

Tests, the curriculum and learning

Yesterday I got involved in an important conversation on a doorstep about education.

I was told by a teacher that she felt strongly the present stretching curriculum backed up by regular testing was getting in the way of encouraging a love of learning in primary school children. She felt there was now too much emphasis on knowing facts and science, to the exclusion of wider education.

It is a difficult issue. I think you can make a case that too much emphasis on requiring mental recall of a fixed body of knowledge with testing to try to ensure pupils have memorised it can put some pupils off. It may inculcate an attitude of learning for the test and not bothering about anything that is not needed to pass the test. On the other hand if you go too far the other way and do not insist on mastery of the basics of number and words children can arrive at Secondary school ill equipped to carry out the more complex tasks there.

I remember at my own primary there was a strong emphasis on learning tables, spelling well, writing neatly, and being able to respond quickly to mental arithmetic challenges. There was a lot of rote learning and endless classroom tests to see if you had put in the work to memorise what was needed. The more creative work took place through projects, where you were encouraged to use your own initiative and time at home to flesh out a folder on the appointed topic. This mixture worked for some of us well. Today we now have the welcome development of smaller classes which should mean we can do better.

I would be interested in your thoughts on what is the right balance and the best approach. I agreed with the teacher that it is best if the system used does develop in a child a wish to know more, and a spirit of enquiry which will lead them to learn more through their own initiatives. If education is just a process of learning by rote and repeating for a test it will miss some of the most important features of personal development, but in the schools I have visited there is usually a balance in these matters which the national curriculum does not prevent. What are your thoughts.

Promoted by Fraser Mc Farland on behalf of John Redwood, both at 30 Rose Street Wokingham RG40 1XU