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ACTIVITY PLANNER

Studies fault competition in primary schools

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor

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Competition in the classroom may be damaging children's education, according to a review of primary schools.

• Consett teachers head to class to learn Polish

Pupils should be allowed to talk and play together more in lessons to improve co-operation, it is claimed, despite concerns that chatter is disruptive.

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The series of studies published today also claims that rewards for good grades have a negative impact and suggests that teachers should praise "effort" instead of success.

The conclusions are made as part of a two-year inquiry, led by Cambridge University, into the state of primary schools in England.

It comes amid growing concerns over schooling, fuelled by the imposition of tests, targets and league tables.

Last month, a lobby of academics said that a new national curriculum for under-fives would cause untold damage to young children.

Professors Christine Howe and Neil Mercer said the report "challenges the traditional view that

talk and social interaction among children are irrelevant, if not disruptive to learning".

They found that "offering rewards on a competitive basis" affected pupils' perception of their classmates. Shy children often became "increasingly quiet or subdued" or were reduced to "passive scribes of a dominant child's ideas".

Teachers should encourage "exploratory talk", which involves children "sharing, challenging and evaluating their views", the study said. "Talk and social interaction among children play a key role in children's social development and learning," it added.

However, the report said that children were given little space and opportunity to talk to each other in many British classrooms.

A second study said that "pretend play and the imagination are important for cognitive development in the early years of education".

The research, by Prof Usha Goswami, from Cambridge, and Prof Peter Bryant, from Oxford University, added: "Teachers should praise effort rather than performance.

"Children who believe that their intelligence is fixed are less likely to make an effort to learn, whereas those who believe that their intelligence can grow will try harder."

Young children's early language skills are "crucial" to their educational development, the study said. "Children who enter school with impoverished language skills require immediate support."

The Department for Children, Schools and Families said that lessons in social and emotional aspects of learning provided more opportunity for group discussion.

"In addition to this, the primary framework for teachers is developing the focused use of discussion to improve specific skills such as writing, problem solving, and mathematics," said a spokesman.

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