



DROP

SATs

FOR GOOD

**The case for recovery without
high-stakes assessment**

**more
than a
score**

CONTENTS

01 INTRODUCTION	3	06 EXPERT COMMENTARY	42
by <i>Jamila Gavin</i> , author of Whitbread prize-winning <i>Coram Boy</i> and many other children's books	4	Mind the gap: Covid, increasing class inequalities and primary assessment <i>Diane Reay</i>	43
02 CALLS FOR ACTION	6	Normal rules no longer apply: why relentless focus on SATs needs to end now <i>Alice Bradbury</i>	50
The More Than A Score summary and three calls for action	7	Testing and mental health: what our one-size-fits-all, results-driven agenda does to young minds <i>Dr Chris Bagley</i>	53
Signatories to the More Than A Score calls for action	9	Alternatives to SATs: why COVID-19 has made changing our current testing and accountability system a pressing issue <i>Gemma Moss</i>	56
03 NEW RESEARCH	11	07 VIEWS FROM HEADTEACHERS	59
Schools without SATs: recovery and post-recovery priorities for parents and school leaders	12	Reflections on education and assessment <i>Jonathan Cooper</i>	60
04 CASE STUDIES	19	SATs and our community <i>Matt Morden</i>	62
The voices of heads, parents and children:		Race inequality and the inequities of SATs <i>Sandeep Kaur</i>	65
Schooling and homeschooling during lockdown	20	The weak wall of assessment <i>Mark Chatley</i>	68
The opportunity and need for change is now	24	SEND and SATs: the worst of all worlds <i>Jeremy Barnes</i>	71
Review the role and means of assessment in primary schools	27	Learning hours wasted in the quest to test <i>Kulvarn Atwal</i>	74
Concerns have been raised from all quarters for many years	31	08 UNION LEADERS & MPS: CONCLUDING STATEMENTS	76
05 BASELINE	33	Statements from ASCL, NEU and NAHT	77
The case against Reception Baseline Assessment		Daisy Cooper MP, Liberal Democrats	80
<i>Beatrice Merrick and Michael Freeston</i>	34	Flick Drummond MP, Conservatives	81
Voices from Early Years practitioners and Reception children <i>Jane Hanmer</i>	39	Emma Hardy MP, Labour	82
On the frontline with Baseline	40	Caroline Lucas MP, Green Party	83

01

INTRODUCTION

We can't go back to the previous 'normal' in primary education testing. More Than A Score is offering an alternative that will far better prepare our children for the changed and challenging world they are stepping into



JAMILA GAVIN AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION BY JAMILA GAVIN

WHITBREAD PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF CORAM BOY AND THE GRANDPA CHATTERJI SERIES FOR CHILDREN

Too many people are talking about this year of lockdown as being responsible for a 'lost generation'. But I say don't ignore the grannies who shake their heads and remind their children of the ghastliness of WW2, which lasted six years – six years of loss, destruction, and the gravest crimes against humanity ever known.

Was the generation that emerged from the rubble a lost generation? No. They came out fighting, determined to seize the opportunities of setting the foundations for world peace and a fairer society. They produced the welfare state; education for all; housing for all; the arts for all; protection from the strongest to the weakest from cradle to grave. Empire and colonialism gave way to democracy.

This is not, in any way, to diminish the tragedies that have been playing out throughout this pandemic. Death and weeping seem everywhere; lives cut short; loss of homes, jobs, and certainty; loss of freedom. It has been a year that has demonstrated huge inequalities in society, as well as inequalities among this generation of children who would normally have been at school or university. Many children from deeply deprived homes lost the much-needed structure that school provided, both for their learning and their wellbeing. This is not to be underestimated. Nor should the need for nurturing and restoring faith in the future be underestimated. Our children must be prepared for the future.

It is the how that is disturbing – the talk of returning to normal, with the suggestion that we must pick up where we left off. But we can't go back to the previous 'normal'. The world has changed, our future has changed, and if we don't change, too, we'll pay a heavy price. More Than A Score is offering an alternative 'how' that will far better prepare our children for the changed and challenging world they are coming into.

Just as the old 11+ made failures of 90% of children, so the concentration on SATs – testing, examining and assessing within tight tramlines of prescribed learning – has left no room in an arid school curriculum for the kind of creative thinking that is vital when old norms fall apart. This is even more vital now as we look for new pathways through our lives. The pandemic has (should have) brought home to us that if our children and grandchildren are to have a future, they must have the imagination to see the plight of our planet. All its misfortunes are interlinked: climate change, viruses – indeed, almost all the plagues of Egypt, it seems, including locusts, floods, fires and famine. And all we can think about in terms of educating for the future is to return to an even more rigorous regime of SATs and testing.

How I wish there had been less negative thought during the lockdowns and more encouragement – for those who could – to use the freedom the time provided to explore creativity, indoor play, books, art, discovery of the world – to analyse and reflect on what it is that has brought the world to its knees, and where we go from here. Because we have never needed more than one thing – and it's exclusive to humankind: the ability to imagine, invent, create and solve problems.

INTRODUCTION BY JAMILA GAVIN CONTINUED

Experts and educationalists have always known that children who engage with the arts and creativity do better at the very subjects our politicians see as the bedrock of education – the core subjects that are tested to kingdom come. Yet with all the evidence before their eyes, successive governments have still stripped the arts out of pupils' school lives. How do we close this credibility gap?

“We value freedom above all else, yet we are not entrusting our teachers and children with it, allowing them to choose the paths they feel are best for their class”

Children who learn a musical instrument do better at school; children who do drama gain a wider understanding and confidence that is essential in the outside world; children who engage with the arts learn how to cooperate and form friendships. Dance and sport bring mind and body into rhythmic coordination to help produce a balanced adult.

The Greeks knew this. It's nothing new, and yet here we are, seemingly mired in a sense that there is only one method – one curriculum to which children must be brought like products on a conveyor belt, with policy makers panicking about pupils catching up on something they have 'lost'. They look for solutions such as extending the school day and cutting down on school

holidays. They think more discipline, more pressure and extra work are the only ways to prepare them in time for transition to secondary school, GCSEs and A-Levels.

And then what? Will that assessment-ridden trajectory prepare our young people well for the challenges ahead? No, because the arts are not some airy-fairy add-on to life, but a core that is absolutely essential to the best of humanity. They are what make us want peace not war, solutions not revenge, to build not destroy. We, they, will need every bit of creative thinking to save us all in the crucial years to come.

We value freedom above all else, yet we are not entrusting our teachers and children with it, allowing them to choose the paths they feel are best for their class – the freedom to play, explore, create – and yes, to learn. The freedom to be children. Children, when they are free, do want to learn and do want to take responsibility.

Once again, we have a new initiative: More Than A Score's unifying calls for action, with new research based on old research based on ancient proven knowledge of the value of the arts to society and to children, both in school and out.

Never have we needed this understanding more than now.

02

CALLS FOR ACTION

- The More Than A Score summary and calls for action
- Signatories to the calls for action



DROP SATS FOR GOOD: THE CASE FOR RECOVERY WITHOUT HIGH-STAKES ASSESSMENT

More Than A Score is a coalition bringing together tens of thousands of headteachers, teachers, parents, academics and professional organisations in one united call: to change the way primary school children are assessed and the way schools are held accountable through high-pressure statutory tests. We are not against teacher-led tests, national sampling, or moderated assessments, and we're not against holding schools to account.

In the wake of the pandemic, our call is more prescient than ever. The wildly differing experiences and the many months of lost learning over the last year oblige us to explore boldly how to free up learning time and how to target resources accurately to give children what they need to thrive at school. This necessarily involves close examination of the current statutory assessment system, which is not there to provide a diagnostic tool to help pupils, but rather to measure school performance. In the words of the Schools Minister to the Education Select Committee in May 2020: "SATs are not qualifications for young people... they are a form of accountability for the school system."

On this premise, we have three simple requests:

- 1. Pause the introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) in English and maths for four-year-olds in September 2021**
- 2. Pause all other statutory assessments in Years 1, 2, 4 and 6**
- 3. Set up an independent profession-led review into primary assessment**

These steps will give every child at primary level all the time they need to catch up properly without the additional stress that SATs cause children, parents and teachers. They will also give time for a thorough review of the assessment system, as well as proper consideration of alternatives that support learning and do not place the burden of school accountability on young shoulders.

This report pulls together voices from across the educational and policy-making fields to demonstrate the exceptionally broad strength and unity of opinion, as well new and detailed evidence, all pointing to the urgent need for a rethink of primary testing. Statements of support from the three major unions representing teachers and head teachers show the entire profession aligning behind the call for a re-evaluation of assessment, and statements from a cross-party group of MPs demonstrate the extent to which the issue rightly transcends politics.

Our brand-new research reveals that school leaders overwhelmingly believe that preparing for SATs should not be part of a catch-up programme and two thirds believe the Reception Baseline Assessment should not be introduced in September. With trust in teachers at an all-time high, parents want to see pupil wellbeing at the heart of the curriculum; their lowest priority is preparation for SATs, and they do not believe these tests should be used to measure schools. This research is backed up by numerous case studies from children, parents and headteachers. "The children's wellbeing and mental health are so much higher this year – as are the teachers' – knowing that there are no SATs just around the corner," says Chris Dyson, a Leeds headteacher.

DROP SATS FOR GOOD: THE CASE FOR RECOVERY WITHOUT HIGH-STAKES ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

Diane Reay from the University of Cambridge collates a body of evidence on the increasing class inequalities in the wake of Covid and how assessment exacerbates the widening gap. The UCL Institute of Education's (IoE) Alice Bradbury demonstrates the effects SATs have on the entire school and the curriculum: "The way SATs data is used demonises schools in challenging circumstances, meaning that in some cases the whole school appears geared towards the improvement of SATs scores," she comments. Dr Chris Bagley from the IoE looks at the lasting mental health effects of the pandemic on primary school children, saying "standardised assessment is a core underpinning factor in poor wellbeing, as asserted by young people themselves". Gemma Moss, from British Educational Research Association, provides a compelling overview of their alternative to the current system.

Statutory tests have been cancelled for two years now with zero negative impact on pupils' education or on school performance

The voices of academics are amplified by experts on the ground (headteachers across the country) who provide a commentary on the valuable learning time lost to preparation for statutory tests. They also report on how especially damaging the current system is to pupils from socially deprived backgrounds, from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority communities, and to children with special educational needs.

Among all these themes that are being discussed by so many with ever more volume and import, one point crops up in every conversation and is well worth remembering: statutory tests have been cancelled for two years now with zero negative impact on pupils' education or on school performance. Paradoxically, while their absence has barely registered, their presence creates unwarranted stress on young children and schools, narrows the curriculum, and generates a fear of failure within the whole school community.

As Mark Chatley, a headteacher in Kent, points out: the only real impact of two years' worth of no testing has been on the Department for Education's data. As his piece shows, the gaps in data and their repercussions over the next seven years make a return to the high-stakes testing regime nonsensical from an effective data-gathering standpoint. And, as Brighton headteacher Jonathan Cooper asks: "How do you measure the quality of an education system? ... In our ability to nurture a love of life and learning, to transform lives through creating opportunity, to create individuals who care about the world and want to make a difference, to build a community of compassion and hope, to inspire innovation and creative thinking."

Change to the system is long overdue and any focus on true recovery is incomplete without an acknowledgement of this. The chorus of parents, heads, children, unions, MPs and dozens of organisations working in the field agree: the time has come to turn the page on the current primary assessment regime.

SIGNATORIES TO THE MORE THAN A SCORE CALLS FOR ACTION

1. Pause the introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) in English and maths for four-year-olds in September 2021
2. Pause all other statutory assessments in Years 1, 2, 4 and 6
3. Set up an independent profession-led review into primary assessment

Melissa Benn, Writer, education campaigner
Jamila Gavin, Writer
Michael Rosen, Writer

Baroness Bennett, Green Party

Baroness Blower, Labour

Daisy Cooper MP, Liberal Democrats' Education Spokesperson

Emma Hardy MP, Labour

Lord (Jim) Knight of Weymouth, Former Minister of State for Education and Skills, Labour

Rebecca Long Bailey MP, Labour

Caroline Lucas MP, Green Party

Layla Moran MP, Liberal Democrats' Shadow Foreign Secretary and International Development Spokesperson

Lloyd Russell-Moyle MP, Labour

Lord Storey, Liberal Democrats' Higher Education Spokesperson

Professor Graeme Atherton, Director, National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)

Elaine Bennett, Early Years specialist, Keeping Early Years Unique

Peter Cansell, Oxford School of Thought and National Association for Primary Education

John Coe, Founding member, National Association for Primary Education

Melian Mansfield, Chair, Early Years Foundation

Beatrice Merrick, Chief Executive, Early Education

Gemma Moss, Convenor, Expert Panel on Alternatives to SATs, British Educational Research Association

Professor Cathy Nutbrown, President, Early Education

David Reedy, **General Secretary**, UK Literacy Association

Alex Sabine, Co-Chair, Early Childhood Studies Degree Network

Philippa Thomson, Co-Chair, Early Childhood Studies Degree Network

Rae Tooth, Chief Executive, Villiers Park Educational Trust

Robert Young, General Secretary, National Association for Primary Education

Ian Gilbert, Founder, Independent Thinking
Madeleine Holt, Campaigner, Rescue Our Schools

Debra Kidd, Teacher, writer

Alison Kriel, Founder, Above and Beyond Education

Gordon Marsden, Trustee, Villiers Park Educational Trust; MP for Blackpool South, 1997–2019

Helen Moylett, Early Years consultant

Alison Roy, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist

Nancy Stewart, Early Years consultant

Matt Waddup, Former National Head of Policy and Campaigns, University and College Union, member of the Lifelong Learning Commission

Dr Chris Bagley, Educational psychologist, UCL Institute of Education

Alice Bradbury, Associate Professor, UCL Institute of Education

Aaron Bradbury, Principal Lecturer, Childhood and Early Years, Nottingham Institute of Education

Greg Brooks PhD, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Sheffield

Cathy Burnett, Professor of Literacy and Education, Sheffield Institute of Education

Dr Helen Dodd, Professor of Child Psychology, University of Reading

Professor Vicky Duckworth, Faculty of Education, Edge Hill University

Dr Pam Jarvis, Chartered Psychologist and Honorary Research Fellow, Leeds Trinity University

Hugh Lauder, Professor of Education and Political Economy, University of Bath

Dr Guy Roberts-Holmes, Associate Professor, UCL Institute of Education

Sir Peter Scott, Professor of Higher Education Studies, UCL

Terry Wrigley, Visiting Research Fellow, Manchester Metropolitan University

SIGNATORIES TO THE MORE THAN A SCORE CALLS FOR ACTION CONTINUED

Ann Adair, Headteacher, Meadow View JMI School, Birmingham

Nigel Attwood, Headteacher, Bellfield Junior School, Birmingham

Paul Barber, Headteacher, Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School, Brighton

Janine Burton, Headteacher, Webheath Academy Primary School, Worcs

Dr Victoria Carr, Headteacher, Woodlands Primary School, Cheshire

Jane Charman, Headteacher, Parkhill Infants School, Croydon

Tim Clarke, Headteacher, Cornerstone Primary School, Hampshire

Sarah Clayton, Headteacher, St Mary's Primary School, Brighton

Jonathan Cooper, Headteacher, St Luke's Primary School, Brighton

Kirsty Cooper, Headteacher, Grayrigg CE Primary School, Derbyshire

Andrew Cowley, Former headteacher

Karl Cross, Assistant headteacher, Barrowford Primary School, Lancashire

Paula Doleman, Headteacher, Ripley Infant School, Derbyshire

Chris Dyson, Headteacher, Parklands Primary School, Leeds

Sally Fox, Headteacher, Pool Primary School

Jane Hanmer, Headteacher, Leighswood Primary School, Walsall

John Hayes, Headteacher, Gospel Oak Primary and Nursery School, London

Ian Hickman, Executive headteacher, Skylark Federation, Hampshire

Christalla Jamil, Headteacher, St Paul's and All Hallows' C of E Schools, London

Matthew Jessop, Headteacher, Crosthwaite Primary School, Cumbria

Sarah Jones, Headteacher, Roman Way Primary, Hampshire

Annie Knoupe, Headteacher, Whitstable Junior School, Kent

Michele Lawrie, Headteacher, St Peter's Community Primary School, Brighton

Sharifah Lee, Acting headteacher, Dorney School, Maidenhead

Jon Le Fevre, Headteacher, Pilgrims' Cross CE Primary School, Hampshire

Rebecca Loader, Headteacher, Clare Community Primary School, Suffolk

Matt Morden, Headteacher, Surrey Square Primary School, London

Chris Parkhouse, Headteacher, Grove Road Catholic Primary School, Yorkshire

Joanne Redfern, Executive headteacher, All Saints CE Infant and Pre-School, Selston CE Infant and Nursery School, Notts

Andy Richbell, Headteacher, St Nicolas CE Primary School, Brighton

Sarah Seleznyov, Co-headteacher, School 360, Big Education New Primary School, London

Michelle Sheehy, Headteacher, Millfield Primary School, Walsall

Andrea Silvain, Co-headteacher, School 360, Big Education New Primary School, London

Catriona Stewart, Headteacher, Kingsmead Primary School, Cheshire

Jon White, Headteacher, St Vincent de Paul Catholic Primary School, Herts

Action for Children's Arts

Association of Child Psychotherapists

Early Childhood Studies Degree Network

Early Education

Early Years Alliance

Early Years Foundation

Keeping Early Years Unique

Let The Kids Be Kids

Montessori Group

National Association for Primary Education

National Education Opportunities Network

National Education Union

Oxford School of Thought

Reclaiming Schools

Rescue Our Schools

Save Our Schools

Square Peg

UK Literacy Association

Villiers Park Educational Trust

03

NEW RESEARCH

More Than A Score commissioned research with YouGov in March 2021 to better understand the views of parents and primary headteachers/school leaders on the issues about 'recovery' and so-called 'catch-up' following the disruption to school life caused by Covid



SCHOOLS WITHOUT SATS: RECOVERY AND POST-RECOVERY PRIORITIES FOR PARENTS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

There has been a great deal of debate about 'recovery' and so-called 'catch-up' following the disruption to school life caused by Covid.

As primary school children reconnect with their friends and teachers, what are the priorities for their parents, headteachers and other school leaders? What are the most effective ways to bridge learning gaps? Should a recovery programme include preparation for SATs and other formal tests? Is there a place for statutory testing at all?

More Than A Score commissioned research with YouGov to better understand the views of parents and primary headteachers/school leaders on these issues.

The results indicate that respondents surveyed in both groups believe the time is right to change the ways children are assessed and primary schools are held accountable.

- **Parents surveyed trust schools to assess any learning gaps and put in place a recovery programme that works for their children**
- **These parents have not missed SATs during the two years in which they have not taken place, and they do not believe the tests should be included in a catch-up programme**

- **Preparing for SATs and other assessments is at the bottom of the list of priorities for school leaders surveyed. Moreover, they believe the tests should not be prioritised in a government catch-up programme**
- **Heads and school leaders surveyed believe the absence of SATs has either improved or made no difference to the quality of information provided to secondary schools**
- **In the future, parents surveyed believe schools should be measured on the happiness and wellbeing of pupils rather than on SATs results or league table positions**

This new research demonstrates that any recovery programme must start in primary schools with a very simple education policy shift: the removal of the constrictions of the current statutory assessment programme. Parents and school leaders will support this move and, most importantly, children will benefit from being free from the burden of carrying an assessment and accountability system on their young shoulders.

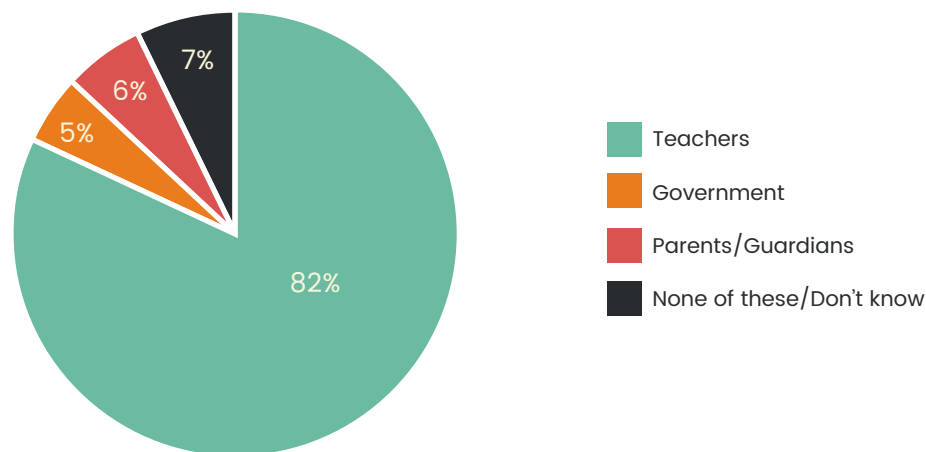
SCHOOLS WITHOUT SATS: RECOVERY AND POST-RECOVERY PRIORITIES FOR PARENTS AND SCHOOL LEADERS CONTINUED

Recovery and catch-up: who do parents trust?

