Speaker notes  Standardised tests in primary schools

These notes are intended for teachers, heads, union representatives, governors, parents - in fact, anybody who needs to speak to a small group or larger meeting. Please use them flexibly, in whatever order you think best. You don’t have to explain everything, and can supplement them with your own ideas, including the experiences of particular pupils and teachers. [Sources shown in the endnotes]

Key Stage 2 ¹

2018 was the third year of the new SATs, based on the revised National Curriculum introduced by Michael Gove. The tests are deliberately harder than under the old system, and are sending large numbers of children to secondary school with a failure label round their necks – in the official language, they have not reached the ‘expected level’ are ‘not ready’ to start secondary school. This has enormous potential to demoralise, and is creating massive problems for pupils and teachers in secondary schools.

• roughly 1 in 3 children are being sent to secondary school with a failure label in one or more of Reading, Writing and Mathematics (36%)
• The failure rate is even worse for some groups of pupils:
  • 2 out of every 5 boys (39%)
  • 2 out of every 5 August-born children (42%)
  • more than half of children with free school meal (FSM) entitlement (54%)
  • half of children classified as ‘disadvantaged’ (i.e. FSM at any time in past six years)
  • 3 out of 5 boys on FSM are failed.

The pass rate for each separate test is higher, but the failure rate is still high: for example, nearly half (45%) of FSM boys are failed at reading (45%).

Does testing reduce the impact of disadvantage? ²

The schools minister Nick Gibb claims that the present regime is closing the gap between disadvantaged and other pupils, but this is only because they are calculating it in a new way. There is a 22 percentage point gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils in 2018, exactly the same as in 2016 and in 2011.
**Do the tests show what each pupil can do?**

Even within their limited range, the tests are a distorted assessment. The time pressure is acute. In Reading pupils are confronted with three different passages, each very demanding, within an hour. They have to answer 40 questions, some in several parts.³

The Maths tests are a race: Arithmetic is 36 questions in 30 minutes. The Maths Reasoning tests each present over 20 problems to solve in 40 minutes.

Writing is distorted for another reason. Pupils build up a portfolio in class, and are allowed to redraft and improve, but almost all of the marks are for technical details (punctuation, spelling, grammar) with very little reward for content and style. The pupils are required to write not for meaning but artificially, to show that they can tick all the boxes.⁴

**Do the tests help monitor pupils’ development from one age to another?**

Standardised tests have proved to be a very unreliable guide to pupils’ progress from one stage to another. The Department for Education has made many attempts to use ‘value added’ to measure the ‘effectiveness’ of schools (and individual teachers), but so many other factors are at work, including how much help parents can give and the impact of family poverty.⁵

Secondary schools are supposed to use KS2 SATs to predict future GCSE grades and set targets. This is absurd, because tests in reading and maths at age 11 cannot predict GCSEs in geography or art. Pupils who are subjected to intensive cramming for the KS2 tests are often set targets which are unrealistic, and start to feel they are failures.

Many secondary schools have so little trust in SATs that they set other tests in Year 7, or wait until they have seen the new pupil’s work.

There is now a lot of research to show the poor links between tests at different ages. For example, expert statisticians at Education Datalab found that only a third of pupils with average scores at age 7 had average grades at age 16, and most had zig-zagged up and down in between.⁶

Similarly, research into baseline tests show that they make unsound predictions of 6 out of 10 pupils even at KS1⁷

**Curriculum narrowing**

Because schools and individual teachers are judged on test results, there is enormous pressure to concentrate on Reading, Writing and Maths and to neglect other subjects. Even spoken language is sidelined. A lot of learning time is being wasted practising for the tests.
What can replace the SATs?

Assessment is not the same as giving a mark or a grade. There are various purposes for assessment, and different methods should be used. One problem with SATs is that they try to serve too many purposes.

The book Beyond the exam factory contains many interesting examples of assessment which will enrich the curriculum. These are methods which are far superior to SATs in analysing a child’s difficulties, showing achievement in different curriculum areas, and providing rich information for parents and the next teacher or school.

Diagnostic assessment: SATs do not help teachers diagnose where a pupil is having difficulties. That comes from careful observation and discussion with the child. Teachers should not have to do a phonics test on all pupils; they should be allowed to concentrate on pupils who are struggling.

