

Generation of pupils let down by focus on tests

A generation of pupils has been left impoverished by a "fundamentally deficient" primary school system that focuses only on tests and basic skills, according to the Cambridge Primary Review.

By Martin Beckford, Social Affairs Correspondent

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The landmark study warns that children are being left ill-prepared for secondary school, work or life by the narrow demands of the national curriculum.

It says the arts, history and science have been the main casualties, squeezed out by the obsession with literacy and numeracy and the "elephant in the curriculum" of high-stakes testing.

But the in-depth report also accuses education ministers of limiting young people's knowledge of maths and English, by implementing a system that values memorising facts more than understanding and enquiry.

It proposes a complete overhaul of the primary school system, which goes far further than the review by Sir Jim Rose commissioned by the Government. It recommends the introduction of 12 new underlying aims for children's education together with eight subject "domains".

Professor Robin Alexander, director of the independent Cambridge Primary Review, said: "Our argument is that their education, and to some degree their lives, are impoverished if they have received an education that is so fundamentally deficient.

"Primary education needs to be seen as a preparation for life-long learning and for life in general. It is preparation for secondary school but we resist the idea that it is merely that. The problem is there even more strongly – certain areas are missing, so on what can secondary school build?

"This is not just about breadth across the curriculum, it's about breadth within the basics and the balance within the basics."

Under the terms of the national literacy and numeracy strategies established a decade ago, primary school pupils now spend half their time in classrooms working on these areas alone. They then take Key Stage 2 tests, aged 11, in English, maths and science.

But the Cambridge Primary Review, the most comprehensive study of the sector in 40 years, argues that this concentration on the three "core" subjects and the obsessive working towards tests is distorting children's learning and eroding their statutory entitlement to a broad education.

Its findings on the curriculum, published today, claim that "the assessment tail wags the curriculum dog".

It does not state categorically that tests should be scrapped, reserving its judgement until a final report due later this year.

But the Review – based on more than 900 written submissions, academic reports and meetings with professionals and parents – claims: "Unless the national assessment system is reformed, especially at Key Stage 2, changes to the curriculum will have limited impact and the curriculum outside the favoured zone of tested subjects will continue to be compromised."

It says although the idea of a national curriculum is accepted, it is currently seen as "overcrowded and unmanageable".

In particular: "The initial promise of entitlement to a broad, balanced and rich curriculum has been sacrificed in pursuit of a narrowly-conceived 'standards' agenda.

"The most conspicuous casualties have been the arts, the humanities and those generic kinds of learning, across the entire curriculum, which require time for thinking, talking problem-solving and that depth of exploration which engages children and makes their learning meaningful and rewarding".

It says creativity and imagination are not valued enough "in these severely utilitarian and philistine times".

The Review claims there is a "demonstrably mistaken" assumption that high standards in the basics can be achieved only by ignoring all the other subjects.

It condemns "the test-induced regression to a valuing of memorisation and recall over understanding and enquiry, and to a pedagogy which rates transmission more important than the pursuit of knowledge in its wider sense", and the "politicisation" of the curriculum by the national strategies and "rhetoric of 'standards'".

It says there is "excessive prescription and micro-management" by the Department for Children, Schools and Families; the Government's exams agency, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority; and Ofsted, the education watchdog.

In response, the Review suggests a wholesale reform of primary schooling, starting with 12 broad aims focusing on the development of the individual child and their understanding of the wider world as well as learning.

It then proposes teaching lessons according to eight "domains", covering arts and creativity; citizenship and ethics; faith and belief; language, oracy and literacy; mathematics; physical and emotional health; place and time; and science and technology. Literacy and numeracy would be integrated into the maths and language areas rather than being "semi-detached".

The study says 70 per cent of classroom time should be devoted to this curriculum, with the rest reserved for schools to develop their own lessons that suit the local community. This would replace the "one-size-fits-all" approach with one that recognises the differences between a small village school in rural Yorkshire with a large one in inner-city Birmingham, Prof Alexander said.

However it appears unlikely its recommendations will be considered, to the dismay of the authors, as the consultation period for the official Rose study – which proposes scrapping traditional subjects in favour of teaching by "theme" but does not consider wider reforms – is almost at an end.

The Shadow Children's Secretary, Michael Gove, said: "I share the Review's concerns about a narrow curriculum damaging standards. One in five pupils failed to get even one GCSE last year because they never got a proper start in primary school."

The DCSF did not comment on the conclusions of the study but said: "We thank Professor Alexander for his contribution and Sir Jim Rose will no doubt read it with interest as part of his extensive, independent consultation into the Primary Curriculum, which is still gathering evidence from a wide range of experts and academics, teachers, parents and the public."

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