As school life returns after lockdown, trust in schools and respect for teachers plays a large role in forming the views of parents of primary-age children surveyed.

82% of respondents trust schools and teachers the most when it comes to assessing what learning has been missed; only 5% trust the government to make this assessment using formal tests.

PARENTS: WHO, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU PERSONALLY TRUST THE MOST TO ASSESS WHAT LEARNING YOUR CHILD(REN) MAY HAVE MISSED DURING EACH LOCKDOWN? (%)



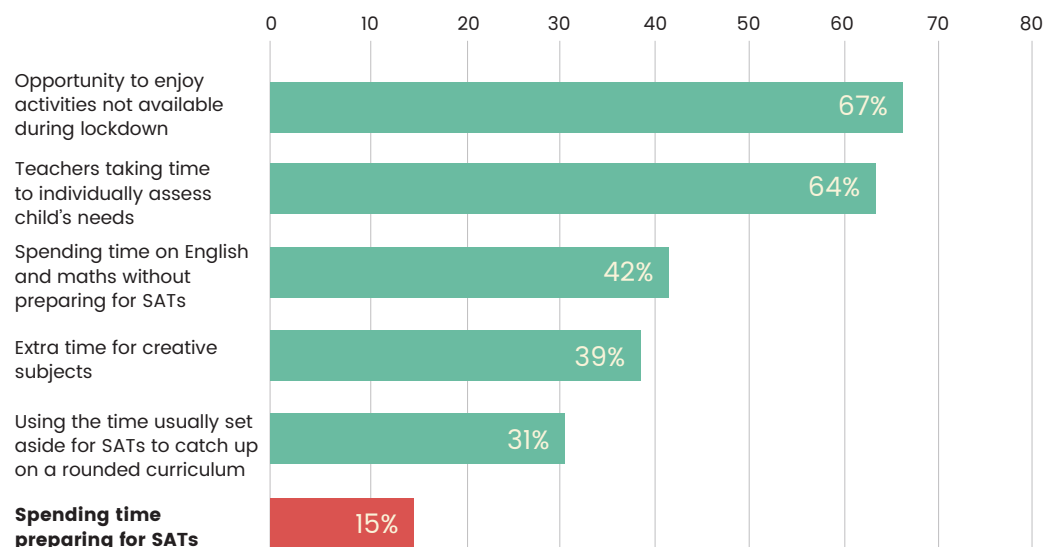
YouGov, March 2021. Sample size: 2012 parents (18+) of children aged 4 to 11 in England

Meanwhile, only 8% of parents surveyed said they would be confident in a catch-up programme put in place by the government, with five times that number placing their confidence in schools and teachers.

What should be included in a recovery programme in primary schools?

Parents' priorities for a so-called 'catch-up' programme in primary schools are clear: they want children to enjoy the opportunities schools can provide that they missed during lockdown. These include sport, drama, music and outdoor play (67% agree), and they want teachers to take the time necessary to assess their children's needs individually (64%).

PARENTS: WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THIS CATCH-UP PROGRAMME? Please select all that apply (%)



YouGov, March 2021. Sample size: 2012 parents (18+) of children aged 4 to 11 in England

SCHOOLS WITHOUT SATS: RECOVERY AND POST-RECOVERY PRIORITIES FOR PARENTS AND SCHOOL LEADERS CONTINUED

Just as important is what parents do not want in a recovery programme: only a small number of those surveyed (15%) want schools to spend time preparing for SATs and other assessments. Perhaps parents are worried about the negative effects of these tests: only 11% of respondents specifically stated that preparing for SATs would not put extra pressure on their children.

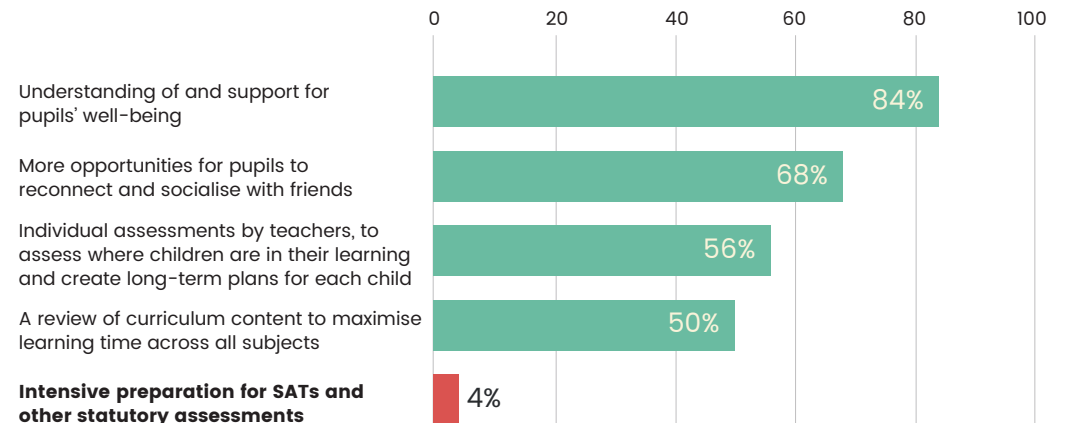
These findings are reinforced by those parents whose children were due to sit a formal government test in the summer term. Only 11% stated that, given the circumstances, they were not pleased that SATs and other tests were cancelled this year.

I'm delighted and relieved that my child didn't have to sit SATs at the end of Y2

The views of school leaders in the survey are closely aligned with those of parents. Their top priority for a catch-up programme is understanding and supporting pupils' wellbeing (84%), followed by more opportunities to reconnect and socialise with friends (68%).

Intensive preparation for SATs and other assessments is bottom of the list of priorities, with only 4% agreeing it should be part of a recovery programme. Heads and senior-level teachers surveyed are much more interested in carrying out individual assessments to create long-term learning plans (56%) and reviewing curriculum content to maximise learning time across all subjects (50%).

SCHOOL LEADERS: WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE GOVERNMENT'S "CATCH-UP" PROGRAMME FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS? Please select all that apply (%)



YouGov, March 2021. Sample size: 234 headteachers and primary school leaders in England.

School leaders' priorities can be summed up by this headteacher in the Midlands: "All the things the government appears to recognise as important in a child's life – PE, outdoors, art, music, friendships, relationships, positive mental health – cannot be achieved if SATs return in their current format."

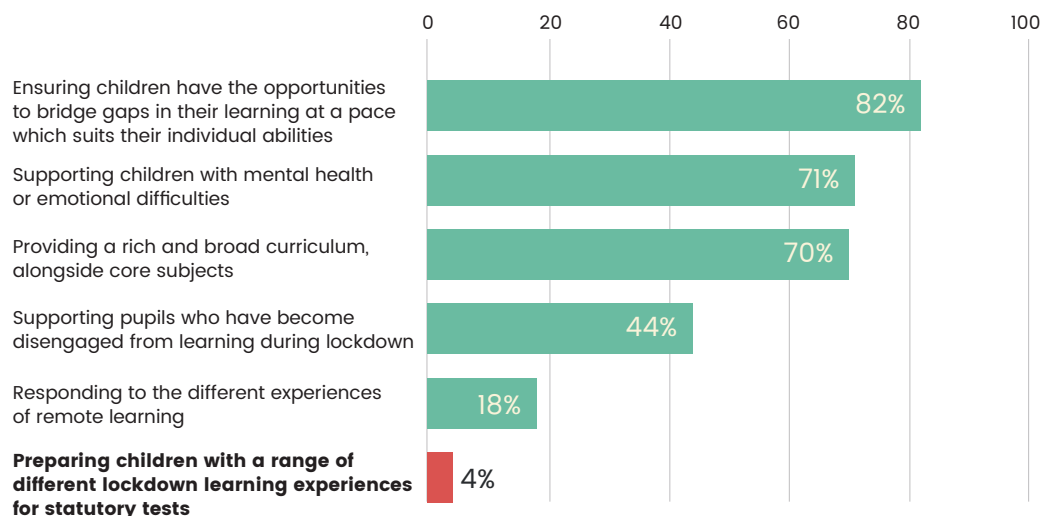
SCHOOLS WITHOUT SATS: RECOVERY AND POST-RECOVERY PRIORITIES FOR PARENTS AND SCHOOL LEADERS CONTINUED

What are schools' educational priorities?

Parents who are concerned about their children being pressured to catch up on lost learning will be reassured by the views of school leaders surveyed on educational priorities.

When asked to name their top three priorities, heads and other school leaders believe in giving children the time and space to catch up.

SCHOOL LEADERS: WHICH THREE, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING ARE YOUR TOP THREE EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES FOR THE REMAINDER OF THIS SCHOOL YEAR, AND THE NEXT SCHOOL YEAR (I.E. 2021/ 2022)? Please select up to three options (%)



YouGov, March 2021. Sample size: 234 headteachers and primary school leaders in England

- 82% will ensure that children have the opportunity to bridge gaps in their learning at a pace that suits pupils' individual abilities.
- 71% will prioritise supporting children with mental health or emotional difficulties.
- 70% will prioritise providing a rich and broad curriculum.

Meanwhile, preparing for SATs and other statutory tests came bottom of the list with only 4% of those surveyed making it a priority.

As one headteacher in Leeds commented, "SATs leads to less learning time, more cramming and more pressure. With no SATs this year we'll see an additional two months of learning time. This is what we all would like."

What about SATs?

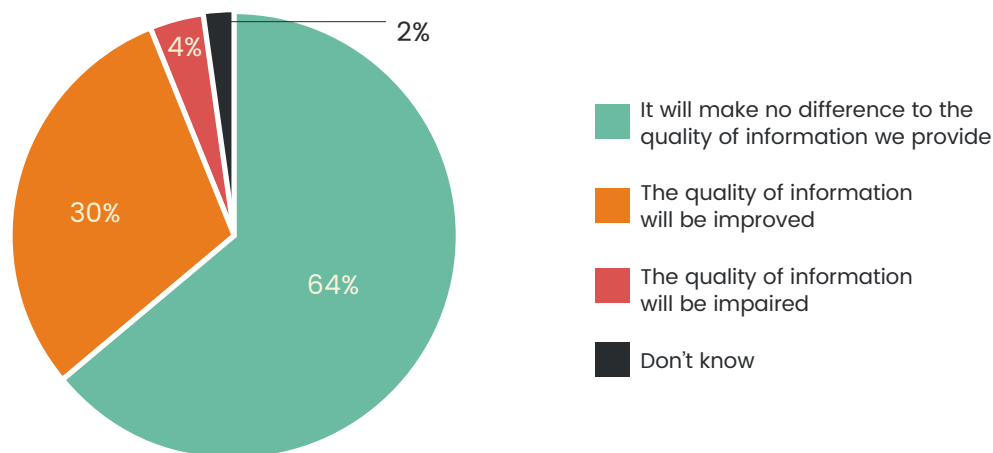
The most high-profile statutory assessments in primary are key stage 2 SATs, taken by Year 6 pupils under GCSE-style exam conditions in May. Data collected from these tests is used to inform a school's position in league tables and is also passed to secondary schools (although many secondaries re-test pupils at the start of Year 7).

KS2 SATs were cancelled in 2020 and again in 2021. So, what are primary schools doing this year to assess their Year 6 pupils, and what difference will it make to the information they pass to secondary schools?

SCHOOLS WITHOUT SATS: RECOVERY AND POST-RECOVERY PRIORITIES FOR PARENTS AND SCHOOL LEADERS CONTINUED

Schools in the survey are adopting a variety of approaches to assessing their pupils. Three-quarters are using individual assessments based on teacher observation and classwork. Others (47%) are either basing their assessment on a portfolio of work collected over time and across the curriculum, or they're using informal tests in English and maths set by teachers over time (43%). Only one in four schools will be replicating the usual process of pupils formally sitting previous years' SATs papers.

SCHOOL LEADERS: WOULD YOU SAY THE ABSENCE OF SATS DATA THIS YEAR WILL IMPROVE OR IMPAIR THE QUALITY OF INFORMATION YOU PASS TO SECONDARY SCHOOLS ABOUT YOUR YEAR 6 PUPILS, OR DO YOU THINK IT WILL MAKE NO DIFFERENCE? (%)



YouGov, March 2021. Sample size: 234 headteachers and primary school leaders in England.

SATs have no value in terms of the quality of information passed to secondary schools, according to heads surveyed: only 4% believe that the quality of that information will be impaired because SATs have been cancelled this year. Almost one in three (30%) believe it will actually be improved without SATs.

Should schools be measured differently in the future?

Looking to a post-pandemic future, parents were asked to consider how primary schools should be measured in years to come. They were also asked for their views on the most important outcomes for their children's primary education. In both cases, statutory assessments were given very low priority by survey respondents.

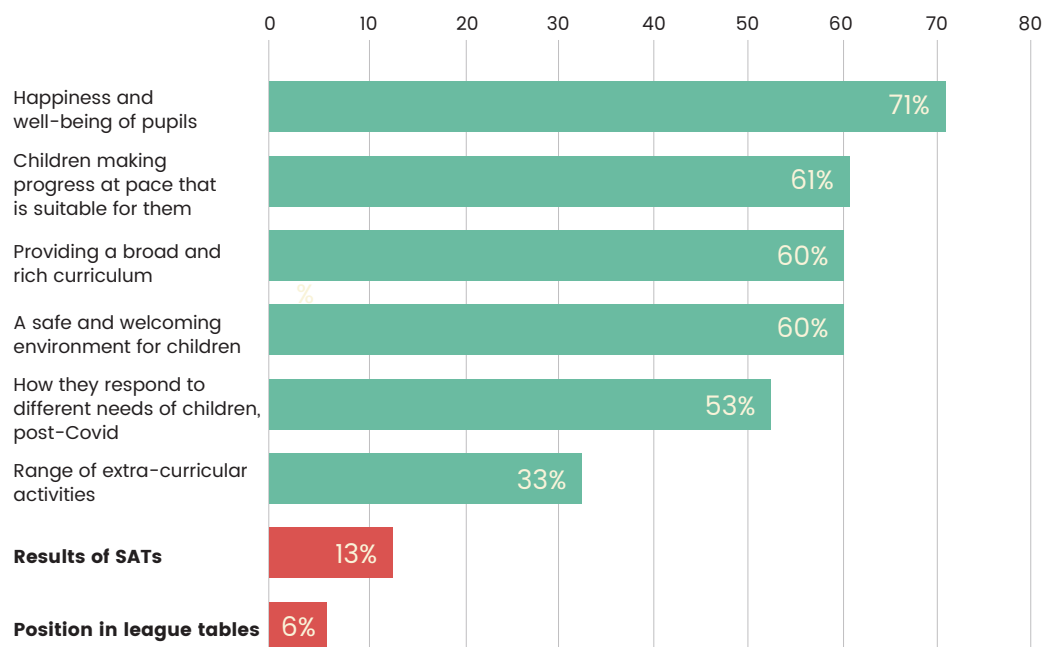
No SATs this year will see an additional two months of learning time. This is what we all would like

SCHOOLS WITHOUT SATS: RECOVERY AND POST-RECOVERY PRIORITIES FOR PARENTS AND SCHOOL LEADERS CONTINUED

When asked which factors, going forward, are important when measuring schools, scores in SATs and other government tests came second last in a list of eight factors (position in league tables ranked last). Parents considered the following criteria to be the most important considerations in measuring a school's performance: happiness and wellbeing; children making progress at their own pace; a broad curriculum; and a welcoming environment.

PARENTS: IN WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING WAYS DO YOU THINK PRIMARY SCHOOLS' PERFORMANCE SHOULD BE MEASURED IN GENERAL?

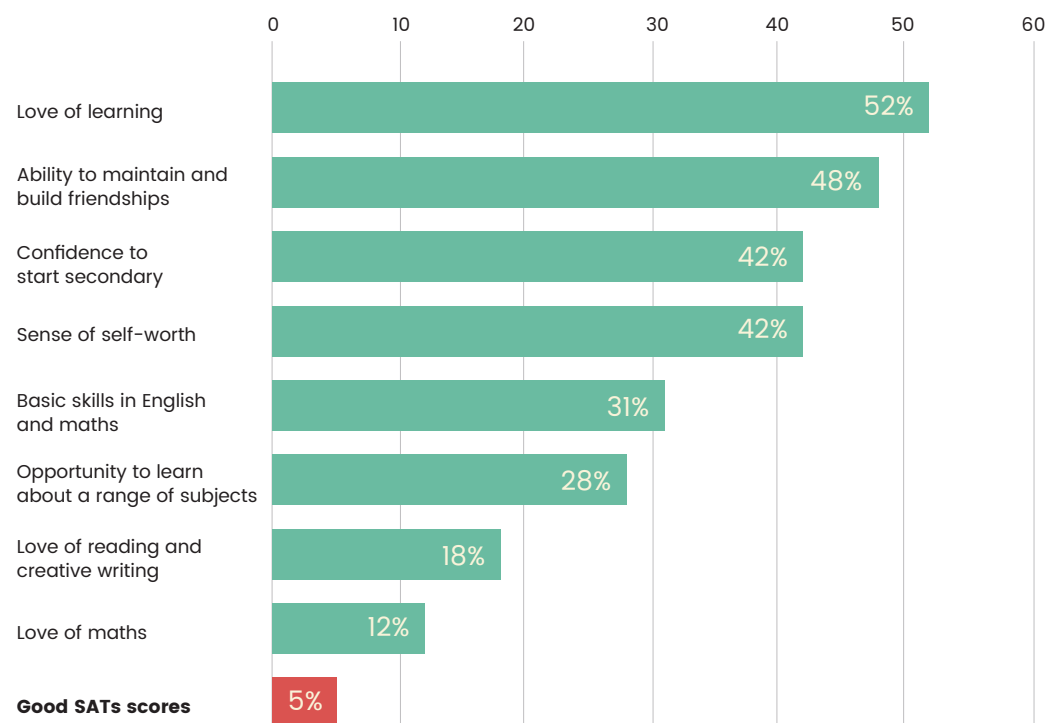
Please select all that apply (%)



YouGov, March 2021. Sample size: 2012 parents (18+) of children aged 4 to 11 in England

When parents were asked what they want for their children from a primary education, social skills, confidence and self-esteem ranked as almost as important as a love of learning. Once again, good SATs scores came last in a list of nine factors.

PARENTS: IN GENERAL, WHICH THREE, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT OUTCOMES OF YOUR CHILD(REN)'S SCHOOL EXPERIENCE UPON LEAVING PRIMARY SCHOOL? Please select up to three options (%)



YouGov, March 2021. Sample size: 2012 parents (18+) of children aged 4 to 11 in England

SCHOOLS WITHOUT SATS: RECOVERY AND POST-RECOVERY PRIORITIES FOR PARENTS AND SCHOOL LEADERS CONTINUED

Should the government test four-year-olds when they start school?

The government's controversial plans to introduce tests in maths and English (Reception Baseline Assessment [RBA]) have been widely condemned by parents, heads, teachers and education experts. [More Than A Score is calling for RBA not to be introduced in September 2021.](#)

In our research, only 6% of parents believe that it is important to formally test children when they start school, and only 8% strongly support the introduction of the tests.

Meanwhile, 64% of heads and school leaders surveyed believe that RBA should not be going ahead in September, with only 16% believing it will be a good use of teaching time when children are settling into school for the first time.

References:

Parents research: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2012 parents (18+) of children aged 4–11 in England. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11–16 March 2021. The survey was carried out online.

School leaders research: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 234 senior primary school teachers in England. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11–22 March 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted by region.

Conclusion

The Covid pandemic has affected all children's education, including the very youngest pupils. In primary schools it has thrown the priorities of parents and school leaders into sharp relief. With the current assessment regime in place, those priorities are not reflected in government policy.

Wellbeing, a broad and stimulating curriculum, and the time to instil both knowledge and a love of learning, are what matter the most to parents.

Headteachers want their pupils to thrive and enjoy inspirational teaching at their own pace.

Both groups surveyed do not want the rigours of government testing to play a role in an immediate recovery programme or in their child's future education. They do not want children to be carrying the weight of an entire school's performance on their shoulders.

The government must now listen to those who know children best – educators, experts and parents. They must make our children more than a score.

04

CASE STUDIES: THE VOICES OF HEADS, PARENTS AND CHILDREN

The opportunity and need for change is now

Schooling and homeschooling during lockdown

Review the role and means of assessment in primary schools

4.1

SCHOOLING AND HOMESCHOOLING DURING LOCKDOWN

Firstly I would like to say that SATS don't belong in schools. My first reason is that SATS preparation wastes time in the school day that could be spent doing activities as a class or doing subjects that feature less such as Geography or science or maybe even introducing new subjects like climate change education or racial equality education. Many children don't feel ready to take the terrible test due to time away from school, away from teachers and away from friends.

