

English primary education criticised in report

By Barry Mason
11 March 2008

A major report has criticised the extent of testing imposed on primary school children in England and the trend to begin formal education at an ever-earlier age.

The report by the Primary Review, based at the Faculty of Education, Cambridge University, highlights how primary age children (under 11) in England are subjected to a regime of testing, testing and more testing—more so than their counterparts in other developed countries. It is part of an ongoing review of British primary education that is the biggest undertaken since the Plowden report was issued over 40 years ago.

The report noted the changes that have taken place in primary education in England since Plowden. One of the most significant is the reduction in the age that children start school from five years old to four. The number of primary schools has fallen by 3,000 in this period but the size of schools has increased by around 15 percent.

The report questions the assumed benefits of starting younger and having a longer school year. The authors say, “There is little evidence to support common-sense assumptions that spending longer in primary schools... results in higher attainment... The assumption that an early school starting age is beneficial for children’s later attainment is not well supported... and there are concerns about the appropriateness of provision for four-year-olds in schools.”

It is highly critical of the type of teaching meted out to four year olds when they first enter school. It notes, “It has been suggested that starting school at such a young age may be stressful for children... Several qualitative research studies have shown that young children’s opportunities to learn through play are curtailed in reception classes due to insufficient staff,

lack of early years training, physical constraints... lack of equipment (especially sand and water and large play equipment) and adherence to primary school timetables.”

Under-fives are also to be subjected to a proscriptive curriculum and testing. Beginning in September of this year, The Early Years Foundation Stage will lay out standards to be reached in reading, writing and numeracy for under-fives. It prescribes no less than 72 learning goals.

The report also looked at the extent and level of testing used in English primary schools. From entering primary school, young children are faced with an assault course of testing. These include an assessment just seven weeks after beginning school, Key Stage 1 tests at the end of their second year and Key Stage 2 tests at the end of their sixth year. Children may also be subjected to additional tests at the end of years 3, 4 and 5.

The researchers compared the regime of testing in English schools to those in other parts of the United Kingdom, Europe and Japan. Whilst these other countries also set tests, the report comments, “The scale of assessment for the purpose of monitoring and accountability is of quite a different order in England compared to our other reviewed countries... There is more external, standard testing in England: it occurs more frequently and starts at a younger age; more subjects are covered by the statutory assessments; test results are published in league tables; testing is high stakes... assessment in England... is pervasive, highly consequential...”

The report on assessment in English schools concludes by stating that “the high-stakes nature of the assessments designed to make the system accountable compromises its potential benefits.”

Since the publication of the report last month, teachers and parents have joined in expressing concern about the pressure that the emphasis on testing is placing on children. John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, told the *Independent*, “The whole testing regime is governed by the need to produce league tables. It has more to do with holding schools to account than helping pupils to progress.”

Mick Brookes, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, explained, “There are schools that start rehearsing for Key Stage

2 SATs [Standard Assessment Tests] from the moment the children arrive in September...other schools...rehearse SATs during Christmas week... They should be having the time of their lives at school, not just worrying about tests. It is the breadth and richness of the curriculum that suffers. The consequences for schools not reaching their targets are dire—heads can lose their jobs and schools can be closed down. With this at stake it's not surprising that schools let the tests take over.”

An increasing number of parents are seeking alternatives to state primary schools. Around 50,000 children are being educated at home. A recent paper issued by James Conroy and colleagues at Glasgow University noted, “Both the numbers opting for home schooling and the range of motivations of those wishing to do so have expanded considerably in recent years. One substantial and growing group is comprised of those who have abandoned formal schooling because they believe it is too constrained.”

The new Early Years Foundation Stage will also apply to independent bodies offering childcare. Under the new curriculum every child will have to be tested at the age of five whatever kind of school they attend. The government will have the power to close schools, kindergartens or nurseries that do not comply with the Early Year Foundation Stage Curriculum. Even childminders who care for young children in their own home will be subject to the new curriculum.

It will in effect become illegal not to teach literacy and numeracy to under-fives. Parents at an independent Steiner school at Wynstone, near Stroud, Gloucestershire are opposed to its introduction. They are campaigning to force the government to exempt Steiner schools and kindergartens.

The Steiner schooling movement puts the emphasis on young children learning through play. Steiner kindergartens do not teach literacy or numeracy, which are not begun until the child begins school at the age of six.

At the same time the government is increasing fees for the registration of child care providers. A number of organisations involved in the care of under-fives recently wrote to the *Times* saying, “we are alarmed at the potential impact of these proposed increases upon parents and providers.”

Steve Biddulph, an Australian educational psychologist, speaking at a recent conference in London warned, “Forcing learning destroys that learning. It makes children go backwards. The harm may well be life-long.”

He cited evidence from an American study that showed that children's language learning slows down in a formal academic setting, but speeds up the more they are allowed to interact through free play. The same relationship was observed in the development of children's reasoning skills.

The government claims that its statutory approach is intended to ensure that children from poor backgrounds get the same educational start as children from better off families. Biddulph pointed out that this could be achieved more effectively through properly resourced programmes aimed at disadvantaged communities.

Penelope Leach, the childcare expert, called for home visits to assist disadvantaged families rather than a prescriptive approach.

Lilian Katz, Professor of Education at the University of Illinois, presented evidence demonstrating that children who are pushed to read and write at an early age do less well in later years. This was particularly true of boys, she said, arguing against a “hothouse” approach to education.

“Research suggests the benefits of formal academic instruction for four and five-year-olds seem to be promising when they are tested early,” Katz said, “but considerably less so in the long term. When these children are followed over a period of three or more years, those who had early experience in more intellectually engaging curricula were more likely to do well in school than their peers, who had early exposure to academic instruction.”

Beverley Hughes, Labour Children's Minister, has dismissed the protests of parents, child psychologists and educationalists as “unrepresentative.”

The Cambridge report confirms the picture presented by last year's UNICEF report, which showed Britain to be one of the worst countries amongst the most developed economies in which to be a child. The high level of risky behaviour of children in Britain was a reflection of the psychological impact of their experience of childhood. The pressure of constant testing and loss of esteem of children failing to reach set

standards can only add to the psychological pressure being imposed on young children.

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