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Teachers: more testing, more tracking, more tension

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At the turn of the year Labour announced a significant change to school-testing arrangements for students aged 11 and 14. But will the scheme solve the problem of the old tests for students and teachers – stress and demotivation and lessons which are designed to “teach to the test”?

In 2004 pressure from parents and teachers forced alterations to testing-arrangements for seven-year olds, granting primacy to teacher assessment and giving teachers greater say in the timing and content of the National Curriculum (NC) tests their young students would face. The current changes have been implemented on the government's terms.

Under them, students will be “tested when ready” rather than at the end of a Key Stage.

A student will be deemed “ready” when in their teacher's opinion the student's work indicate they have moved from their current NC level to the next-higher level. The government expects all students to move “up” by at least two levels between the ages of 7 and 11 (Key Stage 2) or between 11 and 14 (Key Stage 3).

The Government claims that the new-style tests will be shorter than current SATs, but will still allow students to show they meet the demands of the NC level they are attempting to secure. Ten local authorities have begun to pilot the new system. If the pilots are judged a success, the new arrangements will be applied across English state-schools. Sooner rather than later old-style end-of-Key-Stage SATs will go.

“Testing when ready” might seem an advance on the current increasingly-discredited system of end-of-Key Stage testing. But it will mean more tests more often, with the inevitable consequence of more test-reading, more teaching-to-the-test. Increased use of NC testing within the Key Stage (alongside a host of other data-generating tests) will confirm the subordination of teacher-assessment and strengthen the features of the current assessment-system which serve to reduce students and their manifold complexities as people and learners to numbers, grids and graphs.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH NATIONAL CURRICULUM TESTING?

THE original NC-testing regime, implemented at the beginning of the 1990s and first revised in the face of a massive teachers' boycott in 1993, has been eroded significantly over the years. "National" testing is a myth. Scotland has its own assessment system, and that in Northern Ireland is different again. Wales diverged from the English set-up in 2004, and the Channel Islands are beginning to go their own way. NC testing is a legal requirement only in England's state schools; a majority of private schools have never involved themselves in NC testing, nor does the National Curriculum apply to them.

As the yearly round of school-testing has continued, evidence has built up to indicate that the current system generates undue stress and anxiety among students and works to demotivate the lower-attaining. Testing narrows the education all students receive and involves week after week of going over old ground in preparation for the tests, rather than enabling teachers to engage students with new aspects of the curriculum.

Studies suggest that NC testing works to lower rather than raise educational standards, notwithstanding the initial surge in the proportion of students reaching given NC levels year on year. New Labour made a great deal of political capital out of this "success", claiming it vindicated their dictatorial National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, whose intention was

specifically to increase test-scores. But much of this “success” appears now to be down to better test-preparation and increased teaching-to-the-test.

Teachers have felt compelled to replace educationally-beneficial activities with such test-reading partly because test-scores are used by the media to compile “League Tables” of schools. Public perception of primary schools is importantly affected by how their students do in the KS2 tests. “League Tables” (and hence NC testing) are seen by government as essential in underpinning their agenda of so-called “parental choice”, a misnomer since overwhelmingly schools select students through a range of mechanisms and at best parents can express a preference for the school they wish their child to attend.

In this environment ministers welcome the pressure “League Tables” place on schools. Along with NC testing they are supposed to drive up standards. The potential for League Tables based on students’ test-performance to skew the education children receive and narrow the curriculum is recognised internationally. So powerful is it, and so detrimental to good schooling, that some countries (such as Ireland) outlaw the practice of compiling even “unofficial” League Tables of school results.

Here the government routinely rejects any criticism of the current system of League Tables, tests and centralised targets (whereby the minimum percentage of students in each school who will attain at a given NC level is established by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and schools are required to do what is necessary to meet that target.) The system has delivered political gains for New Labour across most of the last ten years.

Ministers point to large percentage rises in the proportion of students attaining at given levels in Reading or Maths test. However, increases in student test-attainment now seem to have stalled, with around a fifth of eleven-year-olds over the past two years falling short of the level the government wants them to reach. This can be presented in the media as a failure of government policy. This lies behind the government's motive for changing the current system and attempting to focus attention not on the yearly cohort as a whole but on the "progress" of individual students "up" the NC levels.

THE "PERSONALISED LEARNING" MYTH

"TESTING when ready" meshes with talk about "personalised learning", spun as enabling teachers to suit the curriculum to the needs of the individual student. In reality this personalised learning will use a variety of tests to push the student into pre-determined categories ("gifted and talented", "under-achieving" etc) and construct for the student their "appropriate" trajectory through the system. (Government policy documents actually speak of "the right trajectory" for a student, as if their future learning and development were predictable on the basis of past performance in tests.)

