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Children start school too young — wait till they're 6, experts say



John O'Leary

Formal schooling should be delayed until children reach 6, according to the biggest review of primary education for more than 40 years.

The Cambridge Primary Review, published today, says that five-year-olds should continue with the play-based curriculum used in nursery schools. Trying to teach literacy and numeracy at such an early age is “counterproductive” and can put children off school, according to the committee that produced the report.

Professor Robin Alexander, the report's editor, called for a debate about whether to raise the age of compulsory schooling, which has been set at 5 since 1870. But the review was more concerned about the style of learning offered in state schools.

Successive governments' insistence on the earliest possible start to formal schooling went against the grain of international evidence, he said. Children who started school at the age of 6 or 7 often overtook English pupils in tests of reading before the start of secondary education.

Most continental countries start school later than in Britain, preparing children for formal classes through extended nursery education. The review proposes a similar model for England, continuing the current Foundation Stage for an extra year and following it with a single stage of primary education taking children to the age of 11.

The suggestion was not supported by the Government or the Opposition.

Dame Gillian Pugh, who chaired the review's advisory committee, said: “If you introduce a child to too formal a curriculum before they are ready, you are not taking into account where children are in terms of their learning and their capacity to develop.”

A separate review, by Sir Jim Rose, that was commissioned and accepted by the Government, called for four-year-olds to go straight into primary reception classes. But Sir Jim recommended that parents be able to defer their child's entry to school by up to a year if they felt they were not ready.

Chris Woodhead, the former Chief Inspector of Schools, who undertook a more limited review of primary teaching for the previous Conservative Government with both Professor Alexander and Sir Jim, said he feared a later start would lead to lower standards: “It is reasonable when children arrive at school for the emphasis to be on socialisation, but I see no reason to postpone the start of formal learning.”

John Bangs, of the National Union of Teachers, described the proposal as an “innovative idea” that deserved support: “We have seen problems with early admission to reception classes. It is an absolutely crucial stage of a child's development and I think there is merit in extending the Foundation Stage.” The 600-page report, entitled *Children, their World, their Education*, says that many practitioners believe that the principles shaping pre-school education should govern children's experience of primary school at least until the age of 6, if not 7. The Welsh Assembly has already extended the Foundation Stage to the age of 7.

Ed Balls, the Schools Secretary, said that it would be a backward step not to make sure children were learning as well as playing through the Foundation Stage and beyond. "It is vital to get children playing and learning from an early age."

Funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and based at the University of Cambridge, the review took six years and drew on 4,000 pieces of evidence. It depicts primary schools struggling with interference from the Government and its agencies, but remaining "fundamentally in good heart" .

Professor Alexander said: "There is room for improvement but, after 20 years of pretty continuous change and reform, how could it be otherwise?" The introduction of more specialist teachers would help schools cope with the modern curriculum, he said.

Professor Alexander described the "crisis of childhood" as a media obsession and said it was evident mainly among those from poor backgrounds, who were farther behind their peers than those in comparable countries.

The review accuses the Government of abandoning the convention that it did not dictate how children were taught, and imposing a "state theory of learning" through its literacy and numeracy strategies. Such policies' "Stalinist overtones" had produced an air of pessimism and powerlessness in the teaching profession. Existing tests at the end of primary school should be scrapped, the review says, and replaced by assessment of the whole curriculum, rather than just English, mathematics and science.

It describes politicians' exclusive focus on ensuring that children can read, write and add up as narrower than that in Victorian elementary schools. Among the changes recommended by the review are longer training for graduates intending to teach in primary schools which, it says, should take two years not one, and a review of special educational needs. Long summer holidays might also be reduced.

Professor Alexander said that the review was intended to inform long-term planning, not "pre-election pointscoring". The main parties nevertheless seized on the findings.

Nick Gibb, the Shadow Schools Minister, said: "We agree that the wave of bureaucracy over the past decade has been deeply damaging and we must trust teachers more. We also agree that we need more specialist training for primary teachers." However, the Conservatives would not support a delay in the start of formal schooling.

Vernon Coaker, the Schools Minister, said: "It's disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is not up to speed on changes in primaries. The world has moved on since this review was started."

Mr Coaker added: "We're putting in place fundamental reforms following Sir Jim Rose's primary review, to make the curriculum less prescriptive. A school starting age of 6 would be completely counterproductive — we want to make sure children are playing and learning from an early age and to give parents the choice for their child to start in the September following their fourth birthday."

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