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Too much testing 'harms primary school pupils'



Researchers say high-stakes tests had 'exaggerated' pupils' progress

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor

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The repeated testing of young children is seriously undermining their education, a major study reports.

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Hours spent drilling pupils increases "anxiety and stress", narrows the curriculum and has limited impact on standards, it is claimed.

Children aged 11 spend almost three weeks practising and sitting tests in their final year of primary school in England — while teachers waste five weeks preparing exams.

Despite claims that children are brighter than ever, researchers said the system of high-stakes tests had "exaggerated" pupils' progress, with up to a third given the wrong grades. In a damning conclusion, the report says £500 million spent on Labour's National Literacy Strategy had been wasted as children's ability to read was no better than the 1950s.

The findings are part of a two-year inquiry — led by Cambridge University — into the state of English primary schools.

Last night, head teachers said the assessment system was "no longer fit for purpose" and called for urgent reform.



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But the Government rejected the findings. Lord Adonis, the schools minister, said: "In recent years there have been unambiguous rises in results using standardised tests.

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It is only since National Curriculum tests were introduced that there is a solid basis of evidence showing improvement on a consistent basis. These improvements have been validated many times by independent experts."

National Curriculum tests in English, maths and science were introduced by the Tories for children of seven and 11.

Under Labour, researchers say the testing regime gathered pace as performance targets were set for individual pupils and schools — with billions of pounds spent on intense tuition in the three Rs.

Ministers say almost 100,000 more children now achieve primary school targets compared with 1997.

However, three studies published as part of Cambridge's Primary Review suggest that reforms have had a limited — and at times harmful — impact on young children. In one report, Prof Wynne Harlen, of Bristol University, said the consequences of children not hitting national targets "can be severe", with schools being placed in special measures or even closed.

As a result "teachers place emphasis on making sure that pupils' test results are maximised". To pass tests, lessons are often restricted to a narrow memorising of facts which excludes things that cannot be easily marked "correct or incorrect".

She said there was an "unavoidable conclusion that the current

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assessment system in England is inadequate both in what is assessed and how it is being assessed".

Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell, from Durham University, said the narrow nature of exams and the amount of teaching to the test produced "seriously misleading" results. The scope of tests are so limited that "as many as one third of pupils may be given the wrong level", it is claimed.

Martin Ward, of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "Everyone except the Government seems to have acknowledged that the assessment system is no longer fit for purpose. Urgent change is needed."

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sylvia evans · 7 years ago

Get back to the old methods of teaching the three 'R's. Stop testing before the age of 7, everyone. Every teacher in every class knows who are the clever, the lazy, the don't want to learn. Test them at the end of every year from age 7, then keep down those who do not pass. I think this will prevent them from getting into bad habits. If they are kept down year after year. After all who would want to be a teenager sitting next to a dummy? Until they learn, that is the answer. You won't get many parents boasting about this. I think it is disgraceful that so many children are leaving school unable to read and write. What a disgrace.

^ | v · Share ›



Ted Bottle · 7 years ago

Testing is fine so long as there is a good reason for it. SATS are stressful for the staff because they have to mark the tests and parents read too much into the lop sided results and schools wish to avoid being 'relegated'. Education should be about developing skills and a curiosity in what the world offers; accessible to apply such information in different circumstances. SATS satisfy none of these requirements. Children are bored with such a narrow curriculum at an age when they are normally eager to learn. It is amazing that the government is in denial that anything is wrong with their current education system. They spew out lots of facts and figures which can be made to prove anything. Small wonder,

getting them properly educated. Matters will not improve until there is some real accountability and children can be educated in schools which have an ethos of learning. Selection can take place for sporting and musical abilities, why not for academic ones? The academic standards of a banana republic?

1 ^ | v • Share >



R. Yeatley • 7 years ago

They're not being over-tested - but there is a hysterical reaction from schools, which results in cramming, i.e. being taught to pass the tests - this for obvious reasons ("league tables") is a real problem, and ought to be fixed by removing unwarranted sanctions.

^ | v • Share >



Chris Petrie • 7 years ago

Several contributors make the comments that "Britain" or "The UK" have too much testing in English schools. The Welsh and Scottish governments have stopped doing the "SATS" in England that they continue.

^ | v • Share >



David Walker • 7 years ago

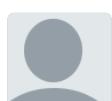
>>while children in my classroom dissolved into tears, and arrived for the tests white, scared/nerves<<

Really! Oh, the poor little dears!

It will be interesting to see how they cope in later life, when they have to take tests that I expect, driving tests, job interviews, that sort of thing.

Of course, they'll probably be offered counselling.

^ | v • Share >



Robert S • 7 years ago

There is nothing wrong with testing. It keeps the children on their toes provided it does not become the sole focus. As an ex-governor of a primary and junior school [10 years ago], it was very apparent that many teachers were driven by the preparation work and the accountability that was required. The attitude of some would be

in to get the results and the schools that I was governor at went from success to success already very successful but they needed to keep up with the movement of the goalposts structure of the intake

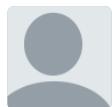
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Jarek P • 7 years ago

Welcome to the real world. I find it very hard to understand why British kids should be w and how examing them is so harmful, while kids on the continent study far harder, take learn far more and don't end up mentally disturbed.