Testing in this context is claimed to be benignly diagnostic. It will reveal student-needs and ensure that the student is on-track. You might think that this was the teacher's job, and moreover something teachers were well-placed to do since they spend the most time in sustained contact with students. But government sees

teaching as mere delivery, and pays lip-service to notions of teacher-assessment while continuing to undermine it.

Policy documents require that teacher-assessment be both capable of firm translation into NC levels and directly linked to pre-stated teaching-objectives. Genuine teacher-assessment on the other hand is likely to be a less hard-edged, more complex and nuanced process, rendering a more rounded and thorough, though always provisional, account of student capabilities.

NC testing is designed to present students in accordance with predetermined norms. It makes use of the apparently “objective” nature of numerical data to give a version of the student which cannot be authoritatively countered and is regarded as summative. Students will be pigeon-holed for their school career. It seems to me unsurprising that many students feel alienated from an education-system which persists in one-sidedly telling them in no uncertain terms exactly what they are.

The re-constituted NC testing arrangements are also likely to refine and embed the hierarchising effects of NC testing. These work to label students by so-called “ability”. More tests more often will reinforce not only the current widespread practice of grouping students into so-called “ability” sets, but boost calls from the Tories to return to a thorough-going “streamed” system.

The new arrangements may help underpin the “rationing” of educational opportunities, whereby scarce resources (such as teachertime) are directed towards students who are perceived to be around the borderline of important

benchmark-levels. These students are deemed to be “worth” more than others because their performance is seen as critically affecting a school’s League Table position.

AGAINST TESTING

OPPOSITION to NC testing has been stymied within the teaching-profession since the failure of the NUT’s attempted boycott in 2003. Academic criticism, however, continues. The current Primary Review, directed by Professor Robin Alexander, is the most wideranging and in-depth investigation into Primary Schools since the ground-breaking Plowden Report of forty years ago. More than thirty interim reports are to be published ahead of the final Report, and the first of these have begun to appear. Some of these papers re-state powerful evidence criticising NC testing. For example, they point to the persistent wide gap between high and low-attaining students, a problem known for several decades and left unremedied by New Labour’s policy of tests, targets and League Tables. Further evidence of test-induced stress (some of it reported by children’s charities) has been brought to light, and the government’s version of what constitutes “standards” in schools again shown to be damagingly narrow.

Right-wing media elements have picked up on some of these criticisms and used them to peddle a mendacious version of contemporary primary schooling, in which students continue to be failed by “incapable” teachers and government half-heartedness. The Sun even claimed that because one in five children did not secure a level 4 in their KS2 Reading SAT in 2007, this means that a fifth of children are leaving Primary School unable to read!

In fact, 93% of eleven-year olds attain at Level 3 on their NC Reading test this year, indicating that they can read at least in line with expectations for nine-year olds. What some students “failed” to show in their NC test was the ability to read for inference and deduction.

But that doesn’t mean they might not be able to do this in other contexts.

Those disseminating the materials from the Primary Review will need to continue to make clear that primary schools are doing well by their students in a range of ways, and could do even better if government paid heed to the range of criticisms and alternatives being put forward.

The Primary Review won’t conclude for another year, but already it is producing material which re-affirms the way New Labour, building on Tory ideas, has done harm at great expense to the education of school-students.

Teachers continue to suffer under policy-diktats and the drive by DCSF to micro-manage classrooms. The left has been slow, in my view, to generate and sustain an adequately integrated and compelling alternative discourse around the purposes and means of (primary/secondary) education. While important campaigning has continued in opposition to academies and trust schools, for example, and in support of Teaching Assistants as they struggle for decent pay and conditions, we have found it difficult to renew and then consolidate our version of what education is for and how it should be put into practice.

There is an urgent need to renew our challenge to the currently-dominant discourse in (school) education. This entails re-thinking for example notions of “ability” and “differentiation”, for even a commitment to “mixed-ability”

teaching can conceal a view of students as basically and unchangeably either bright or average or “less able”.

We need also to understand the debate around “assessment for learning” and its implications for how students involve themselves in their own learning, and intervene with our own more radical and emancipatory vision of democratic

education. Almost twenty years on from the implementation of the National Curriculum we ought also to be arguing for giving curriculum development

back to teachers, and re-asserting the view that teaching is not just a set of skills and competencies. There are doubtless many other areas where the left can and should be making more of the running.

The Primary Review continues. Its reports and evidence are available online. The Review’s director has invited contributions. Comrades, especially those with children attending primary school, should add their views, and encourage their children to do the same.

- www.primaryreview.org.uk

Publications:

[Solidarity 121, 8 November 2007](#)

Issues and Campaigns:

Testing and tables

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