

TRADITIONAL SUBJECTS AXED IN FAVOUR OF 'CHOCOLATE' AND 'SPACE TRAVEL'

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Primary schools are abandoning traditional subjects in favour of "themed" teaching on topics as varied as chocolate and space travel.

Four in five are scrapping academic disciplines such as English, geography and history in favour of lessons which aim to cover several subjects at once, a survey found.

A teacher choosing a "chocolate" theme might touch on literacy using Charlie And The Chocolate Factory and science by melting chocolate to prove the process of changing from a solid to a liquid can be reversible.

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But the move has raised fears of a return to 1970s-style trendy teaching methods. Pupils would leave primary school ill-equipped for study at secondary level where teaching is more likely to be subject-based.

Topic-based classes were blamed for collapsing literacy and numeracy standards as teachers shunned the basics. A landmark report in 1992 said topic-based classes led to "fragmentary and superficial teaching".

The last Tory government began a drive to root it out, with Labour continuing the initiative by championing daily literacy and numeracy lessons.

But evidence of a backlash emerged in a survey of 115 primaries by the Times Educational Supplement.

Teachers have been spurred on by a 2003 Government report which backed a return to "creativity" in primary schools.

Twenty-five per cent of schools had switched to teaching most lessons by themes in the past three years, the survey said. Eleven per cent had started before that, while 43 per cent planned to do so shortly.

Under the new approach, teachers concentrate on a theme for up to half a term. Some topics are covered in less time, for example a week or two.

Supporters claim that, unlike in the 1970s, staff take care to meet national curriculum requirements. They claim teachers are more enthusiastic because they have devised the lessons themselves.

Ofsted inspectors have praised some schools which have introduced the approach. According to the TES survey, history and geography are most likely to be taught in themed lessons, with 83 per cent taught in this way.

For maths, it is 16 per cent and languages 10 per cent.

But one in five schools polled said they had no intention of introducing topic-based work. The biggest barrier, cited by 31 per cent, was the time commitment and planning involved in designing a themed curriculum.

Critics of the practice include Chris Woodhead, the former chief inspector of schools. He said:

"It's harder for teachers to structure a coherent provision in the subjects that are worth studying if they're trying to construct links between these subjects as well.

"It seems common sense that if you want somebody to make progress in a particular subject, you teach them that subject."

David Hart, former general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said: "Themebased education will disadvantage pupils in the transition to secondary.

"And it will make the secondary teacher's task much more difficult."

But Mick Waters, of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, said: "Schools are finally getting the confidence to make the curriculum work for them, rather than being slaves to something they imagine is the driver."

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This is just another part of the general "de-educating" of the vast majority of our population. A poorly educated, intellectually starved citizenship is easier to manage and control than a well educated and

questioning one.

- James Stuart, Chorley U.K.

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