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Friday 12 October 2007

Leading article: We are failing our children - and risking our future

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The year 2007 has offered little consolation for anyone concerned about the state of childhood and education in Britain. In February, a Unicef

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report placed Britain at the bottom of an international league table for the well-being of children in 21 developed countries, finding that they were less happy, more likely to fail at school and less healthy than their peers elsewhere. Summer saw the publication of Iain Duncan Smith's acclaimed two-part report for the Conservative Party, which painted a depressing picture of social breakdown. Last month, another survey – Pocket World in Figures, published by The Economist – ranked Britain only 17th in the world in terms of overall quality of life. Now, the first interim report for a major study on primary schools in England finds pervasive anxiety about young children and their education.

This study is the first comprehensive survey of primary schooling since the landmark Plowden Report of 1967. Since then, much water has passed under many bridges, whether in educational theory and practice, politics or society. Britain today is quite a different country from the one it was 40 years ago. And those who were interviewed for the study felt overwhelmingly that it had changed, and not at all for the better.

Of course, it is not unheard of for an older generation, whether of parents or professionals, to wax nostalgic and regret that things "ain't what they used to be". But nostalgia is not what permeates this report. It is rather a deep sense of unease about the state of childhood and the direction in which primary education has been moving – not only on the part of adults, but on the part of the children whose views were solicited, too.

Directed by Professor Robin Alexander and based at Cambridge University, the survey has unimpeachable credentials. Its authors cannot be accused of having an agenda. Indeed, they seem to have been taken aback – not only by the findings as such, but by their consistency. While there are predictable differences in the points raised by city- and country-dwellers, and between those in affluent and deprived communities, the broad outlines of concern are the same. What is more, they echo, with almost uncanny accuracy, those set out in the other reports detailing the

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condition of Britain's children.

They fall into two categories. Educationally, the survey finds that children are under great, and perhaps excessive, pressure from national testing and the resulting "distortion" of the primary curriculum. It also identifies a wide gap between high and low achievers and particular difficulties faced by the less academically inclined.

The second category relates to the social and cultural environment outside school; those interviewed expressed worries about the consequences of family breakdown, the decline of intergenerational respect and social cohesion, and the growth of materialism and the "cult of celebrity". It noted also the apprehension felt by many parents, especially about the world their children faced outside home and school.

This is an interim report. Only the final report will offer recommendations, so the overall findings may be less negative. It does suggest, however, that our politicians need to take an urgent look, both at the adverse effects of so much testing on young children (and their teachers) and at what might be going wrong with family life and social cohesion. This is a party political issue only in so far as this government has made the welfare of children a priority and directed much public money towards improving it. Given that our performance in so many international social indicators is now so poor, it may be time to ask whether money by itself is enough, and whether it is being spent in the best way. ■

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