My second point is: SATS are simply not beneficial. My worries about SATS include the constant preparation and the amount of time listening and treating the teacher as a master and not as a member of the class community. The SATS are also pointless due to the fact that a vast majority of secondary schools have stated that they don't even look at the results. They are not just non-beneficial but unfair thanks to the limited subjects tested. An example of unfairness is that there is a boy in my class who has a brilliant imagination and a brilliant knowledge of maths and reading but he struggles to get the ideas from his head to the paper. If SATS were not to occur I would flip the day upside down meaning instead of starting with test subjects like literacy and maths that could start with other less used subjects such as History and Drama. This would mean that children would be more interactive and focused in those reasons resulting in better learning. // In conclusion, as I said at the beginning, SATS don't belong in schools, so let's rethink the situation.

NED YEAR 5

SCHOOLING AND HOMESCHOOLING DURING LOCKDOWN

What a 12 months! They've been in school; they've been out of school. They were expected to do remote online learning in Lockdown 2 and yet had no laptops or secure internet connections. They were forced to return to school on 4 January only to be told two days later to stay at home. They missed their friends, they missed learning, they missed their school. Everything they took for granted changed at the end of March 2020.

School should be a place where children thrive, where they develop a real love of learning through fun topics, and where the arts, music and sports can be celebrated. It should not be a 'testing factory'. It should be a place where mental health and wellbeing are at the forefront of everything.

Chris Dyson, headteacher, Parklands Primary School, Leeds

Home-schooling has given me first-hand experience of the school curriculum and shown me how damaging 'teaching to the test' can be. It stifles teacher's ability to teach creatively and intuitively. I was most shocked by my Year 2 child's English curriculum. 'Creative' writing tasks involved crowbarring in so many grammatical rules that it seemed to suck all the fun and imagination out of writing a story. For me, at this age it should be about instilling a love of reading and writing, and I fear the over-emphasis on grammar is losing sight of this. She struggles to recall what a noun is some days, let alone a subordination!

Vicky Trainer, parent of children in Years 2 and 5, Brighton & Hove

I just wanted to come to school and be with my friends. I really missed my teachers and I really missed not doing the #FundayFriday assembly – this was my job. It was that bad at home I even missed my RE lessons. There was nothing to do but look at the rain.

Year 5/6, Parklands Primary school, Leeds

I was a key worker child in lockdown, so I was in school. It was brilliant – we did gardening, drama, art and crafts, and I got to see my friends.

Year 6 pupil, Parklands School, Leeds

The level of grammar that he was having to learn, then implement, was shocking and went totally over his head – and mine!

Gill Gordon, parent of a child in Year 2, Bradford

SCHOOLING AND HOMESCHOOLING DURING LOCKDOWN CONTINUED

There are so many crucial parts of children's development that are pushed to the side because of the relentless focus on academic attainment targets and even progress data. Children need to play and socialise. They need to have the opportunity to actively learn how to be part of/participate in meaningful relationships founded on respect, tolerance and diversity. They need to enjoy learning and experience the feelings of success and belonging. They need a sense of self-worth and a realisation that they deserve their right to live fully and thrive. We aspire to build wisdom, which is when intelligence and knowledge combine with values and empathy.

Daniel Kerbel, headteacher, Grange Primary School, Harrow

I was relieved when I heard that SATs were cancelled – we had missed so much school, it made sense.

Year 6, Grange Primary school, Harrow

Home-schooling was eye-opening in terms of content. The curriculum is joyless, both to teach and to learn. In some parts it is developmentally inappropriate. For example, too little time is spent learning the foundations of maths, so the 'maths mastery' curriculum becomes impenetrable to most. My Year 2 child has now taken the delayed phonics check...but I'd rather the focus be broader than be drilled in nonsense words.

Gemma Haley, parent of children in Years 2 and 6, Brighton

Many families have had a horrific time this year, with Covid-19 adding another layer of misery to financial and safety considerations. Adding to these difficulties with a SATs score that may say 'Below National Average' would be brutal. The apparent 'care and concern' the government appears to have had for poorer children throughout the pandemic would be completely undermined if SATs were to return – they'd have learned nothing. SATs are utterly outdated and not fit for purpose.

Sarah Hewitt-Clarkson, headteacher, Anderton Park Primary School, Birmingham

I was shocked and dismayed by the content of the English curriculum. It appeared that children were learning how to classify language to satisfy testing requirements, and nothing more. I was left wondering who (apart from an academic in a semantics department) needs to know how to classify words and phrases into 'expanded noun phrases', 'conjunctions', etc.

Beth, parent of a child in Year 3, Overton

SCHOOLING AND HOMESCHOOLING DURING LOCKDOWN CONTINUED

Lockdown certainly cemented my concerns regarding the microscopic scaffolding of learning for young people – particularly in literacy. It means that encouraging students to be curious and wanting to learn becomes very difficult. There seems to be an obsession with acquiring the technical aspects of English and maths at the expense of embedding a love of learning and encouraging applied creative expression.

Esther Tyler-Ward, parent of children in Reception and Year 3, Bristol

I felt happy that SATs weren't happening because I knew I didn't have to revise, which meant I could actually learn and find out more about topics.

Year 5, Grange Primary school, Harrow

We're all under extra pressure. The need for children to 'catch up' on lost learning is causing them to worry about not knowing enough and not being good enough, compounded by family issues – separation, bereavement, finances, employment, reduced socialisation, lack of routines, sleep deficit and parental anxiety in a multitude of areas.

The past 12 months have reconfirmed my belief that we need a new system, a long-term plan that prepares children for the 21st-century world in which we live, not one that focuses on top-down accountability and testing that does not suit a large majority of children. And trust – trust in the profession.

Nigel Attwood, headteacher, Bellfield Junior School, Birmingham

Year 6 children are undoubtedly the year group which has suffered most. They have had limited prolonged contact with their class teacher, no school trips for a year, and have not been able to fully enjoy roles and responsibilities which we attempted to allocate to them in September. Many children are anxious about the future, many of them are angry about what they feel has been taken away from them.

Rebecca Loader, headteacher, Clare Community Primary School, Suffolk

4.2 THE OPPORTUNITY AND NEED FOR CHANGE IS NOW

22nd March 2021

Dear Sir Kevan Collins,

FATIMA AND MARTA YEAR 6

We are writing to you from Anderton Park Primary School, It's such an honour to be sending you this letter. We think that SATS shouldn't be going ahead for next year because many children would feel pressurised by taking a test. It has been a joy not to have the worry about SATS this year. Also most children might not have the supplies for practising for a test as some people are struggling with money. We feel like it's not fair to be judged on a test.

Times have changed, Sir Kevan and SATS must change too.
Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Fatima and Marta (year 6 pupils at Anderton Park Primary School).

THE OPPORTUNITY AND NEED FOR CHANGE IS NOW

No head wants to throw all academic accountability out of the window. It's the exhaustingly narrow measure that disproportionately affects children from disadvantaged backgrounds that must go.

Sarah Hewitt-Clarkson, headteacher, Anderton Park Primary School, Birmingham

My daughter was due to have KS1 SATs this summer. I'm pleased they've been cancelled so that teachers can focus on settling children back into the classroom, not cramming to pass a pointless test.

Vicky Trainer, parent of children in Years 2 and 5, Brighton & Hove

I had concerns that my children would be under pressure to catch up. I was extremely disappointed when my son, who always tries his best, came out fighting back tears on his second day back, saying that he had got zero answers correct in his maths test. We talked to him about how it didn't matter to us and that we are very proud of him. He sobbed in my arms that evening.

Sarah Dalton, parent of twins in year 5, Peterborough

Schools need to be trusted to organise their own recovery programmes and evaluate them at a school and county level with conversations about accountability routed in Trusts, School Improvement Partners and Peer Reviews. We must return to delivering the whole package in a concerted effort to combine a focus on mental health with a reinstatement of the whole curriculum, in other words, the arts, sports, PSHE and RSHE component that

we know is so integral to promoting the self-esteem, self-reflection and resilience which helps children to become well-rounded, well-informed, tolerant citizens of the future.

Rebecca Loader, headteacher, Clare Community Primary School, Suffolk

I'm glad we don't have to do SATs this year. If we'd had to do them, we would have missed out on Science Week, as we'd have been revising. That would have been boring.

Year 6, Parklands Primary School, Leeds

I've always thought the current system of statutory testing is inappropriate and outdated. Even more so now.

Gemma Haley, parent of children in Years 2 and 6, Brighton

I'm worrying the whole time. When is it? Will I have enough time to revise? I want to make my parents happy, so what if I get something wrong? I'll need to revise a lot.

Year 5, Grange Primary School, Harrow

THE OPPORTUNITY AND NEED FOR CHANGE IS NOW CONTINUED

We are reconnecting with the children, so thank goodness there are no SATs to take away from valuable learning time. The government's 'catch-up' programme should be consciously referred to as 'recovery' and not dismiss the disruptive effect of the pandemic on learning. It should not be called 'catch-up'! This is like telling a victim to 'move on'. There should be no place for SATs now; they get in the way and, although it helps to produce statistics for the Department for Education, it actively detracts and distracts from teaching and learning time in school. SATs produce meaningless numbers and forget about the children, teachers, educators and parents behind the numbers – the education of the child is our goal, NOT the testing!

Daniel Kerbel, head teacher, Grange Primary School, Harrow

I'm totally against the narrow curriculum my son is being taught. When I looked at some of his English lessons, I honestly wanted to cry for him. There was just no joy in it.

Gill Gordon, parent of children in Year 2 and Pre-school, Bradford

My sister is well jealous. She always teases me saying that SATs are so hard and boring. I'm so happy. This is why we could do Science Week, dunking biscuits in cups of tea. If we'd had SATs, we'd have had to do tests all week to practice.

Year 5, Parklands Primary School, Leeds

SATs are not for the benefit of the student. The tests help support children being taught the demands of our National Curriculum efficiently – but that's a very different thing from 'learning', in my opinion. Learning should be more holistic, and it needs to be flexible to suit the individual. Children do not learn in the same way at the same time, no matter what you teach! In reality, SATs create winners and losers, and schools are forced to compromise on offering a broad and balanced curriculum suited to individual children.

Esther Tyler-Ward, parent of children in Reception and Year 3, Bristol

I feel that if I don't do well in SATs it might stop me getting a good job, and in 30 years' time others who do well in SATs will be rich and I'll just have a penny.

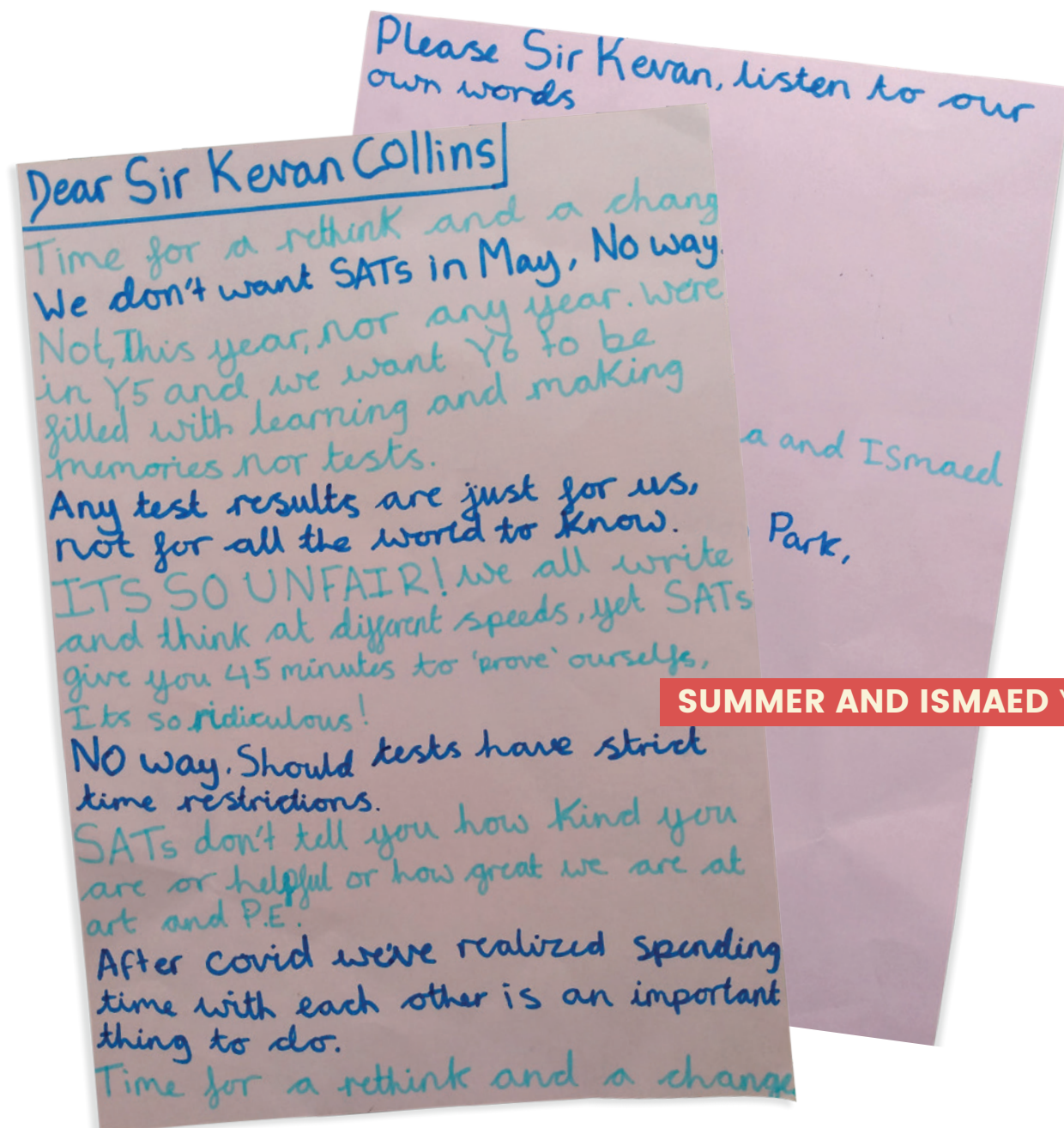
Year 5, Grange Primary school, Harrow

In primary there should be no formal SATs, no formal assessment or measurement, and no judgement or public shaming of children.

Assessments can be done by teachers for teaching. Standardised tests do not measure children's progress or attainment – they are punitive and reductive ways of judging schools. Not having SATs this year means we can continue to teach and assess pupils for their needs right up to the summer without the foolishness of the tests. We want to give children their fun back, let them enjoy experientially based learning, go on trips and visits again, and welcome enrichment activities in school from external providers.

Victoria Carr, headteacher, Woodlands Primary School, Cheshire

4.3 REVIEW THE ROLE AND MEANS OF ASSESSMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS



SUMMER AND ISMAED YEAR 5

REVIEW THE ROLE AND MEANS OF ASSESSMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Measuring and comparing will reflect deprivation as opposed to learning. It's a great time for an Independent Review to look into the effectiveness of these exams. Who knows best how to recover the lost time? School leaders do. With no SATs, this year will see an additional two months of learning time. This is what we all would like.

Chris Dyson, headteacher, Parklands Primary School, Leeds

The best way to learn new things is by doing activities and working with your classmates.

Marcus (9), Bellfield Junior School, Birmingham

I would like my child to be exposed to a broad, balanced and inclusive curriculum. I'd like schools to be able to focus on wellbeing and, in particular, on a positive transition to secondary school.

Gemma Haley, parent of children in Years 2 and 6, Brighton

We use teacher assessment, which we moderate within our school and within clusters of schools (i.e. peer moderation), and we conduct continuous light-touch, child-focused testing to identify gaps, and use our assessment formatively to plan the teaching. This also gives us an extensive and useful picture of where the child is up to, so that we or the next school (Year 7) can plan focused teaching for progress. Talk to children, talk to their families, talk to the staff, and see how they are doing. Are they thriving and becoming life-long learners full of confidence and consideration? Will they be compassionate, considerate and confident future leaders – of themselves

as well as others? If schools are filling their children with these qualities of confidence and consideration, and they are teaching them to enjoy learning and working towards being their best through education and personal development, then we'll have a bright future.

Daniel Kerbel, headteacher, Grange Primary School, Harrow

Schools should be focusing on emotional wellbeing, settling back into the school environment, play and socialising. I don't like the current unhelpful rhetoric of 'catch up'. What does it even mean? I worry that the government will set arbitrary and unrealistic goals for schools and pupils to meet. I'd rather see investment in additional staff and resources than the damaging pressure of longer days and summer schools.

Vicky Trainer, parent of children in Years 2 and 5, Brighton & Hove

Doing little tests once a week is better because then, when you do it right, it's great; but if you get it wrong the teacher can immediately help you with what you got wrong and also help you to work towards improving.

Year 6, Grange Primary School, Harrow

REVIEW THE ROLE AND MEANS OF ASSESSMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS CONTINUED

I always enjoy being introduced to new topics, and I like hands-on learning the most.

Ellie (11), Bellfield Junior School, Birmingham

Schools should be measured on the basis of their recovery, through Ofsted, on their curricular activity and how this is relevant and effective for the individual school. There is no role at all for SATs on any level, in any year. They should be scrapped as an enterprise and the money saved redistributed to schools.

Victoria Carr, headteacher, Woodlands Primary School, Cheshire

I was delighted that my child didn't have to sit SATs at the end of Year 2. I want school to try to make learning fun, sociable and interesting. I'm saddened that my child has gone back into a system with such a rigid curriculum that's so heavily focused on maths and English.

Beth, parent of a child in Year 3, Overton

I want them to focus on his emotional wellbeing and bring joy to his education so that he enjoys being in school. My priority is to protect him and my 4-year-old from our education system the best I can. It's terribly out of date, not fit for purpose in our modern world. Plus, it makes our children unhappy.

Gill Gordon, parent of children in pre-school and Year 2, Bradford

All the things the government appear to recognise as important in a child's life – PE, outdoors, art, music, friendships and relationships, positive mental health, cannot be achieved if SATs return in their current format. We will do what needs to be done – it's our profession, and it's what we do best. We have all changed. The DfE must too.

Sarah Hewitt-Clarkson, headteacher, Anderton Park Primary School, Birmingham

The most enjoyable way to learn is by doing different activities and group work.

Kenayah (9), Bellfield Junior School, Birmingham

REVIEW THE ROLE AND MEANS OF ASSESSMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS CONTINUED

I've never agreed with formal testing in primary. It's good that it has been stopped for this year, and I hope it doesn't restart. Schools should focus on children's wellbeing.

Suzanne Jarrett, parent of children in Years 6 and 8, Brighton

In my opinion, all primary school assessments should be formative – for the sake of the child's progress in subjects in their own time – and less time should be spent 'teaching to the test'. I think it's killing children's love of learning.

Sarah Dalton, parent of twins in Year 5, Peterborough

I would like to give children the skills to develop greater resilience and social communication, to be able to share emotions and worries (and positives), and to re-engage with their love of learning. Our biggest priority by far is mental health support – all the catch-up in the world will not support children with mental health issues. There's no support out there for children or for schools to allow children to develop on the inside; and if the inside isn't right, the learning will not happen. A carefully thought out and adaptable curriculum is key, along with investment to allow schools to achieve. Success, or not, cannot just be based on a test score.

Nigel Attwood, headteacher, Bellfield Junior School, Birmingham

Rebuilding school as a secure environment in which to enjoy learning in its widest interpretation has to be protected by government. It is important for headteachers and staff that this is not undermined by unnecessary pressures which do not assist and could even work against this recovery.

What an amazing opportunity this would be to review and reform the current limited educational regime into something meaningful and fitting for the twenty-first century, addressing the transition and communication between primary and secondary but also acknowledging the wider curriculum and learning what primary schools work so hard to achieve, with more than a nod to the current sorry state of children's mental health. It is going to take at least two years to make a noticeable change in the imbalances in attainment and opportunity that have manifested themselves over the last six months. If the government really cares and is serious about educational change, during this period of repair, it should form a working party to review and overhaul the system completely, listening to feedback from schools, parents and children.

Rebecca Loader, headteacher, Clare Community Primary School, Suffolk

CONCERNS HAVE BEEN RAISED FROM ALL QUARTERS FOR MANY YEARS

While the Department of Education states that sitting SATs “should not be stressful”, there is significant evidence that the experience increases anxiety in children.

A poll of pupils aged 10–11 by Comres for BBC Newsround in 2016 found that...

