

Are we forcing our children to learn too early?

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by Nicola Juncar, The Journal

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THE authors of the most extensive review of primary education in England for 40 years say children should not start learning how to read and write until they are six.

The Cambridge Primary Review found children respond better to play-based learning at a young age, and claimed there was no evidence to suggest it would hold them back in later life.

Rather than raising the school starting age to six, the report suggests the national curriculum should be reformed to allow for more creativity in the first year.

It also called for more freedom for headteachers, instead of interference from education ministers.

The findings have been labelled by the Government as “disappointing” and “out-of-date”.

But headteachers from our region say the report should be welcomed, not rejected.

Headteacher at Newcastle’s Hotspur Primary School, Miles Wallis-Clarke, said: “For some children it is difficult to try and mould them into a formal learning structure early on. There is the risk that forcing some children into learning will have a negative effect.

“There is also certainly evidence to suggest that children in some European countries, where they start at six, do not suffer as a consequence.

“Throughout the report it says that primaries are doing a good job, but they are under enormous pressure to move away from play-based learning at an early age and on to national tests, which narrow the curriculum.

“I think primary heads would largely agree with this. There is a concern that a lot of what we do is for the benefit of politicians and does not maximise the opportunities for children.

“We teach to test and this shouldn’t be the case. Children can learn through creative play; they also learn speaking and listening skills, which are incredibly valuable. That said, reading and writing is at the core of what primary education is about. Some children start primary school with little or no experience of any literature, so we have an important role to play.”

He added: “This report has been put together by very well respected researchers and we should reflect on the findings.”

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