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More play in primaries

Article | Published in TES New paper on 11 January, 2008 | By: Helen Ward

Last Updated: 11 May, 2008

Section: Article



Subjects could be pruned for 5 to 11s - Summer borns may start school a year later.

Radical changes which would see fewer subjects taught in primary, particularly in the first year, were welcomed this week by early years teachers and campaigners.

Ed Balls, the Children, Schools and Families Secretary, said this week that the forthcoming review of the primary curriculum should consider cutting the number of subjects studied. He also recommended extending the areas of learning used in pre-school into primary schools.

Lesley Staggs, an early years consultant, said: "This is brilliant. It is not about pushing anything back; it's about doing things in a way that is appropriate to young children. It's about going with, rather than against, the flow of how they learn.

"This is driven by people in schools who have already rethought key stage 1 and found that children's behaviour has improved and they are more confident learners."

Sir Jim Rose, the former primary chief inspector who will be carrying out the biggest review of the primary curriculum in a decade, has been asked to look into giving parents more choice over when their children start nursery or reception. Parents of summer born babies would be able to hold them back a year

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start nursery or reception. Parents of summer-born babies would be able to hold them back a year, although the starting age - no later than the term after the fifth birthday - would remain the same.

The primary review remit came after increasing concern that the system - especially constant test preparation - was creating unhappy and anti- social children.

The abrupt transition between foundation stage and Year 1 has troubled many. An influential report from the National Foundation for Educational Research in 2005 found that children who had enjoyed playing in sandpits in reception found Year 1 involved sitting on the carpet for long periods of time - an activity one boy described as "wasting your life".

Earlier this year, a TES survey of 115 teachers found significant support among them for a foundation stage-style curriculum throughout primary. Some schools have already adopted reception-style teaching because it suits the children's developmental level and improves their confidence and achievement.

Barbara Capstick, head of Bedgrove Infant School in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, runs "transition" classes in Year 1. She found the children were split roughly 50-50 between those who were ready for more formal styles of learning and those who continued to thrive under reception-style teaching.

"They will never change testing at age seven and there is no point asking for the impossible, so we have to work within those constraints," she said.

But while having more play-based activities in Year 1 was welcomed, concerns remain about the prescriptive nature of the early years foundation stage curriculum, which is due to replace the foundation stage curriculum in September.

Primary Review proposals will not be implemented until 2011.

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