39%

felt worried

27%

felt stressed

87%

felt pressure to do well

Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/36228560>

According to research by YouGov, July 2018
(commissioned by More Than A Score):

23%

of pupils believed their results will help them to find a job in the future

62%

of parents believe that children go through too much testing at school

Source: www.morethanascore.org.uk

Research from 2019 demonstrated the low priority of SATs to parents:

- **Just 25%** said that test results influence their decision when choosing a primary school
- **Only 12%** of parents surveyed believe schools should be measured on the basis of standardised tests
- **73% of parents** believe standardised testing puts too much pressure on their children

Source: <https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Parents-research.pdf> (Dr Alice Bradbury UCL)

Among teachers there is a widespread view that taking SATs has a negative impact upon the wellbeing of children. A PlanBee survey of teacher attitude to SATs in 2019 found that:

- **Almost 95%** of teachers do not want primary school pupils to sit SATs exams due to fears with regard to their effect on the mental health of children
- **More than 85%** of teachers said they believed the main purpose of SATs was to assess school performance rather than support individual pupils' education

Source: Teacher Survey Results – What are your experience of SATs – PlanBee

CONCERNS HAVE BEEN RAISED FROM ALL QUARTERS FOR MANY YEARS CONTINUED

In 2019, YouGov surveyed headteachers and deputy heads and found there was substantial support among primary school leaders for a review of the use of SATs:

- **93%** believed government should review the current system of standardised assessment
- **More than 90%** believed that Year 6 SATs imposed unnecessary pressure on teachers and pupils
- **96%** had concerns about the effects of the tests on the wellbeing of pupils

Source: <https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/primary-school-leaders-deliver-damning-verdict-on-high-pressure-testing/>

A major study in 2020 by University College London found widespread concern among teachers and primary school leaders about the impact on children of a resumption of testing:

70% identified children's wellbeing as their top priority when welcoming them back at the start of the academic year

77% agreed that: "If testing and inspection goes ahead as normal next year, schools serving the most disadvantaged communities will be unfairly penalised," rising to 84% working with the most disadvantaged communities

In interviews, teachers "repeatedly" told the researchers that one positive post-COVID outcome would be the end of statutory testing and, in particular, Key Stage 2 SATs.

Source: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research-projects/2020/oct/primary-assessment-turbulent-times>

05

THE CASE AGAINST RECEPTION BASELINE ASSESSMENT



THE CASE AGAINST RECEPTION BASELINE ASSESSMENT

BEATRICE MERRICK, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, EARLY EDUCATION AND MICHAEL FREESTON, DIRECTOR OF QUALITY IMPROVEMENT, EARLY YEARS ALLIANCE

- **The introduction of a test in English and maths for four-year-olds when they start school has been widely condemned by education experts, school leaders and teachers. It is not supported by parents**
- **The data provided by Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) is unreliable – it is not useful for teachers and it's flawed as an accountability measure**
- **Administering the RBA test takes teachers away from the classroom during the crucial settling-in period**
- **With children's wellbeing and welfare top priorities in the wake of Covid, the case against RBA is stronger than ever**
- **The More Than A Score petition calling for the RBA not to be introduced in September 2021 has over 100,000 signatures. An open letter this April calling for the same has been signed by hundreds of Early Years specialists and headteachers**

Introduction

In September 2021, government is proposing to make two policy changes to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) that covers children under five in schools and early-years settings; two changes that appear to be pulling in opposite directions.

Ministers say that the first set of changes – the reforms to the EYFS Statutory Framework – is all about cutting teachers' workloads so that they can spend more time interacting directly with children and supporting their learning, especially their communication and language skills.

Yet at the same time ministers want to introduce a RBA. This will be hugely time-consuming for teachers, take them away from productive learning situations, create additional administration, and require them to spend time with children in activities that provide no direct learning benefits for the child, nor any useful information for the teachers.

The RBA is designed to do away with the need for the hugely unpopular Key Stage 1 SATs by providing an earlier 'baseline' for measuring schools' progress at the end of Year 6. Yet in reality it simply moves the problems of KS1 SATs into Reception. It is part of a hugely flawed accountability system, where assessments are put in place purely for the sake of accountability, with no benefit to children or teachers. The whole idea of 'assessment for learning' has been lost from these measures to the detriment of children and the credibility of the whole system.

What is the Reception Baseline Assessment?

The RBA is a standardised language, communication and literacy, and mathematics test for four-year-olds during the first six weeks of primary school. The tests, which are carried out by teachers on individual children outside the classroom and recorded on a computer or tablet, should last 20–30 minutes.

THE CASE AGAINST RECEPTION BASELINE ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

RBA is a school accountability measure whose sole purpose is to judge the performance of schools. RBA test results will not be used to label or track individual pupils, and numerical scores will not be shared with teachers or parents. The company that provides the test has explicitly said they have no diagnostic value and are to be used only as a cohort measure. The data will only be used at the end of Year 6 to form the school level progress measure.

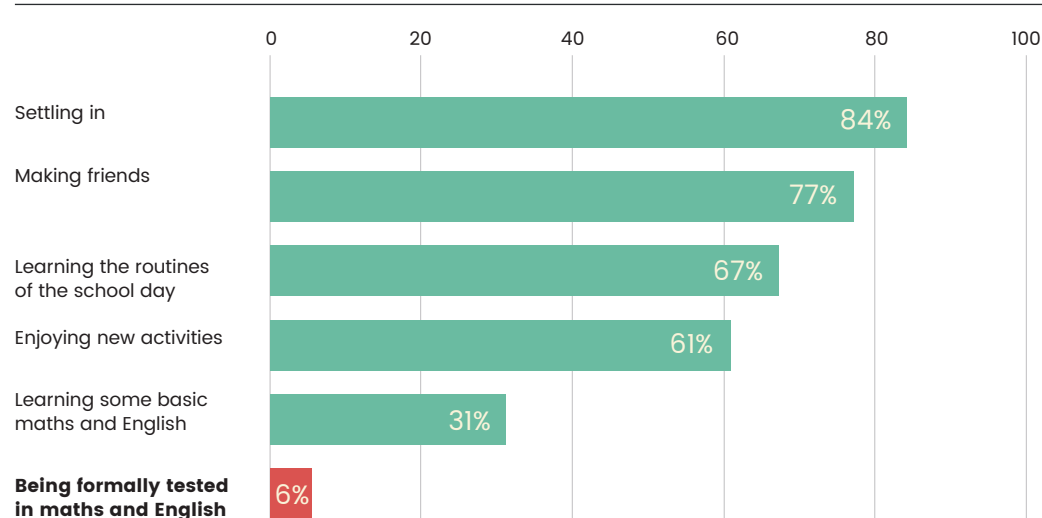
The idea of a Reception baseline has been tried before and has failed each time. RBA was first introduced in 1997 by the Labour government. It was withdrawn in 2002 in favour of the Early Years Foundation Stage profile, an observation-based teacher assessment that retains widespread support and continues to take place at the end of the Reception year. In 2015, the coalition government ran a pilot scheme to reintroduce RBA. These plans were abandoned in 2016. In 2017, the Conservative government announced another set of plans to introduce RBA. A trial was run in 2018 and a pilot (taken up by under 50% of primary schools) in 2019. The proposal is for the scheme to become mandatory from September 2021.

The case against RBA

RBA has been widely condemned by academics and education experts, the teaching profession, headteachers and parents. Brand new research conducted for More Than A Score (MTAS) by YouGov found that only 16% of heads and school leaders surveyed thought that it would be a good use of teaching time, and 63% thought the data produced would not be useful as a baseline measure. 64% thought the tests should not go ahead in September. Only 6% of parents surveyed thought that it was important for children to be formally tested in maths and English when starting primary school.

WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD YOU SAY ARE IMPORTANT FOR THESE CHILDREN DURING THE FIRST FEW WEEKS OF SCHOOL?

Please select all that apply (%)



YouGov, March 2021. Sample size: 2012 parents (18+) of children aged 4 to 11 in England

An open letter from over 700 experts, educators and parent groups in September 2018 described the government's plans as "pointless and damaging". An expert panel from the British Educational Research Association (BERA) described RBA as "flawed, unjustified and totally unfit for purpose".

According to research from UCL in 2020, 86% of headteachers have negative opinions about RBA. More Than A Score's research found that 65% of parents are opposed to testing four-year-olds when they start school, and 63% believe the tests would provide unreliable information. The MTAS petition calling for the RBA not to be introduced in September 2021 has over 100,000 signatures.

THE CASE AGAINST RECEPTION BASELINE ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

The data provided by RBA is unreliable, not useful for teachers, and flawed as an accountability measure

Assessing very young children is inherently unreliable. As the BERA report points out, “Any results will have little predictive power and dubious validity.”

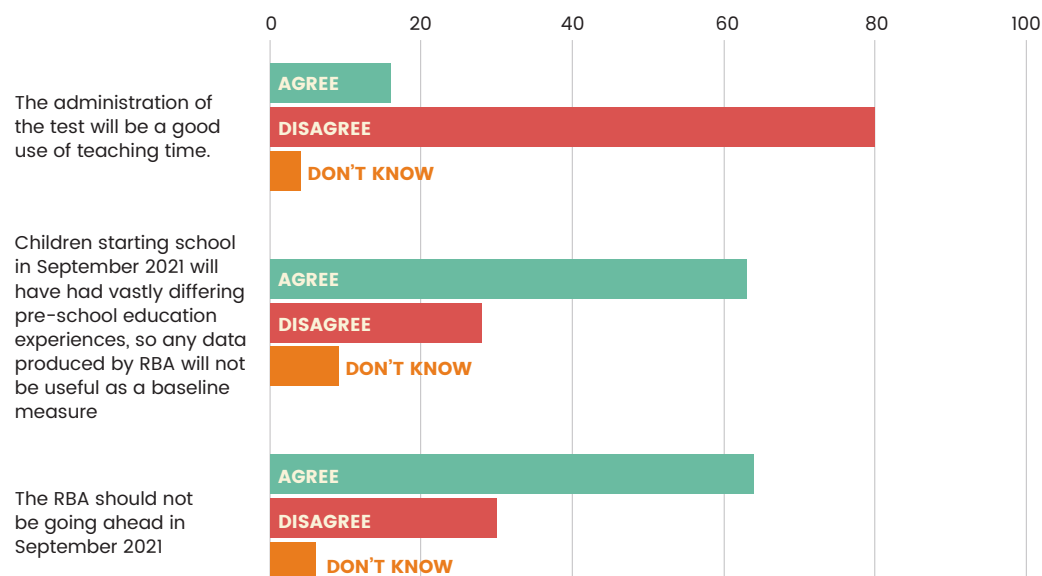
Teachers will continue to carry out their own assessments, which will be more reliable than RBA because they are carried out in a natural learning situation and are carefully aligned with the holistic and meaningful Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) with a focus on children’s wellbeing and care.

The government has not yet provided any information on how schools’ progress will be measured, using RBA as a baseline. Over seven years, a school’s cohort could change by up to 50%. Trying to reflect this fairly in an algorithm can never fully reflect all the variables involved and, as last summer’s debacle over GCSE results showed, the results of such attempts can be problematic.

Worryingly, parents will not receive the option to opt-out of the collection of their children’s data via the RBA. Data collected from the tests will be entered into the National Pupil Database and will remain there for life. The current legislation does not, however, provide any information about how the government could use that data – including selling it to third-party organisations – despite government assertions that it will be “black boxed” between the time it’s collected and when it is used for school accountability seven years later. It also does not provide the option for parents to object to

THINKING ABOUT THE INTRODUCTION OF RECEPTION BASELINE ASSESSMENT (RBA) TO BE TAKEN BY ALL PUPILS WITHIN THE FIRST SIX WEEKS OF STARTING RECEPTION CLASS IN SEPTEMBER 2021...

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? (%)



YouGov, March 2021. Sample size: 234 primary school headteachers and senior teachers in England

the collection of that data, as is their right. The Information Commissioner’s Office has not yet confirmed that it is happy with the government’s data collection proposals for RBA. Urgent clarification is required.

THE CASE AGAINST RECEPTION BASELINE ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

RBA takes reception teachers (and other adults) away from the classroom

As discussed at the start of this article, ministers have recognised the need to prioritise the time teachers spend directly supporting children's learning, and yet RBA does the opposite.

The first few weeks and months of school are important for establishing supportive, encouraging and nurturing relationships between Reception teachers, support staff, children and their families. This is a crucial time for young children's wellbeing and emotional development. They need to build trusting relationships in their early months at school. Parents may also feel vulnerable and apprehensive. Over 69% of teachers involved in the 2019 pilot believed that RBA had a negative impact on the settling-in period.

Teachers must leave their classroom for up to 30 minutes at a time to conduct the tests. For a class of 30 children, this can equate to 15 hours of lost teaching time in the first few weeks of term (not including time spent preparing for the assessments and recording the results). RBA offers no benefit to children and could potentially be damaging to some.

The UCL research shows that children were aware that they were being tested in school-based early literacy and numeracy. Some children experienced a sense of failure, anxiety and stress. This will be even more pronounced following the disruption caused by Covid.

Due to the impact of Covid-19 the case is stronger than ever

In September, following the disruption to school life in 2020 and 2021, schools will need to take into account the impact of the current crisis on all aspects of children's lives. Their welfare and wellbeing will be top priorities for schools, as they are prerequisites for effective learning.

Nurseries may have been open for most of the time since the first lockdown, but attendance rates have dipped significantly and are far from recovering to normal levels, with low numbers of vulnerable children attending in particular. Home-learning opportunities have varied enormously, depending on parents' circumstances. When schools re-opened to all pupils in September 2020 there were reports that almost half of Reception children were not 'school ready', and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were particularly affected. The situation will be even worse this September.

RBA is not a good use of teacher time, particularly when teachers will need to spend more time helping children settle and more time talking to parents/carers to find out about children's starting points and any concerns.

Since results would reflect the amount and type of literacy and maths experiences children have been exposed to, it would primarily be a test of input from parents/carers. This would favour children from more advantaged households; be subject to cultural bias; and would not provide valid information about children's future learning trajectories.

THE CASE AGAINST RECEPTION BASELINE ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

In summary, the case to introduce RBA at all is extraordinarily weak. It reflects an obsession with accountability measures that have become so detached from children's learning that the measurement has been prioritised over the learning. To consider introducing such measures now is even more extraordinary and misguided. The pandemic has taken children out of nurseries and schools for long periods and, equally critically, robbed them of normal childhood experiences, such as going to the park or supermarket and interacting with family, friends and the wider community. It has created huge stresses for children, families and teachers. The priority should be to give back to children as much time as possible to experience normal life, not to subject them to pointless testing.

References

YouGov research with headteachers and primary school leaders: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 234 senior primary school teachers in England. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11–22 March 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted by region.

YouGov research with parents: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2012 parents (18+) of children aged 4 to 11 in England. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11–16 March 2021. The survey was carried out online.

<https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/a-baseline-without-basis>

<https://kindredsquared.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Kindred2-YouGov-School-Readiness.pdf>

VOICES FROM EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS AND RECEPTION CHILDREN

JANE HANMER, SPECIALIST LEADER IN EDUCATION FOR EYFS AND CO-HEAD AT LEIGHSWOOD SCHOOL, WALSALL
(Did not run Baseline pilot)

Just take a moment to imagine...

It's the beginning of term and there's a buzz around school because everyone is excited about the first few weeks of this new school year. EYFS practitioners have spent time and effort creating a stimulating, enabling environment that will allow children to be W.I.L.D. (Wonder, Investigate, Learn and Discover). The school's induction process has included gathering information about all their pupils – without any testing – to create a unique learning space.



Teachers have held information meetings, and stay and plays that provide the chance for children, parents, grandparents and carers to spend time in the setting with their child. Home visits or garden visits (due to COVID) have enabled parents, children and educators to talk about the experiences of their child, their interests, their skills, their little quirks, the things that make them happy.

Then, at last, it's the first day of school! They run in, as they already know their teacher and are excited to explore the environment and meet their friends. Their first week involves a plethora of experiences with their peers and educators, exploring a rich environment full of opportunities. The educators work and play alongside the children. They are not in front of them pulling them along, nor are they behind them pushing their learning – they are alongside them on this journey of discovery.

At the end of this first week the information gathered by practitioners goes far beyond any Baseline Assessment information. They know the whole child. They know what excites and motivates the child. They know what makes the child unique. They know what the next steps in their learning should be.

Need I say more? Do we need a Baseline Assessment? NO! What could it possibly tell us that we don't already know? We have gathered information when the child is at their best, learning through play in a way that's natural, consistent and embedded. This is of so much more use than assessment data gathered through unnatural experiences, which may well show children below their best and, on occasion, cause the child distress. Children deserve more than this – they are so much more than a score!

I could quote many research articles to back this up, but today I prefer to talk from the heart about our next generation of talents. Just take a look at some of the evidence and learning in the pictures shown here, all gathered through playing alongside children in a rich learning environment.

ON THE FRONTLINE WITH BASELINE

NOTES FROM AN ANONYMOUS RECEPTION TEACHER

When the current version of Baseline was on the horizon, I spoke to my school of my previous experiences in its many (failed) forms, as well as the impact on children and the workload, and I shared the evidence I had gathered from following the More Than A Score campaign. The response was that a) it was a Trust-wide decision; b) it would be good to look at the Baseline and materials; and c) it would be a chance for us to practice. The decision was made. We would be a pilot school.

“One child said despondently, ‘But I’m only little – I haven’t learned to read yet’”

The resources arrived. They were old-fashioned, uninspiring and totally irrelevant to young children. I completed the online training, and it became more and more evident that my instincts were right. This was a waste of my time and my children’s time.

When it came to administering the test, some children didn’t want to get involved no matter how I dressed it up. Others were more compliant and were taken from activities where they had been busily playing and making new friends. What became very clear, very quickly, was how unreliable this test was. The reports given were not worth the paper they would have been printed on. Once all the children had been tested, I then had to return to class and do a baseline using observation that would actually help me. This, in turn, delayed us starting lessons such as phonics sessions.

The test itself included content that children wouldn’t be expected to know when joining Reception, including solving written sums and reading. They looked visibly confused when shown these, and one said despondently, “But I’m only little. I haven’t learned to read yet.”

One child was able to describe a ‘nest’ in great detail: mummy and baby birds, worms, beaks and feeding. Unfortunately, this summer-born boy couldn’t find the word ‘nest’, so his answer was recorded as incorrect.

Another concentrated hard to make a wonderfully detailed pattern with the plastic shapes provided, but it wasn’t the pattern the test viewed as a ‘creditworthy response’, so again it was marked as incorrect. The next pupil was so fascinated by the plastic bears that they couldn’t hear what I was asking and played with them instead, making up stories and arranging them in shapes. Another child simply guessed every number correctly when asked to point at them. When I said, “Well done, you knew them all!” he replied, “That was funny – I didn’t know any of them!”

“Another child simply guessed every number correctly when asked to point at them”

ON THE FRONTLINE WITH BASELINE CONTINUED

I tried to make the time with the children fun, and some of them enjoyed it while others went completely silent and appeared nervous – they wouldn't engage at all, and why should they? For these children, I stopped the test immediately and took them back to their new friends. The irony? These were some of my most academic children. And for children with EAL? The test must be carried out in English only.

“A complete waste of time and money that gets in the way of one of the most important times in a young child's life”

As a Reception teacher, I will now have to complete two statutory assessments within one year – unlike any other year group. So, whilst I welcome the removal of SATs for my KS1 colleagues, the price of this is increasing my workload, taking me away from my job, and submitting children to a pointless test. Although the EYFS profile is holistic and based on knowledge gained through interaction and observation of each child, the Baseline test is nothing more than an unreliable snapshot. It's a complete waste of time and money that gets in the way of one of the most important times in a young child's life.

Unreliable, unethical, immoral and expensive. It's time for Baseline to go, once and for all.

06

EXPERT COMMENTARY

Mind the gap: Covid, increasing class inequalities and primary assessment **Diane Reay**,
Professor of Education, University of Cambridge

Normal rules no longer apply: why relentless focus on SATs needs to end now **Alice Bradbury**,
Associate Professor and Co-Director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0–11 Years)
at UCL Institute of Education

Testing and mental health: what our one-size-fits-all, results-driven agenda does to young minds
Dr Chris Bagley, educational psychologist, University College London

Alternatives to SATs: why COVID-19 has made changing our current testing and accountability
system a pressing issue **Gemma Moss**, Professor of Literacy and Director of the International
Literacy Centre at UCL Institute of Education

MIND THE GAP: COVID, INCREASING CLASS INEQUALITIES AND PRIMARY ASSESSMENT

DIANE REAY, PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

- Assessment policy has resulted in excessive teaching to the test and a damaging fear of failure among English children
- The damage to learner identities has been greatest among working-class pupils
- The pandemic, and the policy responses to it, have magnified these inequalities

The fallacy about assessment in English education is that it measures inequalities in attainment when it is, in effect, also a potent driver of educational inequalities. Assessment, especially in the form of high-stakes testing, has a long history of being the cause of inequality rather than a resource for educational opportunity (Shepard 2020). In the UK it has caused an increased reliance on ranking and setting of children from nursery level upwards.

