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Failure to teach three Rs 'damaging economy'

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor

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Failure to teach children the three Rs at a young age is damaging the British economy, according to a report published by Cambridge University today.

• Your View: What skills do young people need to boost the economy?

Productivity lags as much as 25 per cent behind economic competitors such as Germany, France and the United States because workers lack basic reading, writing and numeracy skills, it is claimed.

Researchers say that thousands of children from poor homes are being let down by the state education system. Inequalities have been "exacerbated" as Government policies which give parents a choice between different state schools benefit affluent families who are better at playing the system, researchers claim.



Last summer, four in 10 children left primary school without a solid grounding in all of the three Rs

It means children from working-class areas are being sent to the worst schools and are struggling to master basic literacy and numeracy. The researchers recommend abolishing catchment areas to prevent middle-class parents monopolising places at the best schools. The conclusions are made in a report by the University of London, which is part of a wider two-year inquiry, led by Cambridge, into the state of English primary schools.

It will add to pressure on ministers, who were criticised last year when English 10-year-olds plummeted in a worldwide league table based on reading ability.

"The value of acquiring the basic skills in primary school is evident in the most routine tasks," says the study. "However, even in a rich country like the UK they cannot be taken for granted, for it has been estimated that about one fifth of adults are not functionally literate."

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Last summer, four in 10 children left primary school without a solid grounding in all of the three Rs. In today's study, academics say that a decent grounding in the basics is vital to enable children to "learn faster and more effectively as they continue through the education system".

They quote research from the London School of Economics showing that the weaknesses may be having a knock-on effect in the work place, where companies struggle to get the best out of employees.

In terms of productivity - the amount of output per hour of work - it was revealed that work rates are nearly 30 per cent higher in France and more than 10 per cent higher in Germany and the US.

Researchers say that "much of this can be explained by a poorer level of skills" in the UK, adding that "if basic numeracy and literary skills were universal... the economy as a whole would perform better".

Researchers say that poor pupils get an inferior education as they are denied places at the best schools, even though the Government has encouraged parents to "choose" between local state schools. This means social mobility has barely improved since the 1970s.

Jim Knight, the schools minister, said: "Of course all children should attend a good school and have the opportunity to secure the best jobs in later life.

"That is precisely why we have introduced the new school admissions code to outlaw unfair and covert admission practices. However, reducing inequalities between rich and poor children is about more than admissions and is a top priority for this Government."

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