

Backlash against testing regime

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Headteachers and parents are hungry for change from the culture of Sats and league tables

OPPOSITION TO the key stage 2 national tests was almost universal among those interviewed for the interim Primary Review, with only the children having anything good to say about them.

"Children should be tested to show that they have done well and have been listening," said one child.

Another said: "We need Sats to find our potential and gaps in our understanding."

The tests, which began in 1995, have always had a dual role. They measure pupils' progress but are also part of an accountability framework, giving information to parents and taxpayers about how schools compare. Heads highlighted this accountability aspect the creation of league tables as the real difficulty.

Parents also deplored the tests. One said: "Sats only benefit estate agents." But they also recognised the tests as a passport to success. In one area, an affluent south London suburb, a parallel schooling system had sprung up dedicated to maximising children's success. Here, many older pupils had private coaching for competitive entry exams to state grammar and independent secondary schools.

The "Sats problem" is just one of 44 questions that the primary review will tackle. One solution is already under way. Trials of progress tests have begun in 500 schools. These tests are given when ready and there are different tests for each level. Current tests are given on set dates in May and there is one paper for pupils assessed at levels 3, 4 and 5.

All schools are now required to set targets for the percentage of pupils making two levels of progress in English and maths. New national targets were set this week at 90 per cent making the expected progress in English and 84 per cent in maths by 2011.

Assessing progress rather than just attainment may address the concern of governors who, the review found, believed the current tests "discriminated against those children most in need of support".

But the initiative does nothing to address concerns about a narrow curriculum. Some heads said the pressure of tests rippled back into Year 5. Teachers felt that they "turn the final year of primary schooling into the wrong kind of educational culmination a year of cramming and testing".

Teachers wanted attitudes and skills such as being sociable and thinking critically to be the priority for primary education. They also wanted more freedom to adapt the curriculum to local circumstances.

The current resurgence of themed teaching was mentioned, although some heads and deputies were cynical about this.

Heads wanted teachers who adapted the curriculum, took risks and planned carefully but were flexible. Children valued teachers who made it clear what they were doing and why.

SOME KIDS ARE STILL HAVING A BALL WITH OR WITHOUT SATS

"I go around a lot of schools," said Richard Rowe, head of Holy Trinity CofE Primary School in Guildford. "I really do find an increasing fear of tables and Sats and dry, narrow curricula. I tend to be depressed by a lot of what I see but within that there are a lot of bright lights; teachers doing exciting things and children taking a genuine enjoyment in learning."

Julia Penstone-Smith, Year 6 teacher, is in her third year of teaching after taking the Graduate Teacher Programme. She said: "The Sats are inevitable you have to do them. I am slightly apprehensive as I've just come into Year 6 and I'm not sure what to expect."

"Our curriculum is topic-based and links in as many life skills as possible. The GTP was fantastic because you learn something on Friday and on Monday you are in the school practising it."

Faye Rodgers, 11, who is in Year 6, said: "The school is very relaxed and fun. We call the teachers by their first names."

"I think the children do respect them just as much as if they called them Mr or Mrs. I think it will be quite hard in secondary school not to do it."

"I'm not worried about the Sats. Teachers don't really talk about them that much."

Faye's mum, Gillian Rodgers, is a teaching assistant specialising in PE. She said: "There is a huge focus these days on the negative aspects of childhood. But we have some fantastic children and a lot of children are confident and involved in school life a lot more than I was as a child."

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Photograph: Robin Hammond