

Britain: SATs school tests criticised by official report

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In May, millions of school children throughout England undertook their Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) in English, mathematics and science.

The statutory tests are widely considered to be flawed and almost universally reviled by teachers and children alike.

Numerous educationalists are critical of the Labour government's fixation with increased testing, which is distorting the curriculum and having a detrimental effect on the long-term education of children.

The recent *Report by the House of Commons, Children, Schools and Families Committee—Testing and Assessment (Session 2007-2008)* paints a disturbing picture of the climate generated by testing and target-setting in schools.

The report declares its commitment to “a system of national testing,” but then draws attention to a number of studies conducted in recent years, including one by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) published in 2003, that found “the use of test results for the purpose of school accountability had damaging effects on teachers and pupils alike. Teachers felt that the effect was to narrow the curriculum and distort the education experience of pupils.”

It adds that “excessive time, workload and stress for children [are] not justified by the accuracy of the test results on individuals.”

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) considered that Key Stage tests provide only “one source” of performance data for both students and teachers, and that it is “hazardous” to draw too many conclusions from this data alone. They argue that “A teacher's professional knowledge of the pupil is vital—statistics are no substitute for professional judgment.”

The Association of Colleges stated that performance tables composed from examination results data do not adequately reflect the actual work of a school and that the emphasis on performance tables risks shifting the focus of schools from the individual need of the pupil towards performance table results.

“The fact that the results of these tests are used for so many purposes, with high-stakes attached to the outcomes, creates tensions in the system leading to undesirable consequences, including distortion of the education experience of many children,” the report acknowledges.

“In addition, the data derived from the testing system do not necessarily provide an accurate or complete picture of the performance of schools and teachers, yet they are relied upon by the Government, the QCA and Ofsted [the examinations board and the school inspectors body] to make important decisions affecting the education system in general and individual schools, teachers and pupils in particular.”

The City and Guilds awarding body is quoted as saying that “there

is considerable obligation on the designer of tests or assessments to make them as efficient and meaningful as possible. Assessment opportunities should be seen as rare events during which the assessment tool must be finely tuned, accurate and incisive. To conduct a test that is inaccurate, excessive, unreliable or inappropriate is unpardonable.”

The present Key Stage tests fail on all these counts.

The National Curriculum in England is divided into four Key Stages, or areas of learning, for school children (Key Stage 1, 5-7-year-olds; Key Stage 2, 7-11-year-olds; Key Stage 3, 11-14-year-olds; and Key Stage 4, 14-16-year-olds). The government's stated intention is to improve the average achievement across a school at the end of each.

Schools are given targets based on ensuring that children meet the expected levels for their age in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. Key Stage tests are used to generate data on pupil performance, which is then collated and used, in the words of the report, to “measure trends across time, across schools, and by almost every conceivable characteristic of the pupils.”

The results for each school are aggregated into “performance tables,” which encourage comparison (and ultimately competition) between schools.

The report's authors say that witnesses to its study have challenged the government's assertions that its agenda of tests, targets and performance tables have helped “drive up standards.”

The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) states that there is little evidence that performance tables have contributed to raising standards of attainment. The report also contends that “a growing number of international studies show that other comparable education systems, including those in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, have reached and maintained high educational standards without use of the performance tables.”

The NUT drew attention to the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information study (2004), which concluded that repeated testing and examination de-motivated pupils and reduced their learning potential, as well as having a detrimental effect on educational outcomes. Evidence showed that teachers adapt their teaching style to train pupils to pass tests, even when pupils do not have an understanding of higher-order thinking skills that tests are intended to measure and that National Curriculum tests lower the self-esteem of unconfident and low-achieving pupils.

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), noting the government's assertions of improving standards, questioned “whether this means that our pupils are learning more and better.” It referred to

research at Durham University suggesting that pupils who reach the projected Level 4 at Key Stage 2 do not retain what they have learned over a period of six months to a year.

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) considers that the aggregation of individual test scores creates a high-stakes testing system that it says will inevitably create a false picture of “progress.” It argues that the government has produced no evidence to support the assertion that targets and performance tables have driven up standards, a contention that “has taken on the aspect of a dogma.”

