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Schools 'failing to fire the imagination'

Nicola Woolcock

Children are being impoverished by a deficient and narrow education, according to a leading academic behind one of the biggest reviews of primary schools.

The *Cambridge Primary Review* found that discussion and problem-solving had been pushed aside while "memorisation and recall were valued over understanding and inquiry".

It recommended an overhaul of the primary school national curriculum, saying the right of children to a broad education was being compromised by

a blinkered focus on numeracy and literacy, to the exclusion of arts, music and humanities. The fixation with Key Stage tests sat by 11-year-olds was having an adverse impact, it said, adding: "A reduced obsession with targets might reinvigorate discussion of aims more broadly conceived."

Academics and researchers at the University of Cambridge have spent more than two years analysing primary education. They released their conclusions on the national curriculum yesterday — ahead of their full report this summer — to meet the deadline of the government-

commissioned Rose review of the curriculum. Professor Robin Alexander, who has led the independent Cambridge review, the biggest in 40 years, said: "The history of education reform has been superficial change masking underlying inertia. Political calculations have replaced honest appraisal. Our report steps back and says, 'What is primary education for?'"

The authors said that the curriculum was "increasingly but needlessly compromised by the standards agenda". Half of school time was taken up by literacy and numeracy, with everything else crammed into the time left,

it said. It added: "In these severely utilitarian and philistine times, it has become necessary to argue the case for creativity and the imagination on the grounds of their contribution to the economy alone. The most conspicuous casualties are the arts, the humanities and those kinds of learning in all subjects which require time for talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas."

The review took into account 820 submissions, 28 surveys, 3,000 publications and more than 200 meetings across the country. It recommended a curriculum based on 12 aims, including wellbeing, celebrating culture and exciting the imagination.

A spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "We thank Professor Alexander for his contribution and Sir Jim Rose will no doubt read it with interest."

A source close to the project said there were concerns that the Government would dismiss it.

Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, said: "Rather than continue to tinker around the edges of primary education, we would like the Government to heed the proposals."