

The impact of sats



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Special Study: What impact do Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) have on the education of primary school children in the final year of each Key Stage?

Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) have been an integral part of summative assessment in primary education since their introduction in the 1990s. These tests, occurring at the end of each of the first two Key Stages, usually take place in May, when Year Two children sit tests in English and Maths, and Year Six children are tested in English, Maths and Science.

The rationale for these tests was that the results should, first, ‘genuinely give information about how children were doing in the National Curriculum’ (Sainsbury and Sizmur, 1996). Secondly, these assessments should ‘provide an authentic reflection of the kinds of work children have to do in following the curriculum’ (Sainsbury and Sizmur, 1996). However, from the outset, SATs have attracted considerable criticism in the media, not only from teachers and parents, but also from education researchers and government officials (Yarker, 2003). This criticism stems from the notion that these groups do not believe that either part of the above rationale is being ideologically or practically adhered to. In the first instance, they argue that the most important reason for collating the test results is not to determine individual children’s attainment levels, but instead to compare the overall attainment of one school with others. In the second instance, they argue that the tests, and their implementation, do not accurately reflect the range of educational tasks undertaken by children in school: by posing a series of predominantly closed questions under strict, timed test conditions, all the test results indicate is a level of the children’s competence at taking tests, and not their ability in the subject in question.

According to Wintle and Harrison (1999), these test results are ‘ the most significant performance indicator used by teachers, inspectors, parents and other professionals.’ However, one major component group is missing from this statement: the children taking the tests. It is crucial to examine the issues surrounding the impact that SATs have on these children, so that an overall view of the situation can be established. These issues can be split into three broad categories. Firstly, it is important to consider how and why children’s learning is affected by SATs. Secondly, children’s attitudes, both towards this aspect of their schooling and likewise to the test itself, need to be discussed and analysed. Finally, it is vital to examine the emotional effects SATs have on children, and the causes and consequences of these effects.

One of the principal effects on children’s learning, according to research by Connors et al (2009), is the issue of children being ‘ taught to the test’ in the months and weeks preceding the eventual sitting of the SATs. This involves classroom activities such as children learning how to answer typical SATs questions and the taking of practice tests, in addition to the delivery of the National Curriculum in the relevant subjects. In some respects, this can be beneficial to children. For example, they should be well prepared for the type of questions that will be posed in the SATs; it might be concluded from this that they will gain higher marks. Moreover, it may positively impact on children’s behaviour, as argued by Hall et al (2004), where the taking of practice tests improves children’s concentration and greatly reduces classroom disruption, as they regularly need to display these attributes under test conditions.

There are, however, other respects in which the methodical approach of ‘teaching to the test’ may be disadvantageous to children’s learning. For instance, due to the importance of SATs for summative assessment purposes, teachers feel personally accountable for their pupils’ results (Connors et al, 2009). This is for two main reasons: firstly, they are responsible for the academic progress of the children in their class, and therefore feel that whatever marks these children achieve in their SATs reflect their competence as practitioners. Secondly, on a broader scale, they also feel pressurised into ‘teaching to the test’ in order to maintain or improve the school’s position in the SATs league tables, and also to meet national targets. This can have a negative impact on children’s learning as, during these heavily SATs-focused lessons, children are taught ‘examination technique rather than developing the knowledge and skills the test is designed to assess’ (Hall et al, 2004). This limits a holistic approach to their education, as this teaching method revolves around memory and repetition, rather than skills and application. Furthermore, because teachers are limited as to how far they can deviate from the curriculum, the scope for creativity in these lessons is greatly reduced.