Fear of failure

It has also resulted in a damaging fear of failure among British school children. Fear of failure is seen as a component of test anxiety that emphasises how performance is judged (Putwain, 2008). A PISA survey (OECD, 2019) found that British pupils not only had the lowest mean score for life satisfaction of all the OECD countries surveyed in 2015, they also had the largest drop in mean life satisfaction between 2015 and 2018. (For further evidence of English children's low life satisfaction, compared to other OECD

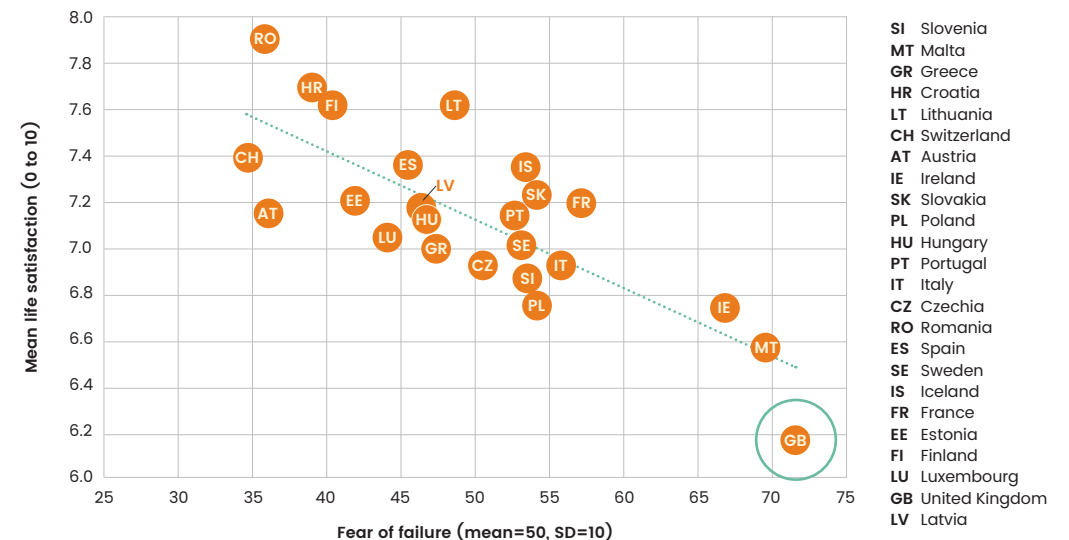
countries, see *The Good Childhood Report 2020*, p 42, and DfE 2019, pp 57–58).

The OECD found that a large part of children's low life satisfaction in 2018 was attributable to their fear of failure. In the table below we can see that the UK is an outlier both in terms of the substantial fear of failure manifested in schools and the very low levels of life satisfaction among pupils (OECD 2019, *The Good Childhood Report 2020*).



DIANE REAY

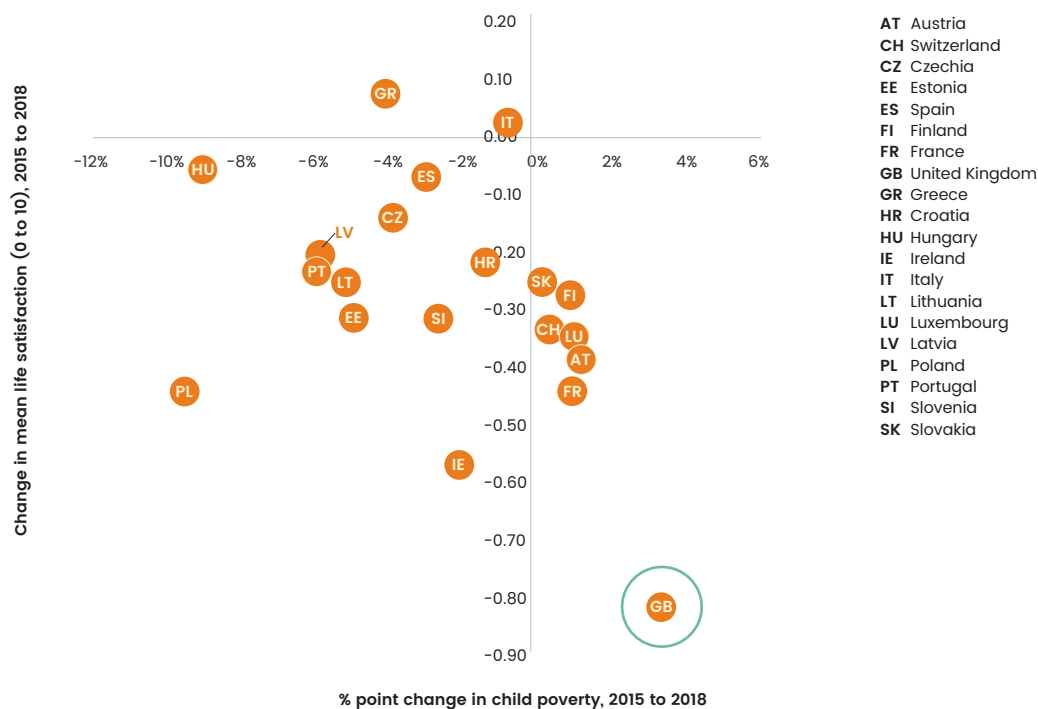
LIFE SATISFACTION AND FEAR OF FAILURE



MIND THE GAP: COVID, INCREASING CLASS INEQUALITIES AND PRIMARY ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

This survey was conducted prior to the pandemic. Since the pandemic there has been growing evidence of further decreases in children's life satisfaction (Newlove-Delgado et al 2021) and heightened anxiety in relation to testing and assessment. However, in addition, *The Good Childhood Report* (2020) found evidence of a link between child poverty and decreases in life satisfaction, with Great Britain again being an outlier, both in relation to substantial increases in poverty at a time when many countries were experiencing decreases, and in relation to our children's diminishing levels of life satisfaction.

CHANGES IN LIFE SATISFACTION AND CHILD POVERTY, 2015 TO 2018



Their survey also revealed that in 2018 the UK had the second-largest social class gap (after Latvia) in life satisfaction among 24 countries surveyed. British children in the highest socio-economic quarter had a mean life satisfaction score of 6.55, compared to 5.76 for children in the lowest quarter (*The Good Childhood Report 2020*, p47). These findings are reinforced by research on 9-to-11-year-olds, which found it was primarily pupils growing up in poor households who were less positive about all aspects of schooling (Rees and Bradshaw 2020). It is working-class children who are both disproportionately suffering in school and have the highest levels of test anxiety.

How testing affects self-esteem

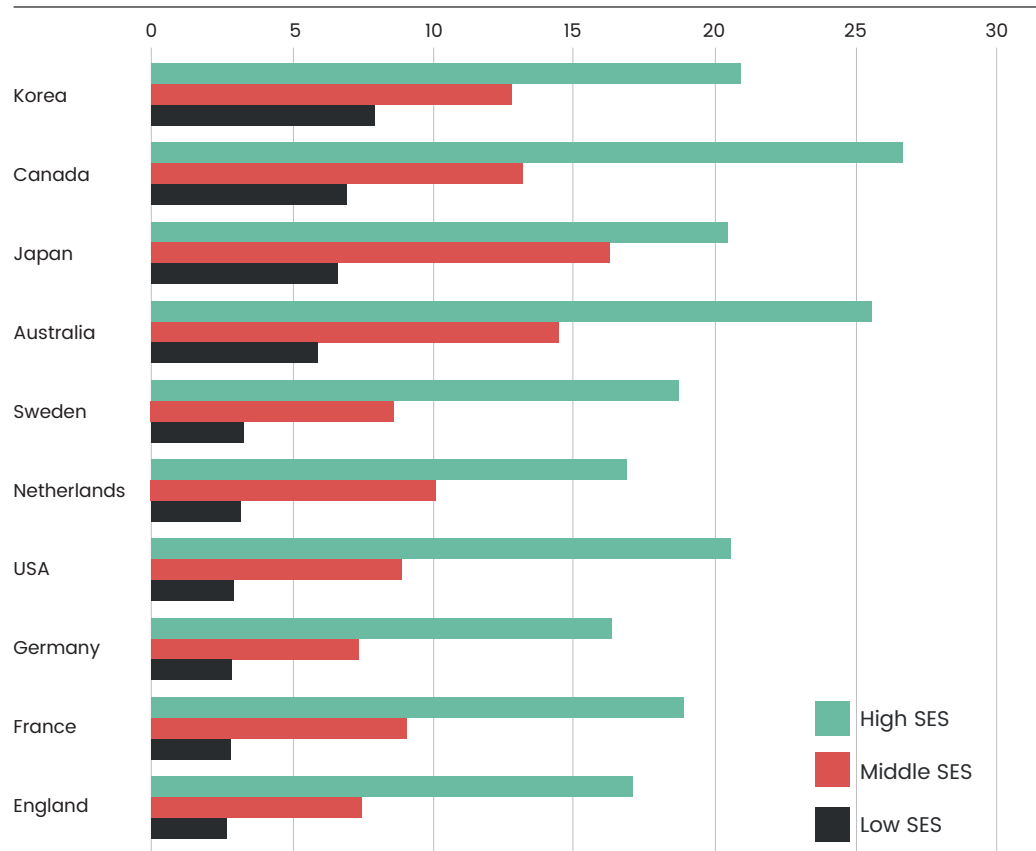
A systematic review of research (19 studies in total) by the EPPI centre (2002) found that after the introduction of the National Curriculum tests in England, low-achieving pupils had lower self-esteem than higher-achieving pupils, whereas before the introduction of tests there had been no correlation between self-esteem and achievement. Low achievers were also overwhelmed by assessments and demotivated by constant evidence of their low achievement, thus further increasing the gap between low- and high-achieving students.

As Bartlett et al (2006) found, there is no firm evidence to support claims that testing boosts standards of achievement, but there is evidence that it reduces the motivation of low-achieving pupils who are primarily from working-class backgrounds. The review concluded that low-achieving students are doubly disadvantaged by contemporary testing regimes; it reduces their motivation for learning; and it imposes conditions they find stressful, which in turn prevents them from performing as well as they can. Greater emphasis on testing has thus resulted in increasing the social-class achievement gap.

MIND THE GAP: COVID, INCREASING CLASS INEQUALITIES AND PRIMARY ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

Existing research, including my own (Reay 2017) shows that low achievers (and bottom set children) are disproportionately from working-class backgrounds. In the PISA table we can see that working-class children are failing to achieve highly in tests, despite the strong focus on teaching to the test in English schools.

THE PERCENTAGE OF HIGH ACHIEVING CHILDREN BY FAMILY BACKGROUND (PISA 2009) FOR SELECTED COUNTRIES (%)



While Pisa has not updated its research on achievement gaps between different social classes, the Social Mobility Commission (2020, p 35–36) found there was a 20% gap in SATs results between disadvantaged pupils and all other pupils in England. It is important to point out that this is not only an issue of class inequalities but also gender inequalities, with girls experiencing higher levels of test anxiety and lower life satisfaction than boys (Ayuso et al 2021, EPPI 2002).

“I’ll be a nothing”

My research underlines this class and gender inequality (Reay 2017). The paradox of our contemporary English assessment regime is that, while the stated aim is to raise the achievement of all children, one consequence of the growing preoccupation with testing and assessment is the fixing of failure in the working classes. In the two quotes below we can see a powerful effect on learner identities:

Hannah: I’m really scared about the SATs. Ms O’Brien [a teacher at the school] came and talked to us about our spelling, and I’m no good at spelling, and David [the class teacher] is giving us times tables tests every morning, and I’m hopeless at times tables, so I’m frightened I’ll do the SATs and I’ll be a nothing.

Diane: I don’t understand Hannah. You can’t be a nothing.

Hannah: Yes, you can, ’cause you have to get a level like a level 4 or a level 5, and if you’re no good at spellings and times tables, you don’t get those levels, and so you’re a nothing.

MIND THE GAP: COVID, INCREASING CLASS INEQUALITIES AND PRIMARY ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

and:

Sharon: I think I'll get a 2, only Stuart will get a 6.

Diane: So, if Stuart gets a 6, what will that say about him?

Sharon: He's heading for a good job and a good life, and it shows he's not gonna be living on the streets and stuff like that.

Diane: And if you get a level 2, what will that say about you?

Sharon: Um, I might not have a good life in front of me, and I might grow up and do something naughty, or something like that.

Sharon is talking about herself and one of the two middle-class boys in her class. Like the bottom set, mainly pupil premium, eight-year-olds in Buchanan et al 2020s study, who talked anxiously of how their current 'failure' in tests could impact their future lives as adults, both Hannah and Sharon have already internalised an understanding of their low achievement as pathological.

For many working-class children, results are conflated with far-reaching consequences: good SATs results mean positive life prospects and poor ones mean future failures and hardships

Although children expressed anxieties across the class divisions, it was not the white middle-class boys panicking about being exposed as no good through the assessment procedures; rather, it was the black and white working-class girls agonising that they would be "a nothing". And for working-class girls the risks of finding they have very little value are disproportionately high. Psychological research shows overwhelmingly that performance and behaviour in an educational context can be profoundly influenced by the way we feel we are seen and judged by others. When we expect to be viewed as inferior, our abilities seem to be diminished. And this sense of inferiority is particularly strong in working-class pupils like Sharon and Hannah.

Furthermore, for many working-class children test results are conflated with far-reaching consequences in which good SATs results are linked to positive life prospects and poor results mean future failures and hardships (Hargreaves et al 2021; Reay 2017; Hall et al 2004). Test results were not simply about how well they were able to perform but went to the very heart of who they were and what they could become.

Ofsted (2019) states that the over-use of assessment and questionable assessment practices have emerged as major issues in the English education system, resulting in teaching to the test and a narrowing of the curriculum. The report concludes that "...existing tests and systems used in schools have been found to be only partially accurate predictors of actual attainment at school level and tend to provide little information on the progress of individual pupils" (p 24). Teaching to the test inevitably improves test scores, but with the proviso that those scores are only measuring a very narrow range of knowledge and skills. But in addition to their limited

MIND THE GAP: COVID, INCREASING CLASS INEQUALITIES AND PRIMARY ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

assessment value, as my own research and that of others (Hargreaves 2019; McGillicuddy & Devine 2018) show, current assessment practices have a detrimental impact on the learner identities of, in particular, working-class children placed in the lower sets.

More recent research (McGillicuddy & Devine 2020) shows that such children feel shame, fear, distress and a sense of inferiority about their achievement in school. It also subjects them to a narrower, more impoverished curriculum. Recent research points to a difference in pedagogy experienced by different social classes, with the working classes more likely to experience “a pedagogy of poverty” that pays little attention to critical thinking skills and adopts a “drill and kill” teaching to the test approach (Hempel-Jorgensen 2018, 2019).

School closures, such as those necessitated by the pandemic, often have longer-term consequences, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalised in society, magnifying already-existing disparities within the education system. In addition to the missed opportunities for learning, many working-class children have been subjected to intense economic and social stress (Giannini 2020). The research consensus (Moss et al 2020; The Sutton Trust 2021) is that the pandemic lockdown will have a more negative impact on working-class children than on their middle- and upper-class peers. The mental health of the UK's children was already deteriorating before the pandemic (Sellars et al 2019).

Between March and May 2020 (during lockdown) a survey of 2673 parents reported deteriorating mental health and increased behavioural problems among children aged 4 to 11. But it was the working-class children who consistently had the worst mental health (Waite et al 2020). They are more likely to have reduced mental health, more anxiety about their schooling, and to have suffered a greater learning loss as a consequence of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

A study conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research in September 2020 (NFER 2020) suggested that the learning gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students had widened by at least 46%, even before the latest lockdown. *The Education Endowment Foundation Report* (EEF 2020) came up with a lower, but still disturbing, figure of 36%. The most recent research available (NFER 2021), which examined attainment at primary level, found that there is a large attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils, amounting to seven months for both reading and maths among year 2 pupils.

The report concluded that the gap is even wider than earlier estimates and is likely to be further exacerbated by the school closures in early 2021. Subjecting working-class children to the diet of testing and assessment that has become normal practice in English schools will only exacerbate their anxiety, fear of failure and mental distress. “Business as usual” will further increase the attainment gap rather than doing anything to alleviate it. It is time to mind, and be mindful of, the gap.

MIND THE GAP: COVID, INCREASING CLASS INEQUALITIES AND PRIMARY ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

References

Gender Gap in STEM: A Cross-Sectional Study of Primary School Students' Self-Perception and Test Anxiety in Mathematics (2020) IEEE Transactions on Education, Volume: 64, Issue: 1, 40–49

Bartlett, D., Black, P., Daugherty, R., Ecclestone, K., Harlen, W., English, J., Gardner, J., James, M., Hutchinson, C., Newton, P., Montgomery, M., Sebba, J.C., Roberts, C., Ryder, J., Stobart, G. & Whipp, A. (2006) *The Role of Teachers in the Assessment of Learning*. Nuffield Foundation and Institute of Education, London

Buchanan, D., Hargreaves, E. & Quick, L. (2020) *My life is like a massive jigsaw with pieces missing. How lower-attaining children experience school in terms of their wellbeing* (2020), Education, 3–13

Cairns, R. (2020) *Exams tested by Covid-19: An opportunity to rethink standardised senior secondary examinations*, Prospects

Achievement of 15-year-olds in England: PISA 2018 results Research report, Department for Education (2019) London

'Drill and kill'? English schools turn to scripted lessons to raise standards, The Guardian, 5 December 2017

Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: Rapid Evidence Assessment. Education Endowment Foundation (2020), London

Harlen W, Deakin Crick R (2002) *A systematic review of the impact of summative assessment and tests on students' motivation for learning*. Research Evidence in Education Library. EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London

Giannini, S. (2020) *Three ways to plan for equity during the coronavirus school closures* UNESCO

Hall, K., Collins, J., Benjamin, S., Nind, M., Sheehy, K. (2013) SATurated models of pupilhood: assessment and inclusion/exclusion *British Educational Research Journal* Vol. 30, No. 6, 801–817

Hargreaves, E. (2019) *Feeling Less Than Other People: attainment scores as symbols of children's worth*. UCL Forum. doi:10.15730/forum.2019.61.1.53

Hargreaves, E., Quick, L & D Buchanan (2021) 'Igotrejected': Investigating the status of 'low-attaining' children in primary schooling, *pedagogy, culture & society*, 29:1, 79–97, DOI: 10.1080/14681366.2019.1689408

Hempel-Jorgensen, A. (2019) *Inequality of pedagogy in English schools: How significant is it?* British Educational Research Association

Hempel-Jorgensen, A., Cremin, T., Harris, D., Chamberlain, L. (2018) *Pedagogy for reading for pleasure in low socio-economic primary schools: beyond 'pedagogy of poverty'?* *Literacy*, 52(2), 86–94

McGillicuddy, D., & Devine, D. (2018) 'Turned off' or 'ready to fly' – Ability grouping as an act of symbolic violence in primary school, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 70(C): 88–99

McGillicuddy, D., & Devine, D. (2020) 'You feel ashamed that you are not in the higher group' – Children's psychosocial response to ability grouping in primary school, *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 46, Issue 3, 553–573

Moss, G., Allen, R., Bradbury, A., Duncan, S., Harmey, S., Levy, R. (2020) *Primary teachers' experience of the COVID-19 lockdown – Eight key messages for policymakers going forward* UCL, Institute of Education, London

Newlove-Delgado, T., McManus, S., Sadler, K., Thandi, S., Vizard, T., Cartwright, C., Ford, T. (2021) *Child mental health in England before and during the COVID-19 lockdown*, *Lancet Psychiatry*. S2215-0366(20)30570-8.pmid:33444548

Sharp, C., Nelson, J., Lucas, M., Julius, J., McCrone, T., Sims, D. (2020) *The challenges facing schools and pupils in September 2020*, National Federation for Education Research, London

(Rose, S., Twist, L., Lord, P., Rutt, S., Badr, K., Hope, C., Styles, B. (2021) *Impact of school closures and subsequent support strategies on attainment and socio-emotional wellbeing in Key Stage 1: Interim Paper 1* National Federation for Education Research, London

OECD (2019) *PISA 2018 Results (Volume 111): What school life means for students' lives*, OECD Publishing, Paris

Putwain, D. (2008) *Examination stress and test anxiety*, *The Psychologist*, December 2008, Vol 21 (pp 1026–1029)

Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation: Inequality, education and the working classes*, Policy Press: Bristol

Rees, G. & Bradshaw, J. (2020) *Children's Worlds National Report: England*, July 2020, Social Research policy Unit, University of York

MIND THE GAP: COVID, INCREASING CLASS INEQUALITIES AND PRIMARY ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

Sellers, R., Warne, N., Pickles, A., Maughan, B., Thapar, A., Collishaw, S. (2019) *Cross-cohort change in adolescent outcomes for children with mental health problems*. *J Child Psychology & Psychiatry*; 60(7): 813–821. doi:10.1111/jcpp.13029 pmid:30989670.

