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Test culture takes toll on young

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Pupils increasingly regard school as a place of pressure, say academics, but see it as a passport to future employment. Primary pupils think they go to school in order to pass tests and secure a good future job, according to the latest findings of the national inquiry into primary education.

While children are generally happy during their primary school years, they feel under pressure to work through the curriculum in preparation for key stage 2 tests. They generally believe these tests constitute an official judgment of them and their abilities.

The report, commissioned by the Cambridge-based Primary Review, is based on 63 research papers, all discussing pupils' experiences of primary school.

It also found that children see a direct correlation between working hard at school and finding a good job in later life. As a result, pupils place greater emphasis on completing their work than they do on understanding it.

They prefer teachers who tell them what they need to do rather than allowing them to exercise choice.

And they think their teachers are more concerned with whether questions are answered correctly than with advancing learning for its own sake.

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Mick Brookes, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers said: "This confirms what everybody in the known universe says about the testing regime in primaries: it's having a devastating effect on the breadth and enjoyment of the curriculum.

"If you're going to test narrow areas, then that's what schools are going to teach."

The report concluded that children are generally happy at primary school, but their enthusiasm tends to wane as they grow older.

Similarly, while they begin school believing that they must unquestioningly obey all teachers, they are more inclined to challenge authority by the time they reach Year 6.

Young pupils are keen to show teachers their work, believing they will be praised. But as they progress through school, they begin to worry about the consequences of getting things wrong.

John Bangs, head of education for the National Union of Teachers, said: "Tests bear down on children's lives. It's an intimation of the kind of anxieties they experience at secondary."

Andrew Carter, head of South Farnham Primary in Surrey, says that it is vital for primary schools not to penalise pupils for incorrect answers.

"We should be devoting ourselves to risk-taking in learning," he said. "Instead of saying to a child, 'That's wrong,' you should say, 'Well done, that's nearly there.'

"You don't want them to get everything right. You don't want them to be in their comfort zone."

The report concludes that the Government's Every Child Matters initiative, which aims to equip children with wide-ranging life skills, is at odds with the current emphasis on academic achievement in primary schools.

It said: "Pupils confirm what teachers themselves believe - that primary education is constrained and to a degree determined by the emphasis on Sats and Sat results. Pupils find themselves under considerable pressure to perform well in the national tests."

The Primary Review is being directed by Professor Robin Alexander, fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge, and emeritus professor of education at the University of Warwick. His team consists of 70 researchers and a 20-member advisory committee chaired by Dame Gillian Pugh. This is the third set of reports in a 32-paper series. The final report will be published next autumn.

www.primaryreview.org.uk

Pragmatic perception

Tom Ellis knows exactly why it is important to work hard at school, writes Adi Bloom.

"If you do well at school, you can be a fireman or a policeman when you grow up," the 9-year-old said.

"But you have to work hard at your maths and literacy. If someone asks how many times you've arrested

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someone in a year, you'd need maths to work it out."

For Tom, a Year 5 pupil at Warren Hills Primary in Coalville, Leicestershire, all lessons represent preparation for later life. Even art and PE have future benefits in the job market.

"You could be an athlete and win lots of medals if you do PE. Or you could be a painter," he said. "Even things that aren't in tests can help when you're looking for a job."

Tom's pragmatic view of primary lessons reflects the latest findings of the national Primary Review, which concluded that pupils believe they go to school in order to find a good job in later life.

It is a view shared by Hannah Fern, one of Tom's classmates. "I want to be a pop singer, like Christina Aguilera," she said. "So if I've done literacy. That will help me write songs."

"Getting good marks in a test are more important than knowing lots about something. If you get good marks, then you'll find a better job."

But Tom says he is not scared of making mistakes.

"I was scared of teachers in reception," he said. "You think they're always right. But then you realise teachers do make mistakes sometimes. They're learning too."

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