

Are tests damaging the school system?

Mike Taylor, former primary school teacher and director of SAM Learning discusses independent revision through e-learning and how this puts children back at the centre of the learning process.

The recent report entitled 'Test and Assessment' from the select committee for Children, Schools and Families chaired by Barry Sheerman has stirred up a hornet's nest of debate again about the relevance of league tables.

As long as anyone can remember there has always been testing of one form or another within the school environment. From verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests to the 11 plus, a system has always been in place to benchmark a child's progression. However, the 1980s brought with it a dramatic change, opening up schools to external scrutiny by publishing the test results in the national and local media.

Putting children at KS2 through SATs in English, maths and science is viewed by the DCSF as benchmarking an individual's – and by extension, a school's – performance. However, is there really any benefit to be gained for the learner, teacher and school from publishing these results? Do the pressures associated with the need to reach the top of the league table make schools and teachers lose sight of the whole purpose of testing – that of identifying gaps in skills and knowledge?

The Test and Assessment report highlights these concerns calling for a reform in the school performance tables for primary schools. It recommends that accountability should be based on a wider range of measures, such as teacher performance and Ofsted reports.

Schools

The Government's decision to publish the results of the Key Stage 2 tests nationally seeks to play schools off against each other. The pressures associated with this highly visible performance-related process, coupled with the pressure from governors and parents who want their children to attend the higher achieving schools, is enormous.

England is now isolated from the rest of the UK: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland do not use Key Stage 2 tests in the same way. Scottish assessments are conducted when the pupil is considered to be ready. They are marked internally and the results kept private. In Northern Ireland, SATs are taken but the results are not published.

Primary teachers at present are pressured into focusing all their attention on preparing for exams rather than teaching. However, teachers would prefer to be teaching the curriculum and incorporating testing as a means of identifying the skills and knowledge gaps.

Parents

It's not just teachers and educationalists who study the league table results intently, it is parents too. They read the tables and know exactly where their local schools rank within the LA. Understandably, they will want their child to attend a good school but, basing their choice on league table alone, they might consider applying to a school further away.

The Learner

There is no harm in children attaining good results for personal reasons, either striving to do well for themselves, or for their parents. However there is harm when the pressure to achieve is just for the school.

Children accept that these tests are part of school life and we have seen significant evidence that they are motivated in getting ready for them. A recent report by independent research charity Fischer Family Trust (FFT) on the impact of e-learning on pupil attainment in online test practice and revision not only confirms that e-learning dramatically boosts attainment levels, but interestingly, that it benefits pupils with low prior-attainment levels the most.

The FFT study is the largest independent research study of its type in the UK. It utilises the results of 28,929 Year 6 students from 947 schools that took their KS2 tests in May 2006 and compares their actual results and their use of SAM Learning on line exam practice and revision service against their predicted results based on gender, ethnicity, KS1 results and FSM entitlement.

The beauty of e-learning is that children are encouraged to revise independently, whether in lessons, lunch breaks, or even at home. Pupils score their own performance and compete against themselves, using guidance to improve their score from each question by getting instant feedback about their answers.

Struggling pupils are given ownership of their learning and the freedom to work on the subject areas in which they are least confident, rather than being limited to revising the same topics as the rest of the class.

The creation of individual learning programmes is proven to work; the FFT research tells us that half of SAM Learning revision happens at home. Children would not put in hours voluntarily if they did not enjoy it or think that it wasn't important to do so.

There is a positive relationship between the use of e-learning and pupils' progress. The research showed the greatest impact occurred when pupils experienced 'ten' or more task hours of e-learning usage: children achieved significantly higher test scores than similar prior-attainment pupils nationally. Just over two per cent more pupils achieved Level 4+ and 1.6 per cent more pupils achieved level L5+ compared to comparable pupils nationally.

Primary schools are experiencing major changes as the school day extends outside the traditional six hours to embrace breakfast and after-school activities. Redby Primary School in Sunderland subscribed to SAM Learning and it was first introduced in ICT lessons with Year 5 and Year 6 classes to show them how to use it. Once pupils became familiar with the programme, it was developed into homework delivery, with extended school clubs being introduced for children who do not have computers at home.

Parents at this school were invited in to see how the e-learning provision worked so they could take an active part in their child's homework. A positive outcome here

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was that the number of children who had previously failed to hand homework in on time was noticeably reduced.

As well as seeing improvements amongst pupils, the school also found it to be an ideal ready made resource for teachers, allowing them to set homework at the click of a button, homework that required less marking – a positive for teachers. Now the school is using SAM Learning with pupils from Year 3 upwards.

Pupils are no longer restricted to the traditional school day but are taking learning outside the classroom and outside the hours. Extended school clubs remove barriers to learning, giving pupils the freedom to help themselves in subject areas they may struggle with and help them to reach their full potential.

In response to the report, Schools Minister, Jim Knight is defending SATS saying that the “Principle of national testing is sound.” It looks like SATs or the process of testing is here to stay, so it is important to place the learner at the centre of the process and provide teachers with the tools to ease the revision procedure. The real debate is whether league tables are damaging our schools, teachers and children for political ends

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In a nutshell

There is continued criticism of the publication of league tables and the current system of testing. The report ‘Test and Assessment’ by Barry Sheerman is critical of the current environment and recommends accountability that is linked more firmly with teacher performance and Ofsted reports.

Testing should be about identifying skills and knowledge gaps rather than for the school. A recent study by the independent research charity Fischer Family Trust focused on the use of e-learning in relation to pupil attainment. The FFT research demonstrated the benefits of e-learning as something children were electing to complete at home around areas where they lacked confidence. The results suggested that the proportion of children gaining higher test levels was greater when e-learning had been used for a significant period of time.

The use of e-learning does not alter the fact that league tables may well be damaging our schools but it does provide a means by which children and teachers can assist the revision process

About SAM Learning

SAM Learning offers comprehensive online learning courses for SATs, GCSEs and A Levels and is currently used by over 600,000 learners and 2,000 schools across the UK. SAM Learning is the market leader in eLearning in Secondary Schools in the UK. SAM stands for Self-Assessment Method, a uniquely powerful learning methodology based on exam practice and self-marking that’s proven to raise achievement in schools.

The company’s mission is to help raise achievement in UK schools by providing high value services that reduce workload for teachers and school managers while enabling learners to take more responsibility for their results.

Friendly, professional help desk staff and a large team of consultants ensure that clients using the SAM Learning service make the most of their investment.

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By Jane Bayley

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