^ | v • Share >



Jim Golightly • 7 years ago

Nothing wrong with testing I suspect it is the teachers that are overwraught and transmi

As for selection by lottery I have long thought that our MPs should be selected by lottery efficient and representative body to govern us

^ | v • Share >



Dee • 7 years ago

I have taught in several countries & the UK definitely has a culture of testing - for the wr

Children spend long periods of time being 'taught to the tests' to the exclusion of all other on end. Most primary school parents & teachers will confirm this.

The children are so 'groomed' to do well at the Sats exams that they can answer the test apply the knowledge.

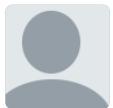
Many are bored senseless after months of working in a narrow educational environment possible for the school's ranking. Many are also awarded levels which parents & teachers their expertise in a subject.

Testing is important but the stress associated with getting the required (or higher) levels school in the top rankings & pass inspections is hardly worth it.

Many primary children will do little other than English, Math & Science till after the May exams. This is not balanced education.

It is time to re-think the testing.

^ | v • Share >



DS • 7 years ago

Did children taking the 11+, or their teachers, get this stressed? My year was the first not to have it. I don't know if this was first-hand experience. I don't recall my elder brother or cousins who did sit it getting stressed. This is just my perception.

If children really are vomiting with fear before these tests, what - or perhaps who - is incorrect?

^ | v • Share >



steve • 7 years ago

When I was at Primary School, a good few years ago in 1948 to 1954, we had a spelling test every week, well, certainly in the later few of those years. Has it harmed me? I like to think not. I have a different view of that. But the tests weren't the hugely formal prescribed stress filled events of our routine. We just got on with it.

What is wrong is the idea of targets and league tables and the competition for school results. That is where the stress is generated - by a target driven bunch of administrators imposed by a crackpot government.

^ | v • Share >



Mark • 7 years ago

I never sat a test until I was 12 years old, I read plenty of books simply because I loved them. The Government would be do better to remember that a watched pot never boils and if kids are forced to sit tests they will grow to hate it. Perhaps we should have national tests in video games that'll stimulate reading instead.

^ | v • Share >



Damian Beasley-Suffolk • 7 years ago

Our children used to attend a local school here in The Netherlands. Dutch primary schools

short, informal tests. Each subject is tested on a 6-week (or so) rota, so that if there are identified quickly and remedial action taken. The tests are staggered, so the children wait weeks. This helps the teachers keep track of their development, and the nature of the tests children almost looked forward to them, and to seeing how much they had learned. When well.

However, our children are no longer in the local schools. Why? Well, while the system in Netherlands suffer from having too little money, too few qualified teachers, resulting in a system of testing is simply not effective because there aren't enough people to make it when staff are ill because of the difficulties in getting replacements, so the children could 40. This was unacceptable.

The same circumstances apply in Britain, despite the enormous increase in funding due to This is the scandal. The UK mania for testing seems to spring from an obsession for paper filling bureaucracy rather than any strongly felt desire to teach children, hence its failure to know how students are progressing, and to know whether the available funds are being used neither is happening. I visit a couple of schools in the west of England regularly, and am buildings and the lacklustre staff (at least, the ones I have met), and I constantly wonder gone, and whose interests are actually being served. Certainly, neither teaching staff nor these arguments.

^ | v • Share >



Charmaine Stewart • 7 years ago

How pathetic! Examinations and tests are motivating forces which encourage students working and successful men and women have made England great. That has not been years. God help us all when this generation of over-pampered and underachieving students that those who initiated these programmes will be the first to suffer.

^ | v • Share >



Russ W • 7 years ago

Testing can and should take place at all levels - as it always has - its the mechanics are deeply flawed.

I was at school in the comprehensive system 35 years ago. We had tests at infant and

formal end of year exams at senior level). There were absolutely no stressed pupils who

The tests at under-11 level were run without prior warning, there was no test-specific plan or exam timetable. No pupil was aware that a test was about to take place until it had already started.

The tests weren't used for measuring the performance of one school against another, they were implemented by individual schools implementing the "false" requirement of "choice".

They were used to qualify the progress of individual pupils and to help with "streaming" between different classes, for entry into secondary schools, for entry into grammar schools, for entry into sixth forms, and for an internal measure of the performance of the school.

What was wrong with that?

^ | v • Share >



Phil • 7 years ago

No targets, no chance of measuring success. Incidentally listen to the many teachers who say that the tests are a waste of time, as a literacy hour.

^ | v • Share >



Anon • 7 years ago

Having applied these tests to children - gritting my teeth and patting shoulders while children dissolved into tears, and arrived for the tests white, shaking and vomiting with nerves - I produce statistics for government proof of political success, and are weighted according to information whatever to the school or the teacher and in no way benefits the child. I am resentful of the fact that we are being used, losing teaching time and undergoing a great deal of stress which is effectively propaganda. Of course the government won't ditch the tests, they will continue to insist on 'improvement' in just the same way as their statistics show the NHS having 'the best year ever'. They are trying to differentiate between children and production line manufacture - why on earth do you want to do that?

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dinerouk@yahoo.com • 7 years ago

It's Target Tony to blame-again!

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