Shepard, L. (2020) *Testing Students This Spring Would Be a Mistake: Especially now, high-stakes tests tell us very little we can't know in other ways*, Education Week, December 16, 2020

Monitoring social mobility 2013–2020: Is the government delivering on our recommendations? (2020) Social Mobility Commission, London

The Good Childhood Report 2020: The Children's Society, London

Montacute, R., & Cullinane, C. (2021) *Learning in Lockdown*, The Sutton Trust, London

Waite, P., Pearcey, S., Shum, A., Raw, J., Patalay, P., Creswell, C. (2020) *How did the mental health of children and adolescents change during early lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK?* University of Reading

NORMAL RULES NO LONGER APPLY: WHY RELENTLESS FOCUS ON SATS NEEDS TO END NOW

ALICE BRADBURY, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND CO-DIRECTOR OF THE HELEN HAMLYN CENTRE FOR PEDAGOGY (0–11 YEARS) AT UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

- While high-stakes testing is suspended we must use the time to consider the problems of testing as shown through research – and, in turn, the advantages of not testing
- Evidence suggests that SATs have a negative impact on staff, pupils and headteachers, as well as encouraging grouping practices
- The relentless focus on SATs by headteachers is no longer possible, given the need to focus on children's welfare after the pandemic, and we should take this opportunity to avoid a return to the 'normality' of testing

As we reach what are hopefully the end stages of the pandemic, the prospect of schools and life in general returning to normal is an attractive one, but there are elements of what was normality in primary schools that need urgent review. Significant problems caused by the current system were revealed in my research for More Than A Score on Key Stage 2 SATs in 2019. As we begin this phase of recovery, it is vital that we do not simply go back to the old ways, but that we recognise the problems of testing – and the advantages of *not* testing – that we have seen during the last year and use this understanding to reimagine the system.

The research conducted in 2019, which turned out to be a project that captured the last moment of the usual operation of statutory tests, involved a survey of 297 headteachers, and interviews with 20 heads from schools

across England (see Bradbury 2019; Bradbury et al 2021). These headteachers came from a range of types of schools, different regions, and had varying levels of experience. Although there were many different approaches to SATs among these heads, there was overwhelmingly a negative view of the tests largely based on their impact on staff and pupils. Many areas of school life were affected, including the curriculum, grouping and intervention strategies, provision of out-of-hours and holiday revision, and allocation of teachers and teaching assistants, to the extent that in some cases the whole school appeared geared towards the improvement of SATs scores.



ALICE BRADBURY

The impact on staff and children

Headteachers had serious concerns about the impact of the tests on staff: 99% of the survey respondents agreed that "SATs put pressure on teachers" and 92% agreed that "SATs have a negative impact on teachers' wellbeing". All of the heads we interviewed expressed concern about the impact on their teachers, as demonstrated by comments such as "they feel the pressure definitely as much as the children".

Heads also told us in the survey and interviews of their concerns regarding the impact on children: 83% agreed that "SATs have a negative impact on pupils' wellbeing". The main concerns related to levels of stress and anxiety among children and the impact on pupils with SEND and those seen as 'vulnerable'. Shouldering the additional task of alleviating the pressure

NORMAL RULES NO LONGER APPLY: WHY RELENTLESS FOCUS ON SATS NEEDS TO END NOW CONTINUED

imposed by SATs, schools employed various techniques to help children manage and reduce the stress of the tests. More recently, concerns for children's mental health and wellbeing have come to the fore more generally during the pandemic. Discourse on 'learning loss' has put further pressure on children by emphasising how far they need to 'catch up' to get back to the right place on the curriculum conveyor belt.

If testing resumes, schools will inevitably make use of all the strategies they have at their disposal to improve their results – and we found that there was a huge range of strategies that schools used. Significantly, SATs had an impact on grouping practices, encouraging setting, 'booster groups' for borderline children, and interventions – what we term collectively 'dividing practices' (Bradbury et al, 2021). There is a risk that as we try to 'catch up' – a concept intertwined with a system of curriculum and assessment where certain knowledge has to be learnt at set points – these dividing practices will be intensified as children are targeted to resolve specific 'gaps' in their learning.

High-stakes headship

The underlying cause of the SATs-related issues raised by heads back in 2019 was the high-stakes nature of the tests, rather than the assessment of children in general. The idea that one set of tests can offer a verdict on an entire school in all its complexity was particularly unpopular. Headteachers told us this caused them significant stress and anxiety, described by one as "intolerable pressure", often related to the fear that they would lose their jobs if results went down. As one head explained, "I feel like I'm like a football manager – I'm only as good as my last set of results". Another argued that

"...it seems fundamentally wrong that someone's career can be defined by a snapshot moment, rather than the quality of education that their school gives the children over a six-year period."

As a result of this 'high-stakes headship', a considerable proportion of heads' time was taken up in supporting preparation for SATs and making decisions based on the prioritisation of the results. But during the pandemic this has no longer been the priority as children's welfare became the main focus of many heads' working lives (Moss et al, 2020). Given the level of need many schools are faced with, it will simply not be possible to return to focusing an entire school on improving SATs results. A return to that pressure will be more than many heads can bear.

“The way SATs data is used demonises schools in challenging circumstances”
Headteacher

The failure to recognise the different contexts of schools was a problem that heads raised back in 2019 – one headteacher referred to the “demonisation of schools in challenging circumstances, which comes about through how SATs data is used”. The pandemic has only exacerbated and complicated these differences in circumstances: as one attendee at a MTAS event said, schools used to be compared with “statistical neighbours”, but you don't have a “Covid neighbour”. Localised variations in infection rates, deaths, unemployment and poverty mean that judging and comparing test results

NORMAL RULES NO LONGER APPLY: WHY RELENTLESS FOCUS ON SATS NEEDS TO END NOW CONTINUED

now is even more unjust than it was pre-pandemic. In my research on the Phonics Screening Check in autumn 2020 (Bradbury, 2020) – the one statutory test that has taken place during the pandemic – headteachers explained how unfair it is to judge children using standardised tests in this period, because “the picture is so patchy and scattered [...] The word ‘standard’ is not applicable to education at the moment, is it?”

“The picture is so patchy – the word ‘standard’ doesn’t apply to education at the moment”

Headteacher

Time to review and rethink

Covid has made some of the flaws within our curriculum and testing regime more visible, but the negative impact of SATs on schools was well known pre-pandemic. Having a hiatus in testing provides an opportunity to step off the treadmill of SATs preparation, and to think about what we lose through a relentless focus on these tests and what we could gain if the system were to change: less stress and anxiety for heads, teachers and children, a broader curriculum, and fewer dividing practices. At a time when many in education are recovering from the hardest year of their careers, it seems an ideal time to review and reform the detrimental system of testing which used to be ‘normal’.

References:

Bradbury, A. (2019) *Pressure, Anxiety and Collateral Damage: the Headteachers' Verdict on SATs*. London: MTAS

Bradbury, A. (2020). *The use of the Phonics Screening Check in Year 2: The views of Year 2 teachers and headteachers*. London: Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy, UCL Institute of Education.

Bradbury, A., Braun, A. & Quick, L. (2021) *Intervention culture, grouping and triage: high-stakes tests and practices of division in English primary schools* British Journal of Sociology of Education

Moss, G., Allen, R., Bradbury, A., Duncan, S., Harmey, S., Levy, R. (2020). *Primary teachers' experience of the COVID-19 lockdown – Eight key messages for policymakers going forward*. London: UCL IOE

TESTING AND MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT OUR ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL, RESULTS-DRIVEN AGENDA DOES TO YOUNG MINDS

DR CHRIS BAGLEY, EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

- **Mental disorders among 5- to 15-year-olds have increased steadily since 1999**
- **Young people themselves assert that wellbeing and satisfaction with school suffer because of SATs**
- **The current catch-up agenda acts against the fundamental human needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness**

The Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown has led to significant mental health challenges for many in our society. As reported in *The Lancet*¹, those who were struggling prior to the pandemic have been most affected. Lockdown has placed additional strain on many families that were already experiencing difficulty. *The British Medical Journal*² reports that although some families have coped well, others have faced financial adversity, struggled to home-school, and are at risk of experiencing a “vicious cycle of increasing distress”. In addition, for socioeconomically deprived families, economic recession is expected to increase the numbers of families under financial strain. Children with parents who are experiencing psychological distress are more likely³ to have mental health difficulties themselves.

Dr Bernadka Dubicka⁴, chairwoman of the child and adolescent faculty at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, recently said: “Our children and young people are bearing the brunt of the mental health crisis caused by the pandemic and are at risk of lifelong mental illness”. One study⁵ showed that the

increase in probable mental health problems reported in adults also affected 5- to 16-year-olds in England, with the incidence rising from 10.8% in 2017 to 16% in 2020 across age, gender, and ethnic groups. In another⁶, parents recruited through social media reported deteriorating mental health and increased behavioural problems among children aged 4 to 11 years.

It is important to note that deteriorating mental health in response to the pandemic has not been uniformly experienced. One survey⁷ found that the majority of young people in Years 4–6 rated their perception of ‘happiness’ as better (range: 37–41%) or the same (range: 27–34%) and 29–32% reported feeling worse as a consequence of lockdown. When asked by the Children’s Society⁸, young people report some positive experiences, including: the importance of connecting with friends and family; the benefits of being active; appreciation and gratitude for what they have; and the merit of engaging in creative activities. What emerges is a complex picture where some young people may have been negatively impacted, whilst others have found at least some aspects of lockdown favourable.

Looking more broadly at trends encompassing a period beyond the pandemic, the Department of Health⁹ has recorded a steady increase in mental disorders among 5- to 15-year-olds from 9.7% in 1999 and 10.1% in 2004 to 11.2% in 2017. Between 2004 and 2017, anxiety, depression and self-harm increased, particularly among teenage girls¹⁰. Consecutive Good



DR CHRIS BAGLEY

TESTING AND MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT OUR ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL, RESULTS-DRIVEN AGENDA DOES TO YOUNG MINDS CONTINUED

Childhood Reports¹¹ show a consistent decrease in happiness with life and with school since 2009. In terms of international comparison¹², children's subjective wellbeing and satisfaction with school is poor in England compared with other nations.

The exam system and the 'standardised assessment' are core underpinning factors, as asserted by young people¹³. Students report that problems begin to arise in primary school, with SATs. Disturbing trends have been highlighted by Dianne Reay¹⁴ and many other¹⁵ researchers, who note that obsessive focus on academic testing as a measure of human worth leads to perverse incentives and does significant damage to the mental health of our children. England is an outlier when it comes to school accountability measured via standardised assessment. In a large-scale evaluation of 'Testing and Assessment'¹⁶ commissioned by the House of Commons, it was concluded that in the UK, standardised assessment has "distorted the education of our children and schools' results at the expense of a more rounded education".

Driven by the 'results agenda' and consequent focus on academic attainment, teachers, parents and young people are operating in an educational environment that is not conducive to psychological health. Children are taught that success is achievable only through accepting the "tyranny of testing"¹⁷, the need for competition and the coerced pursuit of goals shaped by standardised assessments

Many nations are moving towards more individualised, consent-based, relational forms of student evaluation. For example, in Finland¹⁸ there are no high-stakes tests until young people reach 18, and in Italy¹⁹, primary school

student evaluation takes the form of teacher-constructed, descriptive reports. Also, in Portugal²⁰, teacher-led formative assessment is the norm in primary school. Amongst other factors, the evaluation approaches used in these nations are a reason why education there is more equal and inclusive when compared with England, where segregation and marginalisation is far greater.

In February, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS)²¹ claimed that for children, 'losing half a year of schooling will mean losing £40,000 in income over their lifetime'. This statistic has been taken up²² by many across the political spectrum in the UK. The IFS's proposed solutions – to extend the school year, lengthen the school day, and mass repetition of whole school years or summer schools – are predicated on the idea that 'learning' involves a gradual, cumulative build-up of essential information that, if missed, limits children's life chances. The 'crisis in lost learning' is construed in abstract financial terms; the narrative is defined by economists, not educationalists or young people themselves.

This perspective positions children as objects to be moulded into economic entities, rather than complex, whole persons with individual hopes and dreams. The prevailing narrative around a need for 'catch-up' construes our children as faulty, incomplete and 'not enough'. This will precipitate teaching approaches that involve rigid standardisation, narrowing of the curriculum, and ongoing (possibly increased) measurement against external criteria.

What is needed in response to the global pandemic are school systems that are able to respond flexibly and creatively to the diverse social, emotional

TESTING AND MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT OUR ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL, RESULTS-DRIVEN AGENDA DOES TO YOUNG MINDS CONTINUED

and learning needs of young people. This will be particularly important for those whose families have experienced high levels of insecurity, financial uncertainty and psychological distress during lockdown.

For human beings to thrive it is crucial for us to experience autonomy, competence and relatedness²³. Young people need to feel a sense of control, connection to others, belongingness in school, and to develop a perception of themselves as skilled, capable human beings. The catch-up agenda acts against these fundamental human needs and is underpinned by an ongoing dedication to a one-size-fits-all coercive approach where the sole purpose of learning is to download content and pass examinations.

Instead of marinating our children in fear of lost futures and the need to 'catch up', we should take stock, slow down and consider how the pandemic has impacted our children. It will be important to provide space for school staff to listen to their thoughts, allow them to express their feelings and provide flexibility in curricula and student evaluation to allow schools to respond to children in a humane, emotionally responsive way.

References

- 1 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(20\)30491-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30491-0/fulltext)
- 2 <https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n614>
- 3 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32707037/>
- 4 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus-children-mental-health-crisis-b1828732.html>
- 5 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(20\)30570-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30570-8/fulltext)
- 6 <https://psyarxiv.com/t8rfx>
- 7 https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/research/schoolmentalhealth/summary-report/preliminarysummaryreport_oxwellsurvey2020_entire_survey_2020-09-11.pdf
- 8 <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/life-on-hold>
- 9 <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>
- 10 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)31102-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)31102-X/fulltext)
- 11 https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/PRE022a_Good%2520Childhood%25202020_V6_LR.pdf
- 12 <https://iscweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Childrens-Worlds-Comparative-Report-2020.pdf>
- 13 <https://www.statesofmind.org/journal/2020/10/21/education-system-and-identity.html>
- 14 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232835214_%27%27_It_be_a_nothing%27_structure_agency_and_the_construction_of_identity_through_assessment_1
- 15 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309771525_Exam_Factories_The_impact_of_accountability_measures_on_children_and_young_people
- 16 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmchilsh/cmchilsh.htm>
- 17 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/review-beyond-the-tyranny-of-testing/>
- 18 https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Finnish_Lessons.html?id=oB5hAgAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y
- 19 https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/assessment-primary-education-23_en
- 20 <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/50077958.pdf>
- 21 <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15291>
- 22 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56311723>
- 23 <https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>

ALTERNATIVES TO SATS: WHY COVID-19 HAS MADE CHANGING OUR CURRENT TESTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM A PRESSING ISSUE

GEMMA MOSS, PROFESSOR OF LITERACY AND DIRECTOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL LITERACY CENTRE AT UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

- Covid-19 has shown that the English test and accountability system is over-centralised, inflexible and inefficient
- It unnecessarily penalises schools serving our most disadvantaged communities, where the material impacts of poverty on children's health and wellbeing are highest
- It promotes poor practice in teaching and learning, and a low-trust culture through a curriculum that is poorly paced and over-specified in the parts it chooses to test

The pandemic has shone a harsh light on how the English education system currently runs, and the distorted priorities entrenched by its test and accountability system (ILC, 2020a).

Our research shows that, in keeping educational provision functioning during such an extended period of disruption, schools responded quickly to the multiple impacts Covid was having on their communities (Moss et al, 2020). The forms of support they offered went well beyond the narrowly educational to ensure, for instance, that pupils reliant on free school meals would not go hungry, and that families most in need of other support services could access them. Schools recognised they had a vital role in keeping communities together at a time of crisis and responded accordingly. Yet they have received little public recognition or credit for this.

Instead, policymakers' attention has been narrowly focused on reinstating the current test and accountability system, and the fast-paced curriculum delivery it mandates, with scant regard for actual circumstances on the ground. Yet Covid is by no means over. The disease is still actively circulating in schools, while the full economic impacts of the pandemic on our poorest communities have yet to be realised.

In numerous ways, Covid has revealed the depth of the material poverty in which many families in England now live, and the precariousness of their situation (ADCS, 2020; Children's Commissioner, 2021). This has substantial effects on children's lives, including on their physical and mental wellbeing. Poverty matters. It creates an unequal playing field in education, well demonstrated by the strength of the correlation between persistent disadvantage – defined in a recent Education Policy Institute report as pupils who are “eligible for free school meals for 80% or more of their school life” (Hutchinson et al, 2020, p 14) – and lower educational attainment. Child poverty is on the rise, and Covid has exacerbated income inequalities, creating more stress for families in the process (CPAG, 2021). Schools are at the forefront of dealing with the human dimensions of these issues – they do so underfunded and under-resourced, against a backdrop of a testing and accountability system that penalises rather than supports those schools working with our most disadvantaged communities. It is time for a radical overhaul of how we manage (and fund) our education system (ILC, 2020b; Julius et al, 2020).



GEMMA MOSS

ALTERNATIVES TO SATS: WHY COVID-19 HAS MADE CHANGING OUR CURRENT TESTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM A PRESSING ISSUE CONTINUED

A radical solution for radical times

Trying to recover from the impact of the pandemic on children's education will take time. It will require investment targeted at our most vulnerable communities so that some of the material effects of poverty on children's lives can be mitigated (NEU, 2021; CPAG, 2021; EPI, 2020; IFS, 2020). For schools, it requires creating space on the curriculum for high-quality teaching informed by local understanding of children's needs, and with the capacity to adapt to meet them. Formative assessment designed to enable teachers to adjust their teaching to strengthen student learning (Baird et al, 2017) has a crucial role to play here. Our current testing and accountability system militates against this by over-monitoring and over-policing delivery of a curriculum atomised into its constituent parts, to be delivered with fidelity to a timetable that brooks no adjustment. The curriculum and test timetable facilitates external monitoring. It does nothing to encourage the kind of responsive teaching we need and deserve.

Our research shows that during the pandemic, teachers and teaching assistants demonstrated considerable resilience and agility in adjusting and adapting to meet the needs of their communities (Moss et al, 2020; Moss et al, 2021). By contrast, centrally directed policy responses were often ill-timed and poorly judged. Those looking at data from afar have ignored the primary resource available to schools – their own staff and their immediate knowledge of what matters most. Instead, additional funding has been hypothecated to remedies that are hard to scale (NAO, 2021) and whose fitness for purpose in particular local contexts has not been calculated. The inadequacies of a low-trust culture that prefers the expertise of anyone except those dealing with the immediate issues first-hand is here exposed.

Covid is a wake-up call for putting more agency back into the hands of the teaching staff who know their communities best and rebuilding the local and deliberative forums the system requires to function well (ILC, 2020b).

Recovery requires creating space on the curriculum for high-quality teaching informed by local understanding of children's needs

To rebalance and redesign an education system fit for purpose:

Step 1. Replace whole cohort testing with a system of national sampling
SATs in primary schools have morphed from a statement of what children can do into a retrospective means of monitoring whether teachers have delivered the curriculum items tested. This is a costly (£42m approximately) and inefficient way of determining teaching quality. It can lead to over-emphasising the parts of the curriculum tested at the expense of a wider and richer curriculum that engages children more fully and fosters their longer-term intellectual growth. A longitudinal national sample would have the merits of allowing fuller system monitoring over time by collecting richer data from fewer pupils. With intelligent design, it would create new knowledge of key aspects of teaching and learning in context that could support system improvement. By contrast, whole-population testing of four-year-olds in order to judge the value that schools have added seven years hence, when the children are 11, will not create any useful or reliable knowledge that will make a difference to their educational trajectories.

ALTERNATIVES TO SATS: WHY COVID-19 HAS MADE CHANGING OUR CURRENT TESTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM A PRESSING ISSUE CONTINUED

Step 2. Establish an independent body, answerable to parliament, to run the national sample

As part of its responsibilities, it will devise new test instruments designed to give a fuller understanding of how pupil competence changes over time. It will also develop survey instruments to collect fuller contextual information than is currently available on the National Pupil Database. The new body would insulate the curriculum and assessment from direct political interference and manipulation, while maintaining democratic oversight.