Results are now used to inform school decisions about performance-related pay, to inform Ofsted decisions about whether schools should be given “light or heavy touch inspections” and, combined with targets, to inform judgments about the advisability of educational initiatives.

The government is criticised for putting in place “accountability structures” that are strongly based on pupil performance in national tests. The distorting effect of these changes places competitive stress on schools and worsens the educational opportunities for most children: “Test results are not the output of education, but a proxy for the education taking place every day in classrooms across the country.”

One of the most destructive effects of this approach is “teaching to the test,” whereby the curriculum is narrowed to those areas likely to be the subject of examination. The report notes, “The Association of Colleges stated that, whilst a pupil may have the necessary grades to progress to the next level, if that learning is shallow, focussed only on passing the test, they may not have a full grasp of the necessary concepts or sufficient intellectual rigour to deal with the demands of the next level. They conclude that ‘This raising of false expectations resulting in a sense of inadequacy may well account for the high drop out rate at 17.’ ”

By narrowing the taught curriculum to what is tested, it is also possible for schools to inflate test scores without actually improving the underlying education of children taking the tests.

The reports’ authors also take issue with the official language of “success” and “failure,” saying that it highlighted a problem with the “standards agenda which the Government’s reasoning does not address.”

The NAHT states that children learn at different rates and in different ways. Schools should focus on assisting children to reach the goals appropriate for them as individuals.

The authors conclude their study by endorsing “the Government’s view that much can and should be done to assist children who struggle to meet expected standards,” But they express concern “that the Government’s target-based system may actually be contributing to the problems of some children.”

Coinciding with the release of the report, the BBC screened an episode of its *Panorama* documentary series titled “Tested to Destruction,” which highlighted the disturbing effects of increased testing on the education of primary school children in England.

It explained that the SATs regime has only illustrated the underlying social and economic inequality in England today. The better results are achieved in schools in the more prosperous suburbs, and children who live in areas of deprivation tend to achieve lower marks.

Panorama interviewed pupils at the Phoenix Primary school in Liverpool, and invited some of them to draw pictures based on their thoughts and feelings about tests. This produced some very dark and negative images, epitomised in one child’s “SATs Monster.”

Professor Wynne Harlen of Bristol University said that the tests

were a “way of telling you that you are less worthwhile,” and that children’s confidence and self-esteem are constantly under threat with every practice test they take. Moreover, “the nearer to SATs the more education was narrowed down to maths, English and science.”

By way of rebuttal, School’s Minister Jim Knight made the claim on the programme that children “don’t even notice” they are taking SATs.

While the other subjects were sidelined in the SATs’ year group, the programme posed the question whether concentration nevertheless led to an improvement in core subjects tested. Specialists insist that the opposite is true. Professor Margaret Brown said that because teachers were teaching to the tests, this was to the detriment of learning. Whole areas of maths, for example, are ignored as education is reduced to practising solving short test questions.

Chief Inspector of Schools Christine Gilbert recently announced that one in five 11-year-olds leaves Primary school unable to read, write and add up, and that overall standards had stalled. According to Professor Brown, “the government have pointed to rises in the test results. Teachers are good at coaching children to the test and it’s got to a ceiling.”

Rather than admitting the failure of government education policies, Gilbert outlined a more punitive inspection regimen beginning in September 2009. Snap inspections are to be introduced with no notice to schools and parents. Evidence of “bored” children can also trigger an inspection. Schools judged either “satisfactory” or “inadequate” will be inspected within a three-year cycle, while those performing better will be inspected every six years.

The SATs exist alongside a whole raft of exams that children in England have to take, including tests at seven, 14, 16 and 18 if they stay on at school. In response to the unpopularity of SATs, the government is piloting a supposedly more “child-friendly” single-level test, to be taken when the teacher deems a pupil is ready. Teachers on the programme said these revisions would be for the worse, as the worry caused by the tests would be ever-present and not just in the run-up to SATs.

Barry Sherman MP, chairman of the Commons Select Committee, said that there was a broad range of evidence showing that SATs were de-motivating and spoiling children’s enjoyment of education. “Testing” he said, “is ever present in schools. The success of a child, teacher and school is linked to testing, testing, testing.”



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