



Summer
Term 2017

The SATs
effect:
teachers'
verdict



Impact on teaching and learning

94% of teachers agree with the House of Commons Education Committee's finding in April 2017 that the 'high-stakes [assessment] system does not improve teaching and learning in primary schools'.

Teachers responding to an online survey by the National Union of Teachers¹, carried out following the completion of Key Stage 1 and 2 tests, have described how children are inadequately served by the current system of primary assessment.

The current system is producing unreliable data with damaging consequences for both children and schools. Young children may be mislabelled as low ability, which impacts on not only how they are viewed by others, but how they view themselves as learners.

"The results are used as a stick with which to beat schools whose data may slightly dip from the previous year's scores. This creates immense pressure on the schools to attain results and this means too much time and effort on preparing for tests. As a consequence the children give too much import to the tests themselves and are under pressure."

The DfE argues that schools and teachers should mitigate the damaging impact of the high stakes system. Many teachers, however, find that it is simply not possible to protect their pupils from the pressure.

"They tell you to keep Year 2 SATs low key... but you have to open sealed packages in the room in front of them, read out ridiculous commentaries, have an observer in the room... and the word test is printed on the booklet. Plus you take away their usual comfortable learning environment and all the practical equipment they are used to and you are supposed to use!"

¹ Survey of 2,375 NUT primary members in England, May 2017.

Inclusion under pressure

- 84% of teachers said that the high stakes system had a particularly negative impact on children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND)
- 58% said there was a particular impact on children who speak English as an additional language (EAL)
- 42% highlighted summer born children, and
- 33% said that children eligible for free school meals, a bench mark for disadvantage, were particularly adversely affected.

In addition to the negative impact of preparation for tests on these children many teachers also highlighted that they may all receive test scores which do not reflect their true knowledge, skills and understanding. As a result they may be inaccurately labelled or have their perception of themselves as learners damaged.

“As a key stage 1 teacher I often find that the summer born children underperform compared to those born earlier in the academic year. This leaves many summer born children with low self-esteem and negative emotions about education and their ability, when the truth is that they simply need a few more months in order to be at the same stage as their older peers.”

“There is not enough credit given to pupils juggling speaking two languages who do incredibly well to cope with switching from one to another at home and at school. Their parents also find it hard to support them at home if their language skills aren't fluent.”

“Children with issues at home can't control this. No matter how hard they work, they can be affected by other issues eg domestic violence, family break ups etc and this should be taken into account more.”

Funding reducing as pressures mount

Real terms cuts to school funding have meant that resources are scarce and schools are increasingly being asked to do more with less and less. The distorting impact on the allocation of resources in schools caused by the high stakes assessment and accountability system is made all the more dramatic by the lack of sufficient funds.

“The majority of attention is focused on those who might pass.”

“The children who have a very low chance of passing the tests are withdrawn from interventions as the year goes on so that the focus is on borderline children. Absolutely disgraceful, but senior management are under immense pressure to get the highest percentage of pass rate.”

“Children are viewed as data. Children not capable of ‘making it’ are discounted so that resources can be focused on cusp children. Children assessed as ‘safe’ aren’t always given the support to make progress they deserve.”

“Despite differentiating, due to funding, we don’t really have the staff required so all [children] can make progress all of the time!”

“Due to a shortage of additional staff, priority is given to those who are deemed to have a chance at passing the tests. Other children receive less support as a result which I find unacceptable.”

“Teachers cannot meet the needs of SEND and EAL pupils as teaching assistants are being used in classes with children who are sitting their SATs. As a result, children who will not be sitting the SATs are being affected by this, as the school does not have the money to resource extra members of staff.”

There is enormous pressure to ensure that children at the border of the ‘expected standard’ are pushed to ‘cross the line’. This means that resources, such as teaching assistants’ time, are diverted towards preparing these children for SATs.

Teachers are very worried that children, such as those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), do not always have access to the support that they need to learn and develop. This is because schools are not measured in ways which capture the achievements and engagement of children who do not reach the expected standard.

“Priority for resources (additional support) is given to those who have a chance of passing the tests rather than those with the greatest need.”

“Children with SEND working below curriculum requirements are not always given the support they deserve as resources need to be used elsewhere.”

“It worries me that funding will be diverted from SEND children to be used on intervention for just about managing children.”