Portfolios: A portfolio of a pupil’s work is the best way of showing the next teacher, or the secondary school, what each child is capable of. The pupil can help select what to include, so that it doesn’t increase the teacher’s workload. The portfolio can then be shown to parents and form the basis for discussion about their child’s progress.

What if teachers are worried that their children might not be at the right standard?

Experienced teachers will give parents an honest assessment of how well their child is doing, but some teachers will feel uncertain, especially at first. Some parents are worried that standards might slip. There are easy ways to overcome this, through sample tests and moderation:

• Make samples available of what counts as a satisfactory or a good standard, through a national bank of test questions.

• Ask a sample of pupils to answer a short test, and compare this with the teacher’s judgement. This need only involve 5 or 6 children, using tests lasting less than 30 minutes.

• Gather together teachers from different schools to look closely at a sample of work and discuss which is reaching a good standard.

NB Workload: Some teachers worry that teacher assessment creates extra workload. This is only the case if government regulations turn it into a bureaucratic exercise, with too many boxes to tick and too many different criteria. It is the Government’s mistrust of teachers which results in demands for endless collection of evidence (eg in Reception and for KS2 Writing).
Some quotations to choose from \textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Curriculum narrowing}

“Everything is about test results; if it isn’t relevant to a test then it is not seen as a priority. This puts too much pressure on pupils, puts too much emphasis on academic subjects and creates a dull, repetitive curriculum that has no creativity. It is like a factory production line chugging out identical little robots with no imagination, already labelled as failures if they haven’t achieved the right level on a test.” (Primary teacher)

“All our planning [in Year 6] is based on what we think the children need to do, where their gaps are, to try and get them to that level … It is teaching them to take a test which I know every school does … The children know it’s for the test when you ask them.” (Primary)

“At the top of Key Stage 2, definitely in Year 6 and to some extent in Year 5, the curriculum is narrowed to reading, writing and maths because that’s what we’re held accountable for and we’ve got to get those children to a certain level.” (Primary, I)

\textit{Endless preparation for tests and measurement of progress}

“Every six weeks we ‘assess’ children and analyse the data. We analyse each sub-group of children (e.g. SEN, Pakistani boys, EAL etc.) and form targets for each category based on the analysis. The individual learner is completely lost in this process. It’s meaningless, statistically insignificant data which wastes time and means we are losing sight of the reason for assessing in the first place.” (KS1)

\textit{Children are being damaged by the pressures, and by an early sense of failure}

“It is heart-breaking to have a four-year-old approach me in tears because they ‘are still in the bad group for reading’ because they have already been streamed in phonics at age four!” (Primary)

“They are six years old, and all their school experience tells them is that they are failures (already) and have to be pulled out constantly to work on things their peers can already do, and miss out on the fun bits of learning.” (Primary teacher)

“I work with Pupil Premium children and often have to take them out of class when others are doing activities that they would like to do. They also miss assemblies, and I can see their agitation when they can hear laughter and singing while they are having to do extra work with me.” (Primary)

“These children are pulled out of broad curriculum subjects to try to close the gap. Their experience at school must be horrible – in assembly they’ve got to do phonics intervention, then a phonics lesson, a literacy lesson, a maths lesson, lunch, reading, extra reading intervention and then speech intervention. What else are they learning about the world? They are six years old, and all their school experience tells them is that they are failures (already) and have to be pulled out constantly to work on things their peers can already do, and miss out on the fun bits of learning.” (KS1)
Other tests in primary school

The problems are not only at the end of KS2. For example:

• The new Reception Baseline Test will be a disaster. There is no evidence of its accuracy as a predictor of later achievement. Previous baseline tests made inaccurate judgements of the majority of children, and children speaking languages other than English, growing up in poverty and summer-born children are likely to be labelled as having low potential.

• The Phonics Check tests only one aspect of reading, and does so artificially including nonsense words. It narrows down the teaching of reading. The forthcoming Multiplication Tables Test will also distort the teaching of maths.

Sources

1 from Department for Education statistics https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-key-stage-2

2 ditto

3 https://www.sats-papers.co.uk/ks2-sats-papers/


7 https://reclaimingschools.org/2018/03/29/the-looming-baseline-test-disaster/ and https://reclaimingschools.org/2016/01/18/the-delusions-of-baseline-testing/


9 https://reclaimingschools.org/2019/05/12/without-sats-the-sky-wont-fall-in/