Step 3. Redesign local accountability to strengthen system learning and enhance system equity

Support and challenge are key parts of system learning, but they are not well wired into Ofsted's current remit or its new inspection framework, which remains overly concerned with monitoring curriculum delivery. This is carried out on the basis of little proven expertise in forming judgements on curriculum quality during a short visit. Data from the national sample could be used instead to foster democratic accountability with a range of local stakeholder panels committed to reviewing outcomes and their relevance locally. By identifying substantive thematic areas warranting further exploration, and by committing funds for this purpose, it is possible to re-envision system learning as responsive to local needs. It is also possible to draw researchers, practitioners and policymakers into closer relationships, working together on agendas defined collectively as requiring the most urgent investigation here. (These recommendations and how such a system could be made to work are more fully sketched out in the BERA Expert Panel report on Alternatives to SATs, led by Harvey Goldstein and to be published by BERA later in the year.)

References

- ADCS (2020) *Building a country that works for all children*, Manchester: The Association of Directors of Children's Services
- Baird, J., Andrich, D., Hopfenbeck, T. N., & Stobart, G. (2017) *Assessment and learning: Fields apart?* *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 24:3, 317-350
- Britton, J., Farquharson, C., Sibieta, L., Tahir, I. and Waltmann, B. (2020) *IFS Report R183. 2020 annual report on education spending in England*, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies
- Children's Commissioner (2021) *Child poverty: the crisis we can't keep ignoring*, London: Children's Commissioner Office
- CPAG (2021) *The cost of learning in lockdown: March 2021 update*, London: Child Poverty Action Group.
- EPI (2020) *Preventing the disadvantage gap from increasing during and after the Covid-19 pandemic*, London: Education Policy Institute
- Hutchinson, J., Reader, M. and Akhal, A. (2020) *Education in England: Annual Report*, London: Education Policy Institute
- International Literacy Centre (2020a) *Responding to COVID-19, Briefing note 1: Primary Assessment*, London: UCL Institute of Education
- International Literacy Centre (2020b) *Responding to COVID-19, Briefing Note 3: Educational priorities in challenging times*, London: UCL Institute of Education.
- Julius, J., Hillary, J. and Faulkner-Ellis, H. (2020) *The Implications of Covid-19 on the School Funding Landscape*, Slough: NFER
- Moss, G., Allen, R., Bradbury, A., Duncan, S., Harme, S., & Levy, R. (2020) *Primary teachers' experience of the COVID-19 lockdown – Eight key messages for policymakers going forward*, London: UCL Institute of Education
- Moss, G., Webster, R., Harme, S., and Bradbury, A. (2021) *Unsung Heroes: The role of teaching assistants and classroom assistants in keeping schools functioning during lockdown*, London: UCL Institute of Education
- NAO (2021) *Support for children's education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*, London: National Audit Office
- NEU (2021) *Turning the page on poverty*, London: National Education Union

07

VIEWS FROM HEADTEACHERS

Reflections on education and assessment [Jonathan Cooper, Headteacher, St Luke's Primary School, Brighton, National Leader in Education](#)

SATs and our community [Matt Morden, Co-head, Surrey Square School, London](#)

Race inequality and the inequities of SATs [Sandeep Kaur, Associate Headteacher, Highlands Primary School, Ilford](#)

The weak wall of assessment [Mark Chatley, Trust Leader, The Coppice Primary Partnership, Kent](#)

SEND and SATs: where there's no choice at all for the children who need it most [Jeremy Barnes, Headteacher, All Saints Catholic Primary School, Liverpool](#)

Hours wasted in the quest to test [Kulvarn Atwal, Headteacher, Highlands Primary School, Ilford](#)

REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION AND ASSESSMENT

**JONATHAN COOPER, HEADTEACHER, ST LUKE'S PRIMARY SCHOOL,
BRIGHTON, NATIONAL LEADER IN EDUCATION**

How do you measure the quality of an education system? Ask educationalists, parents and carers, children and young people, and they will tell you that it's in our ability to nurture a love of life and learning; to transform lives through creating opportunity; to create individuals who care about the world and want to make a difference; to build a community of compassion and hope; and to inspire innovation and creative thinking. They definitely would not say it's in a school's ability to enable children to pass individual tests in reading, maths or grammar during one week in May. So why is this the most significant measure of a school?

Do we want to talk about our children in terms of their thinking skills, their imagination, their ability to collaborate, to solve problems, to take risks, to ask questions, to show resilience and, above all, to care? Or do we want to sum up the wonderfully complex and creative mind of an 11-year-old as having reached 'age-related expectations'?

Is it an industrial model of schooling, with children sitting in rows facing the expert teacher? Or is school a home for the mind, whose organisation is flexible and its curriculum sufficiently rich to meet the needs of the learner and the learning?

Do we want children to learn in silos? Or should education be seen, like all the best organisations, as primarily a social experience where children explore and collaborate in deep, reflective, enquiry-based ways?

In order to survive in a high-stakes-testing regime, schools have been forced to work backwards from the tests, reducing curriculum and learning opportunities in order to meet crude and narrow test requirements. Children's curiosity and creativity is stifled as they struggle to find a space in the curriculum for themselves, and they become more passive as they are fed information. By the age of 11, children are asking 80% fewer questions than they did at age four. What isn't in the test and therefore isn't measured naturally loses value, attention and time – sport, the arts, the sciences. The children who miss out the most are those from more disadvantaged backgrounds where inequalities are even more starkly highlighted and exacerbated. After 20 years of focusing primarily on maths and literacy, Ofsted now talk of inspecting the wider curriculum. However, Ofsted has been front and centre of policing the focus on the three Rs, and the damage caused to education has already been felt by thousands and thousands of children over the years.

These tests are not useful to a child, their school, or even the secondary school. Good schools carry out their own ongoing and much broader assessment of the whole child. The results from the tests very rarely come as a surprise. Sadly, it's the wellbeing and educational opportunity of the children that suffers, as the results are used as tools for holding schools to account – the children receive no benefit. In fact, from a very early age many



JONATHAN COOPER HEADTEACHER

REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION AND ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

begin to see themselves as failures if they don't reach the expected grade. The cancellation of SATs results due to the Covid pandemic has not caused a crisis of confidence in primary school assessment. Unlike many politicians, parents and carers trust and greatly value the knowledge and expertise of their child's teacher.

In the last 20-odd years as a headteacher and advisor of primary schools, I have watched schools struggle to remain true to their values and principles within a heavily politicised system where the measure of a school's success revolves around the results of these end-of-key-stage tests. As schools, we yearn for imaginative and visionary leadership from the centre – and primarily from educationalists – that recognises the challenges and opportunities facing our children in the future. However, we continually get outdated proposals for teaching and learning, with the curriculum and assessment often substantially based on the childhood education of the present Secretary of State for Education. Why do we accept this? Why do we let it hold us back?

There has never been a more important time for heads, teachers and wider educationalists to take control of the teaching and learning debate, to acknowledge and respond confidently to the challenges we face in educating children for the 21st century, and to recognise our capacity to lead on innovation and improvement. This is not only essential, it's a moral imperative. We are dealing with a system that is becoming ossified through political interference. So, what could some of the solutions be? We need parents and carers and young people to tell politicians what they want

from education. We need to show that we cherish the minds of our children through a curriculum that is rich and varied, where children can express themselves as fluently and powerfully in drama or music as they do in maths or writing; a curriculum that also recognises the key challenges facing our world – for instance, where is national climate change on the curriculum? We need an assessment system that takes into account the whole child as a learner, a thinker and an engaged future citizen. We need to value our knowledge and expertise as a profession and, like successful education systems elsewhere, we need teachers to enter the profession with at least a Masters in Education. Leaders from schools and universities need to work in harmony, developing and implementing research that allows education to respond creatively to our rapidly changing world. We need to commit to funding early childhood education to a much higher degree to address inequalities sooner. We need to abolish inspections and, instead, use the substantial funding available to support schools with expert advice to equip them on their journey of continuous self-improvement.

Most of all, we simply need to sit down regularly and spend time watching children at play together, observing their vast potential for learning once they're given an environment rich in opportunities and the freedom to think and communicate with each other in a variety of ways. We need to see how creative, compassionate and caring they can be when collaborating rather than competing. We need to feel awe and wonder at what they can potentially achieve and ask ourselves: Is our education system cherishing and nurturing their potential? Or, through its narrow priorities, is it stifling education on a daily basis?

SATS AND OUR COMMUNITY

MATT MORDEN, CO-HEAD, SURREY SQUARE SCHOOL, LONDON

- **98% of our families sit within the lowest 40% of the income-deprived families index, many of them experiencing extreme deprivation**
- **Pupils leave us with above-average results in core subjects, because in our “personal and academic excellence” school motto, the personal comes first**
- **Much of the SATs' content is unrelatable for children from deprived communities, putting them at further disadvantage**

Last year at Surrey Square, only 17% of our nursery cohort were at age-related expectations for reading, writing and maths when they joined us at the start of the year. We are committed to closing this gap and have extremely high expectations of all our pupils.

Surrey Square is a school at the heart of the community it serves, meeting not just the educational needs of its pupils, but also responding to the plethora of social issues facing local families. 98% of our families sit within the lowest 40% on the IDACI indicator of deprivation. Despite these challenges, the children leave us achieving above-national results in the core subjects, which we believe is due to the emphasis we place on the 'personal excellence' of our children and their families while they are part of the Surrey Square community.

In our school mission, *Personal and Academic Excellence, Everyone, Every Day*, the 'personal' comes first. This is essential, as children's basic needs

have to be met in order to enable them to access their academic learning to the best of their abilities. If something in a child's home life is affecting their ability to learn, then we see it as our duty to address this first.

That being said, many of the systemic social issues faced by our families do not disappear overnight, and no matter how much we attempt to prepare our children for the notorious 'SATs week' there are still many unforeseen challenges our pupils experience that make an already tough week even tougher.



Of our children, 25% live in temporary accommodation. It means they can be moved with just a day's notice. Indeed, they've experienced first-hand being called to the homelessness unit, with all their belongings, to be given keys and a new address without knowing in what state they'll find the accommodation. This has sometimes happened immediately before SATs week, impacting the children's tests results. How can this be fair?



MATT MORDEN HEADTEACHER

SATS AND OUR COMMUNITY CONTINUED

Temporary accommodation is often overcrowded. One family of five – mum, grandma, teenage boy, teenage girl and Year 6 girl – were placed in one room in a hostel containing just two sets of bunk beds and a garden table for 18 months. They had to share the kitchen and bathroom with multiple families. The youngest daughter has sickle cell anaemia and is often awake at night with joint pains, which meant everyone was woken up. She was unable to use the toilet out in the hallway on her own as it wasn't safe, meaning her mum had to accompany her. She was still living there during SATs week.

This situation isn't a one-off. Temporary accommodation is often sub-standard, riddled with mould and infested with vermin. Children living in these conditions are then expected to come to school and sit high-pressured tests at the age of 10 or 11. Since the pandemic, we have seen a rise in cases of families falling below the poverty line, which means even more children will be experiencing similar difficulties with food and housing.

Furthermore, the wider social contexts for many of our children only compound the challenges they face. We had a child sitting SATs when a family member had been arrested the previous night; another child witnessed a stabbing on the landing of his block of flats on the Sunday evening before SATs week. This is extremely overwhelming for a 10- or 11-year-old, with a huge impact on their mental health.

In one classroom we saw a child who struggled with the first question of the reading paper and then proceeded to put his head on the table because he couldn't face doing any more. In that same classroom another child walked out, tipped over the water cooler and kicked a hole in the door as he

left. What are we doing to children's mental health by making them endure this at such a young age? It really doesn't need to be this way. It's the high-stakes, high-pressure nature of this type of testing and accountability that is wrong – a child's entire primary school learning experience being judged on one single test result.



Much of the content of the SATs testing is unfair for children from more deprived communities. Take the reading paper, for example: not only is there the pressure of reading three texts and answering a series of questions within a limited timeframe, but children in communities such as ours are also disadvantaged by the fact that much of the content is so far removed from their own experience. For example, Maria and Oliver rowing a boat across a lake to see a monument, or Edward describing his memories of the old farmhouse in *Albion's Dream*, or Michael out fishing at sea and encountering a whale – these are not experiences that many, or indeed any, of the children in our community would have encountered. But we know it would be different for children from more affluent backgrounds for whom the test would be more accessible.

SATS AND OUR COMMUNITY CONTINUED

As regards the maths reasoning paper, mathematicians who are good with numbers but poor with language can be further disadvantaged. Studies support the fact that not only can the complex, specialised words used in reasoning questions be a barrier for EAL children, the problems are also often culturally biased, representative of the type of experience more familiar to affluent families. If children have never experienced going to a concert or theatre, this could present an additional barrier to the question in the example below. With 98% of our families sitting within the lowest 40% on the IDACI indicator of deprivation, and 60% with EAL, this puts them at a disadvantage even before the 40-minute paper begins.

We believe that a fairer system must be developed. We are using this year to trial a different way – a broader assessment mechanism that doesn't just focus on a narrow set of outcomes based on a snapshot of one test result. We are collating digital portfolios for reading, writing and maths, as well as focusing on wider curriculum areas, including values, oracy and the arts. Tests will still be used but will form only part of the evidence. They will capture a range of examples to give a fuller picture of a child's understanding in these areas and a more expansive overview of the whole child within a context that is relevant to them.

18

Last year, Jacob went to four concerts.

Three of his tickets cost £5 each.



The other ticket cost £7

What was the **mean** cost of the tickets?

RACE INEQUALITY AND THE INEQUITIES OF SATS

SANDEEP KAUR, ASSOCIATE HEADTEACHER, HIGHLANDS PRIMARY SCHOOL, ILFORD

- The curriculum is geared towards mastery of skills, knowledge and concepts built on a narrow Eurocentric view that alienates BAME children and makes them feel 'other'
- For pupils from BAME backgrounds, SATs represent yet another form of judgment – what they don't do is develop children's sense of belonging and identity as empowered, active citizens of the future
- For BAME children and families, the disproportionate impacts of Covid have resulted in an unfair language barrier, making SATs an even bigger threat this year

"By 'education' I do not mean hobbling the mind but liberating it. By 'education' I do not mean passing on monologues but engaging in dialogues. Listening, assuming sometimes that I have a history, a language, a view, an idea, a specificity."

Toni Morrison

Primary school education should bring about a deep sense of safety and security that derives from a child's evolving sense of identity. Pupils should transition to secondary school with an inner acceptance and a sense of belonging to their community, celebrated for the unique talents, skills, language and histories they bring and contribute. However, this reality is far from the truth, with Year 6's primary journey culminating in a sense of being judged. This experience is compounded for children and families from BAME backgrounds and those learning English as an Additional Language.

This is due to an intersection of factors, including the nature of the curriculum, the lack of opportunities to develop positive self-identity and a sense of belonging, and more recently the disproportionate nature of Covid impacts on BAME families.

Curriculum

Our primary school curriculum is designed to culminate in a final pass or fail judgment, with children assessed on the memorisation of specific skills and facts to demonstrate mastery. Sadly, we are so invested in the fruits of these assessments that the nourishment of the child has become a by-product. The National Curriculum offers children a narrow Eurocentric-dominant view, by default making the colonial world the planetary world (Pratt, 1992). By this, we mean the views and perspectives of history are predominantly expressed from a white, male, privileged position – stories told by the oppressor rather than the oppressed. The core texts of literature are dominated by Western thought and 'classic literature', but is this the only literature?

There has been much debate in the media about the Sewell Report 2021, which asserts that exploring the colonial past is akin to 'victim narratives'. Well, who will tell the stories of the silenced? Our children's sensory systems download an evolving world in which they are viewed as 'outsiders'. By association, this perpetuates a constant need to fit into a 'universal mould' – in other words, the colonial narrative. The curriculum is political by design and perpetuates a romantic notion that Empire gave the world only positives.



SANDEEP KAUR ASSOCIATE HEADTEACHER

RACE INEQUALITY AND THE INEQUITIES OF SATS CONTINUED

As educators, it is our duty to lead the way in facing our history, warts and all; only then can our children truly learn lessons from the past, work towards a better sense of humanity, and become the critical thinkers that we strive to create.

“Do children from BAME backgrounds truly get the opportunity to question the world if they only see a partial view of it represented in the curriculum?”

Teachers have neither confidence nor experience when it comes to diversifying the curriculum, as they themselves grew up with the same education system, accepting the indoctrinated narrative that it espouses. It will only be in schools fortunate to have leadership that nurtures support and promotes a more equitable curriculum that children will see themselves represented. Just recently, a team planning the Victorian unit were shocked that children had no concept of Queen Victoria's links to India. When pupils found out that she had been Empress of India they felt awe and wonder that this part of history related to them and their current sense of belonging to the British identity. How sad that in Year 4, children from BAME backgrounds still question if they are British. Displays of superficial British values will not change this mindset – children need to see themselves as inextricably part of history.

Identity and belonging

“Young people's sense of belonging in school is shaped by what they bring to it – their histories, their day-to-day lived realities – as well as schools' practices and expectations. Relationships, encounters and pedagogical experiences make a difference.”

Riley (2017)

Riley challenges us to consider to what extent the build-up to SATs nurtures this environment for pupils from BAME backgrounds. Can children see themselves in what they are learning – enriching it by drawing on their own life experiences? Do children from BAME backgrounds truly get the opportunity to question the world if they see only a partial view represented in the curriculum? Can children really get their sense of belonging if they always feel like the 'other'? SATs offer neither grounding nor security to children, families or staff – just anxiety, judgment and a culture of fear. This oppressive system gives no space for critically questioning the validity and fairness of SATs tests for BAME children. They are being assessed on views and knowledge that are alien to their very sense of being. One such example is the reading paper, which year on year assumes a white, middle-class knowledge background and familiarity with 'classic literature', but whose classical knowledge and cultural capital are reflected here?

Data can be manipulated in many ways, highlighting model minorities such as the Chinese and Indian ethnicity groups as always performing highly, while detracting from the underachievement of black and Pakistani children across the SATs data cohort. Data can also be manipulated to show a gradual improvement, yet this does not reflect the growing divide.

RACE INEQUALITY AND THE INEQUITIES OF SATS CONTINUED

In 2018/19, data showed that 65% of children achieved 'expected standards' in combined reading, writing and maths. The Chinese cohort achieved 80% and the Indian cohort 77%. However, the black Caribbean cohort achieved 56% and the Pakistani group 62%. The fact that Chinese and Indian ethnicities outperform other ethnicities, including white British, doesn't answer for the underachievement of black and Pakistani children. What really needs to be looked at is the proportionate change for each ethnic group over time, and which are consistently making the least progress. The fallacy here is that great progress equates to closing the gap (Gillborn, 2008).

Covid impacts

The impact of Covid has disproportionately affected BAME families in health and social terms. At our school, we are supporting children living in multigenerational families who are coping with the loss of loved ones. Many of our BAME families have fallen into extreme poverty during the pandemic due to job insecurity; they require foodbank vouchers just to ensure that their children's basic needs are being met. As a school, we have set up a hardship fund supported by staff and local communities to help families most in need – this includes a family of four with one single bed between them. Faced with such circumstances, our children's emotional wellbeing is adversely affected. They have experienced a lockdown without access to wi-fi or rich language opportunities.

“Our pupils' experience of lockdown didn't include unlimited wi-fi and rich language opportunities”

Our dialogic teaching and learning pedagogy have enabled our most disadvantaged children to make good progress. In recognition of this, we have been presented with the 'Schools for Success' award by the Mayor of London for four years in a row. However, our efforts have been severely thwarted by the pandemic, giving the BAME community a sky-high barrier to climb. Dialogic teaching and learning are powerful, as they create a utilitarian classroom environment where all voices are valued, language is modelled, critical-thinking questions are posed and encouraged, and the majority of the lesson is driven by the children building on each other's ideas. This is the core of high-quality modelled language. But SATs-motivated primary education next year will detract from all of this valuable learning and will pose a threat to their life chances.

As an educational community, it is time to protect our children from the detrimental effects of SATs' high-stakes accountability system and see an end to the narrowness of vision that undermines their identity and belonging. It's time to introduce a system that celebrates and works for every child.

THE WEAK WALL OF ASSESSMENT

MARK CHATLEY, TRUST LEADER, THE COPPICE PRIMARY PARTNERSHIP, KENT

- **The cancellation of SATs and other assessments in 2020 and 2021 has consequences for the primary accountability system over a period of 10 years**
- **Five different models of measuring progress over the course of nine years means that there are no real comparative measures, just gaps**
- **If schools are to be measured using comparative data gathered from children, that data should be viable and complete. Now, there are too many missing pieces**

In May 2020, Schools Minister Nick Gibb MP told the Education Select Committee, "SATS don't have an impact on children's lives; they are a form of accountability for the school system." With those few words, he opened up the first gap in the broken wall of assessment.

"The system is flawed just because of its design, but also because of the gaps created by the pandemic"

Almost 12 months later and the pandemic and lockdowns mean that this has been a school year like no other. The introduction of Reception Baseline Assessment was halted; Year 2 and Year 6 SATs and the Summer Phonics

Check were cancelled for the second year; and the Multiplication Tables Check postponed once again. All of these were the right decisions, considering what children, families and staff have been through. However, they have left many more gaps in what was already a very weak wall.