“Progress of children with SEND and EAL is affected as schools are more likely to use available resources in helping children who are more likely to reach the required standard in the test. Being named as not making ‘expected’ progress is a difficult label to shift.”

In addition to having a distorting impact on the allocation of resources within schools, the current assessment system does not enable schools, teachers, children and their families to celebrate the success of children who do not reach the expected standard. It is a blunt instrument for reporting children’s progress. This lack of recognition has a damaging impact on many children’s self-esteem and negatively impacts engagement and motivation to learn.

“Children who know they are not on track to achieve the national standard feel anxious. They should be able to feel proud of how much they have progressed rather than being given a result that shows they have failed.”

Teachers also reported that the most able children are not well served by the current system as they are limited by the parameters of the end of key stage testing.

“The most able are not stretched by curriculum and not motivated as achievements are not recognised when SATS results are reported.”

“Bright children who do not need the constant prep and review have their attainment stifled by the ceiling of the testing expectations.”

Breadth of the curriculum at risk

95% of teachers said that preparation for SATs does not support children's access to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Time spent on preparing for writing assessments, and for reading and Maths tests, the results of which will be used to label children and judge schools, squeezes out other subjects from children's educational experience.

“Schools teach to the tests because there is such a lot at risk.”

“Subjects like art and music end up being squeezed out. We are pressured into showing examples of writing across the curriculum and therefore lessons like science and history end up having more of an English focus.”

“Children are being put through intervention programs to help them keep up with maths and English, which often take place during afternoon sessions, which means that children are missing out on other lessons because they are having to do even more maths and English.”

The sheer volume of curriculum content required to be covered in tested subjects is at odds with the Government's favoured mastery method from Shanghai, which sees students learn fewer topics, and no topic is moved on from, until every child has a full understanding of what they have learned.

“Teachers are being forced to rush through learning to try and teach a packed curriculum. Children are not getting a chance to embed their learning and apply it well enough because they are being rushed on to something else. I can see more and more children with gaps in their learning.”

“I’m sure the aim was to ensure children left primary education with a higher level of maths and English, but there are many children who, for whatever reasons, do not have a sound enough understanding of the basics of numbers to truly understand the maths they are asked to complete. As a result, they are taught to the test and have trouble applying this learning to other areas.”

High stakes system increasing workload

93% of teachers said that SATs significantly increased teacher workload at their school.

84% of respondents reported that their school held additional booster classes for Year 6 children, with 38% reporting booster classes for children preparing for key stage 1 SATs, and 33% for five and six year olds, to prepare for the phonics check.

Comments reported the impact of these additional classes on the workload of teachers across the school, but especially on those teaching Year 6.

“Year 6 teachers spend every evening marking mock SATs papers. Other staff dedicated breaks and other time to holding booster groups that teach to the test.”

Of those who said their school provided additional sessions to help prepare children for national tests, 70% withdrew students from other lessons, 20% ran classes in school holidays, 57% had classes after school and 23% during children and teachers’ lunch breaks.

“It was an unwritten expectation that the Year 6 teacher would give up a week in the Easter holidays to run booster sessions. Maths club after school every week was run in two classes for the Year 6. This was very much additional intervention in prep for SATs.”

Thus SATs preparation is preventing children from accessing other lessons in schools, and extra-curricular after school, and school holiday activities.

Recruitment issues in Year 2 and Year 6

These working conditions were deemed unsustainable, with many teachers commenting either that they wanted to stop teaching Year 2 and Year 6, or that they were considering leaving teaching altogether.

“I have felt as if I am drowning under the weight of marking, inputting data and planning. I will be leaving teaching before I am 60. It’s soul-destroying... It’s not what I trained for.”

“The huge demand for teacher assessment impacts on every lesson... We are a small village school, so each child is worth a large percentage when it comes to data. This has had a huge impact on my work life balance so much so, that I am taking a year off teaching only two years after joining the profession.”

School leaders commented that recruitment to teach in these high pressure year groups was proving challenging, with experienced teachers deserting positions in Year 2 and Year 6 because of the pressure of preparation for external tests and assessment.

“The pressure on Year 6 teachers is horrendous. Recruitment of experienced upper KS2 teachers is a challenge! Teachers do not want to teach in Year 6 because of the work overload and ridiculous expectations.”