests in those areas can serve as a proxy for the rest of a child's education is both wrong in itself and misleading to parents.

Then there are SAT tests themselves. Of doubtful reliability until recently, they distort the curriculum and generate needless stress for children and teachers. They also have too much to do - assessing children, evaluating schools and monitoring national performance - and, arguably, end up doing nothing well.

Our report proposes an assessment system which is comprehensive and rigorous, yet as non-intrusive as possible. It covers all areas of the curriculum, for all are important in themselves and an essential foundation for what follows, and standards in the 3Rs depend on the quality of the rest.

Assessment at the end of primary school should be the culmination of a process which builds up year by year. To ensure consistency, it can be externally moderated.

As for school accountability, that, surely, is what Ofsted inspections are about, while pupil performance across the system as a whole can be monitored by sample testing using items from a national test bank.

Meanwhile, we can dispose of a couple of myths. It is not testing but good teaching that drives up standards. And tests are but one kind of assessment among several.

Let's reform the system but first let's enlarge the vocabulary.

*Robin Alexander is Fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge and director of the Cambridge Primary Review, which is supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and publishes its final report today www.primaryreview.org.uk
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