Now that schools have fully re-opened, some have called for a return to normality as quickly as possible. In many cases this will mean the dreaded phrase 'catch-up', particularly for current Year 5 and Year 1 children preparing for SATs at the end of 2021/22. This is the wrong way to approach it. Too much has happened for us simply to return to the way things were. There should be assessment of course, but the system we have in place at the moment is flawed, not just because of its design but also because of the gaps created by the pandemic.

If we return to 'normal' next academic year, what will it look like? We can assume that the Reception Baseline (RBA) and KS1 SATs will both take place and our current Year 5 children will take their KS2 SATs. We will then be able to look at their attainment data. We would have to go back three years to 2019 to compare it, but it would be there. However, the current Year 5 took the new KS1 SATs; that means we would be looking at a different progress measure than was used in 2019. There will be no shared meaning, which should be the purpose of any summative assessment system.



MARK CHATLEY HEADTEACHER

THE WEAK WALL OF ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

What about our current Year 4 children when they take SATs in 2022/23? Much of the same will apply. We will have some attainment data, so we could compare it with the previous year; we would also have the new progress measure, so we could compare that with the previous year, too. In 2022/23, we have a slim chance of shared meaning. That, however, is where

“We aren’t comparing apples with apples – we aren’t even comparing apples with pears. Surely now is the time to throw out the whole shopping trolley?”

the problems really begin!

Our current Year 3 children did not sit the KS1 SATs in 2020 due to the first lockdown. So, when they sit their SATs in 2024 there will be no progress data whatsoever. There will be some attainment data, which can be useful, but this will not factor in the huge discrepancies between schools with different intakes. Many schools make fantastic progress from low starting points, but this still shows only as attainment that may be lower than national average. This is not only inequitable – it does not create any shared meaning of the assessments.

Our current Year 2 children will be in the same position, as KS1 SATs have been cancelled in 2021. So, for two years we will have to change the way we look at the Year 6 outcomes data completely. The gaps in the wall are becoming more pronounced.

But never fear! When our current Year 1 children come around to Year 6 in 2026, they will have KS1 SATs scores and we will finally return to both attainment and progress measures last seen in 2022/23. This will also be the same for our current Reception children who, thankfully, did not have to sit the RBA at the start of the current school year.

This could be the point where we could start thinking again about shared meaning... but unfortunately not.

Children starting school in September 2021 are due to sit the RBA on their arrival. The government’s plan is for this to form the new progress measure for schools between Reception and Year 6. It’s important to point out that no plans have ever been published showing how a short test in English and maths taken at the age of four can be used as a comparable measure to the results of three days of tests taken at the age of 11. What’s more, the idea of a shared meaning will once again be decimated by another change in the way the outcomes of assessments are reported.

There are many aspects to the debate about primary assessment. However, it’s hard to look past two points. Firstly, if testing at primary school is an accountability measure and, as Nick Gibb claims, *does not have an impact on children’s lives*, then perhaps we need to spend our time on things that do. Secondly, for an accountability measure to be used well, it needs to be consistent and create a shared meaning. With *five* different models for progress measurement in the space of nine years, this is simply impossible. We aren’t comparing apples with apples – we aren’t even comparing apples with pears. Surely now is the time to throw out the whole shopping trolley?

THE WEAK WALL OF ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

School Year	Assessments	MEASURES			
		Pupil Progress	Pupil Attainment	League table	
2018/19	KS1 & KS2 SATs			vs 2017/18	
2019/20					
2020/21					
2021/22	RBA, KS1 & KS2 SATs			only vs 2018/19	
2022/23	RBA, KS1 & KS2 SATs				
2023/24	RBA & KS2 SATs			Incomplete vs 2022/23	
2024/25	RBA & KS2 SATs			only vs 2023/24	
2025/26	RBA & KS2 SATs			only vs 2022/23	
2026/27	RBA & KS2 SATs				
2027/28	RBA & KS2 SATs	*	*	no comparable years	
2026/27	RBA & KS2 SATs	*	*		

RBA = Reception Baseline Assessment
KS1 = Key Stage 1
KS2 = Key Stage 2
*** = no plan on how this will be measured using RBA**

SEND AND SATS: THE WORST OF ALL WORLDS

JEREMY BARNES, HEADTEACHER, ALL SAINTS CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL, LIVERPOOL

- **For children with SEND (special educational needs and disability), a primary education focused on SATs and league tables can lead to the worst of all worlds: they must accept a severely narrowed curriculum and miss out on the opportunities that could support them**
- **Headteachers, under the pressure of a results-driven accountability system, may even be unwilling to accept pupils with SEND**
- **There are better ways than SATs to measure accountability for spending on SEND**

Whether parent, pupil or teacher, we're continually told that choice is good, and that a deregulated system allows more of it: more competition, more choice – a rising tide lifts all boats.

But what if your choices lead to perverse incentives? What if the choices available to you are all bad ones?

Because this is what it must feel like if you're a pupil with learning difficulties in Year 6, and this is what it definitely feels like if you're the headteacher of a school with a high proportion of pupils with special educational needs. I'm talking SATs, of course. Here's what choices mean for me as a headteacher:

Firstly, the choice of curriculum. So many schools accept the overwhelming pressure of league tables and, sadly, it leads them to narrow the curriculum, possibly as early as Year 4. So, if you're a child with learning difficulties, you might be deprived of many learning opportunities such as music, dance and drama that could unlock potential, confidence and talent. Instead, you are told to do more of the same in areas where you already struggle. Not a great choice.

But it doesn't stop there. If you have very severe learning difficulties you will be almost certainly be taken out of most lessons in Year 6, and probably Year 5. The constant cycle of exam preparation means that it would be almost abusive to put the child into that environment, even with support.



JEREMY BARNES HEADTEACHER

“Because of SATs, many schools actively push against the admission of pupils with SEND (special educational needs and disability), knowing the impact it will have on overall results”

SEND AND SATS: THE WORST OF ALL WORLDS CONTINUED

The critic might counter this with, “Ah, but if you had included these children earlier in their education, and your mastery teaching was good enough, these pupils would now be able to work alongside their peers!”

Unfortunately, those who pontificate from the sidelines have no idea of just how severe some children’s learning difficulties are, neither have they any idea just how many mainstream primary schools are trying to address this with pitiful resources.

“There is no purpose for SATs in the education of pupils with special educational needs, especially those with learning difficulties. Worse than that, they can have damaging perverse consequences”

Which provides a neat link to my second point: the choices made by schools regarding pupil admissions.

I would argue that *because* of SATs many schools actively push against the admission of pupils with SEND, knowing the impact it will have on overall results. In 2019, we took a pupil into our Enhanced Provision – a child who had missed his entire Reception year because the school had said they could not meet his needs. The pupil is now in Year 2, integrated into his mainstream class for the full curriculum. Admittedly, even with fabulous progress, he is unlikely to hit his standardised score measures (and will therefore be

deemed a failure by many), but the fact that he was out of the school system for a whole year didn’t help. I’m convinced that the school’s cry of ‘*we can’t meet his needs*’ is often driven by a desire to achieve high SATs indicators.

This is not a one-off, and I have some sympathy with fellow headteachers. Their reputations – and possibly careers – rely on good test data. The current system takes no account of the proportion of pupils with significant learning difficulties. I also think that there is an institutional scepticism in whether some of these learning difficulties exist, and that they are in some way exaggerated to provide a convenient excuse for poorer test performance.

I do have a sceptical disposition, and I would be the first to call out schools that are labelling pupils as SEND incorrectly, but if you visit my school you will see children whose needs are incredibly acute. I’m in awe of the staff who educate them every day.

Yet these same children will be given a score of zero in the SATs, and this zero will bring down the cumulative score of the year group. What message does this send out?

And what of the choice of accountability?

As with so much of life, the pandemic has taught us an awful lot about the future. For parents of pupils with SEND, they will have seen how technology can shape the relationship between school, pupil and home. To varying

SEND AND SATS: THE WORST OF ALL WORLDS CONTINUED

degrees of success, a more personalised curriculum for pupils can now be shared almost in real-time with parents through the technology available to schools.

This is the front line of accountability, direct to the parents themselves. There's a real opportunity to strengthen this partnership. We don't need to wait for SATs results to tell us this.

The second line of accountability is to the taxpayer. I accept that considerable sums of extra funding support many pupils with SEND, and therefore it is understandable that schools should be held to account for the way the money is spent. Firstly, we have local authorities who still have statutory responsibility for this. Secondly, we have Ofsted, who inspect schools on precisely this prospectus. And thirdly, it's back to the parents again who have a central say in the allocation of funding.

So, it's wrong to say that SATs play a major role in the accountability for SEND spending and/or pupil progress.

There is no purpose for SATs in the education of pupils with special educational needs, especially those with learning difficulties. Worse than that, they can have damaging perverse consequences: they can narrow the curriculum; dissuade schools from being truly inclusive; and pull us away from better methods of accountability for spending decisions.

“The use of SATs as an accountability yardstick, as an indicator of school quality, as a way of collecting meaningful data, is flawed and corrosive”

Schools should be able to use SATs for their own internal assessments, for those pupils able to access the tests. But the use of SATs as an accountability yardstick, as an indicator of school quality, as a way of collecting meaningful data, is flawed and corrosive.

And all of this is made even worse by the compilation of 'best schools' tables in both local and national media.

Another bad choice.

HOURS WASTED IN THE QUEST TO TEST

KULVARN ATWAL, HEADTEACHER, HIGHLANDS PRIMARY SCHOOL, ILFORD

- **Approximately 20% of teaching time is spent preparing children for SATs**
- **Children are being trained to pass tests rather than develop a love of learning**
- **Teacher assessment can provide a nuanced, balanced view of children's progress**
- **We should spend time enabling children to develop creative and critical thinking**

It would be possible to improve our Year 6 children's learning in preparation for secondary education if we didn't have the distraction of external tests. Children spend more hours in Year 6 learning English and maths than they will be expected to do in Years 7, 8 and 9. I would argue that a minimum of five hours per week are spent preparing children for SATs – approximately 20% of the teaching timetable. Just imagine the impact of this time if we were able to implement a broader and more balanced curriculum.

What's more, SATs week in May significantly reduces the length of the school year; teachers must rush to complete the curriculum up to five weeks before the end of term. Not only does this mean that the results sent to secondary schools are not an accurate picture of where pupils are when they leave primary in July, it also means that the period following SATs could be better

spent ensuring children have the time to fully absorb and understand the English and maths concepts tested via SATs.

Meanwhile, this tendency to narrow the curriculum in order to prepare children for SATs means that schools have to place far too much focus on English and maths at the expense of other areas of the curriculum. Essentially, children are being trained to pass tests rather than develop a love of learning within each subject.

I don't necessarily think it is wrong to test children. I do think it's important, however, to consider *how* we test our children. We need to arrive at a better balance between testing and developing wider skills. There remains considerable pressure on schools to demonstrate high levels of pupil attainment and progress, and there is too great an emphasis on the outcome of the KS2 tests.

We should use tests – which can be centrally produced – *as part of a portfolio of evidence* collated by teachers to demonstrate children's attainment and progress. We trust teachers to assess writing in Year 6, so why not trust them to do the same for our children in maths and reading, too? Tests used alongside strong teacher assessment can provide a nuanced, balanced view of children's personal development and attainment. Take the time to build their engagement and enjoyment of reading. Take as many opportunities as possible to engage them in quality dialogue.



KULVARN ATWAL HEADTEACHER

HOURS WASTED IN THE QUEST TO TEST CONTINUED

By moving away from single, high-stakes SATs, not only will our children have more time and space to immerse themselves in deep and meaningful learning they will experience a more enjoyable and fulfilling education. Instead of focusing on preparing children for written examinations, we can spend time on enabling them to establish the skills of lifelong learning, including opportunities to develop creative and critical thinking. As we look now to recovery, in light of the months of lost learning and increased class inequalities across society and, crucially, in education, now is the opportune moment to pause, reflect, review and consider alternatives to the arcane formal assessment system.

08

UNION LEADERS & MPS: CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

Geoff Barton, General Secretary, ASCL

Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary, NEU

Paul Whiteman, General Secretary, NAHT

Daisy Cooper MP, Liberal Democrats

Flick Drummond MP, Conservatives

Emma Hardy MP, Labour

Caroline Lucas MP, Green Party

GEOFF BARTON, GENERAL SECRETARY, ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL AND COLLEGE LEADERS

The long-term impact of the Covid crisis on the learning and mental health of our children and young people won't be known for some time.

But what we do know is that primary teachers and other staff need the time, trust and space to help children settle back into the rhythms and routines of school life without the distraction of KS2 tests and accountability measures.

The temporary changes made by the government to primary testing in 2020 and 2021 – most notably, suspending SATs – raise the question of why such things ever need to return.

As identified in More Than A Score's campaign, 'Change to the system is long overdue'.

Whilst we don't underestimate the damage and trauma caused to the lives of children, the pandemic has also brought opportunity for permanent change to a primary testing regime that is demonstrably not fit for its original purpose.

This should become our Covid legacy.

KEVIN COURTNEY, JOINT GENERAL SECRETARY, NATIONAL EDUCATION UNION

Covid-19 has been a catastrophe but also a revelation.

Amid the suffering, we have learned many things: that poverty and inequality are not just abstract ideas but real experiences that work against the possibility of learning; that many schools have managed to rise to the challenges of the pandemic and prioritise the welfare of their pupils; that 'recovery' will be a long and many-stranded process.

The educational system that existed pre-Covid is not best suited to see us out of the pandemic. Even before March 2020 we knew that the attainment gap between poor and better-off pupils was no longer closing. We knew teachers were deeply discontented with the curriculum they had to teach and the style they had to use to teach it. We knew about the pressures of accountability and the stresses they placed on teachers – and pupils.

These problems are now more acute than ever. Who would think that, faced with the need to care for, re-engage and re-energise pupils, the best we can do is not just return to our previous test-driven way of organising the primary curriculum, but add new tests to it? Yet this is what the government proposes, telling schools to prepare for the return of SATs and announcing the introduction of Baseline Assessment for children entering Reception, as well as a multiplication check in Year 4.

As a society, we are in danger of sleepwalking into a future that will be harmful to our children, deepen inequalities, and place obstacles in the way of schools that are trying to develop a learning environment fit for our new times.

It doesn't have to be like this. The NEU has long supported More Than a Score. It's a movement that has reached out with increasing success across the whole of education to involve parents, headteachers, teachers and researchers in a campaign to replace the testing system that holds back the development of our primary schools. These are the voices we can hear in this dossier, making the case for three urgent and essential reforms.

PAUL WHITEMAN, GENERAL SECRETARY, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HEAD TEACHERS

NAHT have a long standing position that the current system of primary assessment is in need of reform. Currently there are too many statutory assessments throughout a child's time in primary school, and these distract from teaching and learning, rather than enhancing it.

The pandemic, and the cessation of SATs for two years, has given us all an opportunity to pause and reflect on the current system. We agree that we should not simply 'flick a switch' and revert to how things were before.

For too long assessment has been too closely linked to high-stakes accountability and NAHT has for many years highlighted the negative effects and perverse incentives that such a system creates. Our own accountability commission found that the current system limits ambition, incentivises self-interest, deters talented staff from work in the toughest areas, narrows the curriculum by encouraging teaching to the test, diverts attention from teaching and learning, drives good people from the profession and does little to give reassurance about standards.

Whilst each of our organisations will have differing views about what a future assessment system should look like in practice, we will all agree that now is the time to think clearly and carefully about creating a system that is fit for purpose in a post-pandemic world.

DAISY COOPER MP, LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

After more than a year of most students learning primarily from home, the transition back to in-person teaching represents a pivotal moment for pupils and teachers, and an opportunity to think afresh about how our education system works.

It's wonderful to see all children back in schools and to observe the huge efforts made by teachers to welcome them back; but there's no hiding the fact that the emotional and educational recovery from the pandemic will take time. It is, therefore, vital that policymakers find ways of ensuring that already over-stretched teachers have more time to teach their pupils, not just test them.

Unfortunately, the decision to place statutory testing at the core of the UK's educational recovery means that students will barely have a moment to reacquaint themselves with their teachers before being forced to jump through the DfE's numerous bureaucratic hoops.

Bold ideas are needed in order to help children with the rest of their academic journey after the year they've had. And we already know, for example, that children's learning experiences have varied so much that the disadvantage gap has widened.

As such, the decision to place Baseline, SATs and other statutory tests at the heart of the Education Department's recovery programme is a backward step.

This is why I support the three recommendations in this report – in particular, the call for an independent review of the primary assessment system is vital if we are to seize the opportunity to build back better.

FLICK DRUMMOND MP, CONSERVATIVES

Extracted from The Future of Education report for One Nation Conservatives

SATs are a good indicator of progress but should there be more flexibility? At present they are largely used as an accountability measure for schools. We have Ofsted for evaluating schools. The focus on mastery of subjects is much welcomed, but rather than having national testing at 11 through SATs, surely it would be better to evaluate a pupil's progress ongoing? Similar to GCSEs, time spent preparing for SATs could be better used for teaching subjects in depth. Testing is good, but should be designed as a tool for feedback to individual teachers and schools, rather than being used to monitor and penalise schools. Local authorities, MATs and Ofsted could monitor this over time, but would leave it up to the schools to determine how to use the data, rather than making it public. Children develop at different rates throughout their school career, so tests and coursework can be used to monitor how the individual is performing.

If testing were more relaxed, teaching could be more wide ranging and could take account of pupils' interests and their local areas, for example, within the National Curriculum.

EMMA HARDY MP, LABOUR

The pandemic has reached into every part of our lives and we currently have little way of knowing which changes will be permanent or which temporary, which profound or which trivial.

Education has been severely affected. A whole generation of parents has come up close and personal with the modern curriculum, its contents and the expectations on pupils. While experiences have been varied, the consensus seems to be that both teachers and children have had a tough job.

When schools closed the first time round, the immediate question was how to make up for the 'lost learning'. Over a year on, more fundamental questions are being asked. What, exactly, have children missed out on? What is learning? And what role does the child's experience at school play in their emotional and social development?

In my last years in primary education, I grew increasingly concerned about the reductive view of children as 'empty vessels' and education as the straightforward task of filling these vessels with knowledge. This approach showed increasingly less regard for any notion of child development, either cognitive or emotional, and has resulted in children being treated as mini adults. Five-year-olds now sit in rows receiving 'chalk (or, rather, interactive whiteboard) and talk' from the front of the class and 'improving standards' is as simple as 'delivering' more knowledge at an earlier age. It is the philosophy – if you can describe it like this – that sees longer school days and shorter summer holidays as the way to ensure a 'better' education.

It is important to remember that teaching was in the midst of a recruitment and retention crisis before Covid-19 arrived. There was also an epidemic of mental health problems among our young people. Currently, the pressures and expectations of 'performance' begin early in a child's educational life and never let up.

How can a primary school focus on wellbeing, on the whole child, on a broad and engaging curriculum, when it lives and dies on its English and maths SATs results? As we recover from a pandemic where we have seen the true value of schools in the social and emotional wellbeing of children, do we really want SATs results to remain the key judgement of what makes a school 'good'?

SATs are arbitrary, flawed and narrow. They epitomise elevating that which can be easily measured and dismissing that which cannot. They are also meaningless. I have yet to meet a secondary school headteacher who uses the SATs results at face value and does not instruct teachers to carry out their own internal assessment of their pupils. Surely this would be a more effective use of the money spent on SATs?

We can do better than this. Our children and our teachers deserve better than this. We should not be contemplating a return to how things were, and it is my fervent hope that the time has come for much-needed change.

CAROLINE LUCAS MP, GREEN PARTY

The months of home-schooling during coronavirus have been an eye-opener for many parents. Not only as regards how hard teaching is, but also what we expect our children to learn, such as the past progressive tense or the difference between a subordinating conjunctive and a coordinating conjunctive. If educationalists had been charged with coming up with a method of squeezing the joy out of learning, this would be it.

But that's not all. An ideological obsession with competition in our primary schools has led to a testing regime that is mainly designed to pitch schools against each other. It is the wrong approach in a modern, progressive, child-centred education system.

This year, more than ever, this approach needs to be abandoned. When children start the new school year in September, they will have been through 18 months of disrupted schooling. Teachers face a huge challenge in trying to make up for this gap and get our children back on track. This is completely the wrong moment to put them through the additional stress of SATs and baseline tests.

Teacher assessment has been agreed for older students who are unable to sit public exams. The same principle needs to apply to primary school. External SATs exams should be scrapped in favour of teacher assessments that actually enhance children's learning rather than start them on the testing treadmill.



morethanascore.org.uk
campaign@morethanascore.org.uk
press@morethanascore.org.uk