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Tests fixation sets England apart

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Academic subjects and an emphasis on diversity dominate early years when other nations focus on language, literacy and shared values.

English primary schools remain uniquely preoccupied with testing, while primaries in France, Norway, Japan and the rest of the UK focus on language acquisition and personal and social education.

English pupils are tested more often, in more subjects and at a younger age than pupils elsewhere.

And when English primaries teach citizenship, they focus on the value of diversity, while other countries teach children what they have in common with one another.

Research conducted for the national Primary Review reveals that England differs from many countries in not making personal, social and health education, citizenship and a modern foreign language compulsory at primary level.

Similarly, while environmental education and global awareness lessons are encouraged, they are not compulsory as they are elsewhere. Focus for English primaries is on the academic curriculum.

Professor Kathy Hall, of the National University of Ireland at Cork, and Professor Kamil Ozerk, of Oslo

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University in Norway, compared England's primaries with those in France, Norway, Japan and the rest of the UK. They found that England stood out for the frequency of its explicit references to raising standards.

The researchers said: "England still stands out as exceptional in its emphasis on statutory external standard assessment for children at ages seven and 11 ... What distinguishes assessment policy in England is the degree to which it is used as a tool to control what is taught and police how well it is taught."

Mick Brookes, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said: "The emphasis on targets, testing and tables is simply demoralising the troops, rather than giving them the motivation to move further forward."

"If we want to match other countries in terms of the wellbeing of children, we have to change the way in which we work. We have to find a way to benchmark without creating conformity."

England also differs from the other countries surveyed in the status it attributes to maths and science: English, maths and science are all tested nationally here.

The researchers conclude: "The plain message delivered by the assessment system is that these curriculum areas represent the knowledge that is most highly valued by society."

Other countries focus more on the study of language and literacy, and on citizenship.

In spite of this, English primaries spend more time than others teaching themes of pluralism, diversity and tolerance. These are integrated into the RE, history and geography curricula.

By contrast, Japanese primaries resist multiculturalism. And French schools endorse the "republican values" of equal opportunity and integration instead of teaching about diversity.

Tony Breslin, chief executive of the Citizenship Foundation, believes that English primaries would benefit from examining such values, too. "One doesn't progress by ignoring difference," he said.

"But one looks at it while searching out those many things that people of different backgrounds have in common."

"It's vitally important that primary schools give proper attention to matters of literacy, numeracy and oracy. But primary schooling is enhanced when proper time is given to personal and social development."

The researchers agreed. They concluded by highlighting the gulf between the aims of the English primary curriculum and its outcomes: "While policy in England promotes assessment for learning purposes, the high-stakes nature of the assessments, designed to make the system accountable, compromises its potential benefits."

In the Primary Review, England was benchmarked against France, Norway and Japan. All four countries have centralised primary curriculum systems and all monitor pupils' learning through national assessments.

The latest Progress in International Reading Literacy Study placed England's 10-year-olds 19th, compared

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with France in 27th place and Norway below the average, in 35th place. Japan did not take part in the study.

And the recent Programme for International Student Assessment study, which measured reading ability at 15 - assessing the whole of the UK, rather than England separately - placed Japan 15th, the UK 17th, France 23rd and Norway 24th.

The order was the same when it came to science, with Japan ranked in 6th place, the UK 14th, France 25th and Norway 33rd.


How English primaries are different:

- There is more external testing in more subjects.
- Testing begins at an earlier age.
- Test results are published in league tables.
- The testing is "high stakes".
- The external tests are accompanied by teacher assessment and the results reported to parents and government agencies.
- England's curriculum emphasises pluralism, diversity and multi- culturalism. Other countries emphasise common values and shared national identity.
- The curriculum is more subject-based, with science part of the core. Other countries treat language and literacy as pre-eminent rather than England's 3Rs tradition.
- The civic dimension is comparatively weak.

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