

UK children's exposure to science and arts 'hijacked'

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A ten year review of primary education has found that children are now taught an 'alarming' amount of maths and English at the expense of science, arts and the humanities compared to ten years ago.

The root of the problem, according to The University of Manchester researchers, is the national curriculum's emphasis on testing the 'core subjects' of maths and English.

The team examined national data from 1997 to 2007 collected by The University of Manchester on behalf of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

Primary schools were asked to detail the percentage of teaching time devoted to each subject for every school year. The findings were due to be presented to the now defunct select committee for education and skills this year.

Dr Bill Boyle, who is based at the School of Education said: "The often quoted issue of whether 'standards' have risen or not is really relevant against the huge 'deprivation' of children's exposure to foundation subjects. That is the real issue.

"And this unique ten year data set shows incontrovertibly that teachers are forced to devote more time to teaching maths and English and less time to the other subjects.

"It's scandalous that around 51 per cent of teaching activity is now on two subjects - leaving a paltry 49 per cent for all the others.

"This resonates strongly with many current concerns- but one of the biggest worries is over secondary school and higher education 'pick up' of science.

"Where are we going to find our young scientists if primary education neglects this important area?"

He added: "The core of the problem is the pressure exerted by central government on schools to raise standards in English and mathematics.

"The narrow concept of a core curriculum - politically valued because it is tested - reinforces shallow teaching and learning practice. In other words teachers are being forced to teach for test.

"With the introduction of national numeracy and literacy strategies and the percentage 'success level' targets centrally set for national test pupil outcomes, some reduction of foundation subjects in favour of the tested core subjects was always inevitable.

"But it is the extent of the diminution of the foundation, as evidenced by our data, which is alarming."

"It conflicts with what teachers want. And Ofsted argues that the curriculum should be balanced and allow adequate development of each subject area."

Source: University of Manchester

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