Another way in which SATs impact upon children’s learning concerns the fact that an increasing percentage of the school timetable is being dedicated to the teaching of the SATs subjects, according to research by Webb (2006). Although English, Maths and Science, due to their long-established importance across all Key Stages, have always featured prominently in the school schedule, the danger exists that a disproportionate amount of the school week will be spent on the teaching and learning of these subjects,

primarily caused by the teachers' feeling of personal accountability (Connors et al, 2009). Consequently, the rest of the primary curriculum subjects, especially art, music and physical education (Webb, 2006) may not have as much time devoted to them. This would adversely affect the children's right to receiving a broad and well-balanced primary school curriculum. Taking this potential curricular imbalance a stage further, some schools organise weekend and after-school SATs clubs, and some parents enlist private tutors for extra SATs coaching sessions (Byrne and McGavin, 2004). On a positive note, these courses of action may help to increase children's confidence and competence in the target subjects. However, these constant levels of coaching, both during and after school hours, may change children's attitudes towards SATs-orientated teaching and learning, and their eventual participation in the tests themselves.

According to research by Connors et al (2009), some children, especially those taking the Key Stage Two SATs, regard both the prior preparation and the test itself to be ways of challenging themselves at school. This sense of 'challenge' can increase children's motivation and application levels in the classroom (Drummond, 2003), as children try to meet the demands of an increasing, more intense academic workload, and acquire new knowledge and skills. What is unclear, however, is whether these increased motivation and application levels are mirrored in non-SATs subjects. Another positive aspect of the 'challenge' of SATs is that many children associate hard work with higher marks (Webb, 2006), which can be an additional motivational factor. Although it could be argued that aptitude, rather than attitude, contributes to higher levels of achievement, it is nevertheless important to

encourage this positive thinking. This idea is extended on a social level by Byrne and McGavin (2004), who argue that the achievement of higher marks can add a competitive element to educational proceedings, as children try to achieve more highly than their peers do. However, it is important to note that this has the potential to cause emotional distress to the child who does not perform as well as others, even if the ‘competition’ is meant to be friendly and light-hearted.

In contrast, many children have a much more negative attitude towards SATs and the teaching and learning associated with it. Referring back to the ‘challenge’ of SATs, according to research by Hall et al (2004), some children, rather than viewing them as a challenge to be overcome, regard them instead as either ‘a bridge too far’ or, even worse, ‘a complete waste of time’. In the case of these children, these negative attitudes may be caused by a variety of factors. For example, they may be lower achievers who find the increased intensity of, and the amount of time devoted to, SATs preparation difficult to cope with. This can cause them to become disillusioned about the SATs, which, in turn, can have an adverse affect on their behaviour and motivation levels. At Key Stage Two level, many schools place children into ability groups in the SATs subjects (Webb, 2006); this can alleviate this problem to a certain extent, as their individual learning needs can be more appropriately catered for. Nevertheless, it could be argued that, although the level and pace of such learning would be more appropriate for lower achieving children, this solution does not directly address these children’s possible concerns about the amount of time allocated to the SATs subjects. A further concern for lower achieving children, according to Yarker

(2003), is that, if they do not achieve what they consider to be ‘ good’ marks in the tests themselves, they will be ‘ labelled as failures’. It is, however, important to clarify that these children are never ‘ labelled’ in this way by teachers, but by the children themselves, who are concerned about the effect that SATs results will have on their future, both academically and motivationally.

Another factor that may cause children to have a negative attitude towards the SATs is highlighted by Wintle and Harrison (1999), who argue that the concentration on SATs preparation is linear and regimented to such an extent that children no longer have any ‘ ownership’ of it. This can have a distinct attitudinal effect on the children. They may become disillusioned by the fact that, because of the focus on SATs work, they are simply undertaking activities and tasks for the sake of knowing how to do them for SATs purposes, rather than for the benefit of their own learning. Cullingford (2006) echoes this view, stating that, with regard to SATs preparation, ‘ children perceive their task in school as not so much to think as to guess what it is that the teachers want’.

Moreover, further research conducted by Cullingford (2006) suggests that many children, particularly those at Key Stage Two level, are surprisingly aware of ‘ the importance of SATs’ and even ‘ the significance of league tables’. It can therefore be argued that they consider SATs to be one of the most, if not the most crucial aspect of their schooling during the final year of each Key Stage. This attitude can have a positive or adverse effect on their commitment to the SATs and the preparation for them; again, this depends on the attitude and aptitude of individual children.

