

Britain: Constant testing increases stress among school pupils

Liz Smith
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Two teachers' unions in Britain recently published a report examining the impact of the increase in formal testing, particularly noting a rise in stress suffered by school pupils. The paper by the Professional Association of Teachers (PAT) and the Secondary Heads Association (SHA) "Tested to Destruction?" found that between beginning formal education at age 5 and leaving school at age 17 or 18, pupils will endure at least 75 external assessments, tests and examinations.

The report points out that there is now an obsession with measuring performance and expresses deep concern that this will lead "to a greater turmoil unless we ease back on the relentless search for numbers." It comments on a survey undertaken on behalf of the Children's Society and the two unions, outlining the multifarious compulsory and optional tests taken in the course of a child's life at school:

- * Children are assessed within seven weeks of entry to a state primary school. As a minimum this has to cover aspects of language and literacy, mathematics, and personal and social development.

- * At the end of Year 2 (seven years of age), "Key Stage 1" Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) are taken in English and maths.

- * Optional tests can be taken in Years 3, 4 and 5, comprising Key Stage 2 in English and maths.

- * At the end of Year 6 (at age 11) SATs are taken in English, maths and science with extension tests for high achievers.

- * In Year 9 (age 14) Key Stage 3 SATs are taken in English, maths and science with extension tests for high achievers.

- * In Year 11 (age 16), Key Stage 4, there are no statutory requirements as to the nature of the assessments to be made, but many students will take a range of General Certificate in Secondary Education

(GCSE) subjects, typically eight, which comprise two exams and a course work component.

- * Post -16 there is no element of compulsion, but those staying in education and training are likely to study GCE Advanced level, usually taking three subjects.

The survey concentrated on the externally imposed regime of testing outlined above and its effect on secondary pupils, (ages 11-18). It states that 75 assessments is the minimum a child is expected to take and this does not include incidental tests and exams schools use to monitor a pupil's progress. Neither does it include the many voluntary activities young people are encouraged to take part in, many of which involve exams.

Initial indications from the 8,000 responses received are that the majority of children suffer some form of exam stress, including difficulty sleeping, being tearful and upset, feeling ill, loss of appetite and difficulty in relaxing. Girls are more frequently affected .

The report quotes a poll of adults taken for the *Herald* newspaper in Scotland, which showed that 61 percent of 18-24 year olds and 53 percent of parents of school-age children think pupils in Scottish schools are under too much pressure to "do well at school and get good qualifications".

Professor Martin Denscombe of De Montfort University, Leicester, has questioned over 1,600 young people aged 15-16 about what they regard as the main threats to their health. He said "Time and again, young people talked of the stresses involved as they worked towards their 16+ examinations." Irrespective of their social background or whether they were planning to leave school at 16 to find work "the vast majority of the young people were caught up with the pressure".

The report quotes a letter from an experienced

primary school teacher concerned about pressures arising from SATs. She points out that several in her class have private tuition and expresses grave doubts as to the level of pressure placed on children. “I have been told to revise for SATs—hence this year, 11-12 weeks will have been focused on SAT revision,” she explains. “I believe that many problems of behaviour, attitude, etc. now prevalent in secondary education are the culmination of pressure.”

Childline, a telephone help service for children, has received mounting calls resulting from examination stress, nearly 15 percent from children under 13. The Samaritans, the charity offering support to those in despair or feeling suicidal, has launched an awareness campaign to help young people cope with the potential emotional backlash at exam results time.

The PAT/SHA report quotes an article for the *Critical Quarterly* by Professor Dylan William of Kings College, London who writes: “To sum up, the trouble with the prevalent approach to educational assessment in this country is that we have divorced the certification of achievement and capability from the learning process. Because the assessments we use have no educational value, we feel unable to justify spending a lot of time on them, so that we typically assess the outcome of several thousand hours learning with assessments that only last a few hours.... We started out with the aim of making the important measurable, and ended up making only the measurable important.”

Schools are being set ever-higher targets, enforced through performance tables and inspections. The report states, “We live in an atmosphere of pressure and it is very difficult for schools to avoid passing on the pressure to their pupils.” In addition to the human cost, the financial burden of carrying out testing imposed is substantial—£150 million a year in England alone.

The report concludes that this situation has come about, “Because education is now an instrument of politics and that until the profession manages to wrest back the instrument, neither we nor the children we teach and care for, can expect any respite.”

The systems now in place were introduced by Conservative governments in the 1980s and 90s and were extended by the present Labour administration. Government plans are well under way to introduce compulsory tests in Key Stage 3, particularly for those who failed to achieve a pass at key Stage 2.

The imposition of extensive examinations and testing in state schools were argued for by the Thatcherite right within the Conservative Party on the basis that they “are the cement which bind(s) educational structures together giving them strength, cohesion, direction”. They were said to reinforce “formal traditional teaching” and give individuals labels that indicate social worth.

However, the increasing emphasis on testing was accompanied by the restriction of the syllabus, and a prescriptive attitude to education, rather than a child-centred approach.

But as the emphasis on targets and tables intensifies and schools are increasingly subject to market forces, disaffection is beginning to appear even within organisations that initially supported or were sympathetic to these arguments. PAT, for example, was formed in 1970 amongst more conservative layers of teachers who were opposed to taking industrial action.



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