This surprisingly common awareness of the importance of both the SATs and the results they achieve in them is one way in which children can become not only attitudinally affected, but also emotionally affected by them. In this instance, because of the strong focus on preparing for the tests, children may feel pressurised, and in many cases excessively so, for two main reasons. Firstly, according to a study by Connors et al (2009), some children put themselves under pressure to perform well because they have ‘worrisome thoughts and concerns about the consequences of failure’ if they do not. It could be argued that this level of worry should have no place in the mind of a child of primary school age, although it does further illustrate the importance the children place on SATs. Secondly, many children realise that SATs results are important to their teachers; consequently, the children also perceive them as important (Webb, 2006). This realisation, generally speaking, is a subconscious one: the children are not told outright by the teacher that the SATs are important. Instead, the curricular focus on the preparation for the SATs signifies their importance in the children’s minds. Furthermore, if the children respect their teacher (the way they should in an ideal situation), then they may feel under pressure to perform well in the SATs to attempt to prove that their teacher has taught them well, thus enhancing their reputation. One final important point about this kind of pressure is that it may not necessarily have a negative effect on all children; conversely, some children may thrive on it, and work harder and achieve higher as a consequence.

It can be argued that any increase in pressure will increase the likelihood of stress and anxiety, particularly in the case of children, who will not have had

the experience of coping with such pressure increases at this stage of their lives. According to Yarker (2003), children, particularly at Key Stage One level, become stressed through constant 'teaching to the test' and test practice, due to both its intensity, and its implementation to the apparent exclusion of the rest of the curriculum. However, Byrne and McGavin (2004), whilst acknowledging the stress that this may cause to children, argue that it is the thought of, and the participation in, the tests themselves that cause the highest levels of stress and anxiety in children. In certain severe cases, research has even discovered a direct link between these SATs related stress levels that can be detrimental to the child's health and their life outside school, such as loss of sleep (Yarker, 2003), loss of appetite (Hall et al, 2004) and headaches (Connors et al, 2009).

With regard to children's emotions about the prospect of being formally tested, some children were 'excited' and were looking forward to taking the tests, according to a survey by Connors et al (2009). A possible reason for this could be the fact that they may regard the tests as the culmination of their hard work, and they offer them the chance to put their newly acquired skills and knowledge into practice. They can prove to themselves and to their teachers that they have learnt what the tests require them to learn. In contrast, other children can display signs of nervousness and apprehension during the period immediately prior to taking the tests (Connors et al, 2009). Reasons for this could include the fear of getting a 'poor' result, which may not only adversely affect their self-esteem, but may also make the child think that their teacher (and possibly their parents and their peers) will think less of them as a result. They may also worry that they have not worked

hard enough, or not achieved enough in the target subjects to obtain the level that they want to achieve. Furthermore, children can often have problems during the taking of the test itself (Byrne and McGavin, 2004), not only for the aforementioned reasons, but also due to other factors. For instance, many children, particularly at Key Stage One level, may find it difficult to formulate answers and recall previous learning and knowledge under the pressure of timed test conditions. Furthermore, if the child is not in a prepared, focused frame of mind before the test starts, this can affect their performance on the day, which could lead to a lower, potentially misleading test result.

In conclusion, it is clear from the evidence that primary schools take the process of preparing children for the SATs tests very seriously. However, the way in which this issue is approached depends on the individual school concerned, and the ways in which they implement their teaching and classroom procedures. One thing remains constant, though. Regardless of the methods used, and the reasoning behind them, SATs will have an academic, attitudinal and emotional impact on children's education in the final year of each Key Stage. Although the evidence available has predominantly shown a bias towards SATs having a negative impact in these respects, they can have a positive impact under the right physical and mental conditions. In the same way that the approach to SATs depends on the individual school, the level and the inclination of the impact depends on the individual child, and their individual level of aptitude, dedication, self-belief and resolve.

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