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Research Article

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# How Much Longer Will the Curriculum and Assessment Seesaw Remain Out of Balance in the English Primary Classroom?

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**Abstract**

*Drawing on a case study of one primary teacher's practice (1990- 2006) the author seeks to demonstrate the adverse effects on pedagogy as well as pupils' learning of Standardized Assessment Tests since they became the gold standard by which primary schools are judged. This insight into the adverse effect on her practice supports recent research findings that these tests continue to adversely impact on the education of disadvantaged pupils whilst also narrowing the curriculum and leading to teacher stress (Carleton et al, 2026). These researchers' definition of disadvantages is wider than that held by the Department for Education and Science. This is not a call for an abandonment of the tests but a reform to limit the negative effects of the present system.*

## 1. Background and Rationale

Prior to the implementation of the National Curriculum there were a flowering of grass roots ideas in England that fully involved primary teachers as professionals -the National Writing Project, the National Oracy Project, and the Language in the National Curriculum Project (LINC). These models of professionalism adopted the notion that 'ideas grow from seeds which need to be watered, weeded, nurtured and warmed by the sun of support and reflection' [1]. At the time researchers highlighted the lack of teacher expertise in classroom assessment procedures and pointed to the need for training but policy makers did not see classroom assessment as a priority [2,3]. It was not until 1999 that publications about assessment were written in an accessible form for those outside the academic community [4].

It would be wrong, however, to claim the complete absence of effective learning informed by informative classroom assessment practice, at this time, as extracts from the following article written by the teacher whose practice with Year 6 children is focused upon below.

## 2. The Last Wilderness

The intention behind the Last Wilderness project initiated by this teacher was to arrive at a performance piece incorporating dance, drama and music devised by the children and arising out of consideration of the theme of power [5]. The project lasted a whole term.

- During September, the focus was research, scientific work, experimenting with sound images and investigating the literacy form of fairy tales.
- In October 'The Last Frontier' (a documentary on the threats to Antarctica) was screened on TV and groups of children in the class dissected this for information. Their discovery that the rich nations of the world wished to exploit the Antarctic continent came as a shock, and they expressed their inability to understand why it was necessary to destroy the wilderness. Out of this was born the desire to demonstrate their concern to a wider audience. The Year 6 children themselves developed characters for the production through role play in drama. As a result, they were sensitive to the use of gestures, inflexion, and rhythm in delivery, even to the quality of voice. Parts were allocated collaboratively; all had contributed so no one person had a right to a role. In the selection for the Wise Woman for example, the children listened to each other speaking the scripted piece until one child's delivery, the choice was instant and unanimous:

**'It's her voice, it's the way her voice sounds. It sounds wise.'**

- By the end of November, working hard against the clock, the story was complete and the text and music finished. The children wrote the press release. After a week of rehearsals, the show went on accompanied by a program also written and edited by the class.

The final product was a fifty-minute performance of original music, drama and dance shown to a live audience on two nights. Spin-offs from the main project included a class poetry book, individual storybooks examining aspects of power, group books on polar history and geography, data on weather monitoring and the results of their scientific investigation. The creation of the final production involved the children in a collaborative process progressing through brainstorming, discussion (select/reject), research, improvisation (drama, song, drafting, testing), discussion (refinement), reworking, final product.

In 1999 when undertaking research for my doctorate in education I was able to study this teacher's literacy practice as well as the effect of ongoing outside influences [6].

By this time, she was the headteacher of a 7-11 Junior school with responsibility for teaching Year 6 pupils. Although the National Literacy Strategy had had an impact, she still retained a cheerful outlook on managing the school's curriculum as well as her own classroom practice [7].

' We have a whole school approach to it (curriculum)…each of us in turn builds on what has gone before…the difference once we have established the scheme of work (literacy) …and begun all working in the same way on new materials to support things meant that the children were all exposed to the same way of working and we knew what had gone before...that really did help us..'

**She added of herself**

'I feel confident…I constantly look for ways…evaluate my own practice…I constantly look for ways of improving it and making it better…being the coordinator for English and the head of the school I do feel in control'.

It is acknowledged that the teacher's mindset and the context within which she teaches affect not only her reactions to outside pressures but also the power relations operating within her classroom. At this time, she regarded policy changes and outside testing as a challenge to be managed so that she could get on with the real job of educating her pupils.

In the extract that follows she is encouraging a group of higher attaining children to read aloud with expression, taking account of punctuation. This incident shows how the teacher's feedback over a 'miscue' in reading can be managed positively and lead to new understanding without damaging the pupil's self-esteem [8].

| Teacher/pupil interaction | Commentary | Suggested attribution | Effect on pupils IRF initiation, response, feedback |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lucy :(reading from shared text) we had picked ourselves up now and were leaning on the parpet<br>Teacher : Ehh let's have a little think..a parapet it means it means the edge of something like a building…or a bridge has a parapet if it has sides which you stand and lean over the parapet or…have you been in a Castle?<br><br>Len/Joe:<br>>yes kind of< Teacher: and climbed up to sort of battlement heights?<br><br>Len/Joe >yes<<br><br>Teacher: and that edge.. that built up edge<br><br>Rachel: like the church tower<br><br>Teacher: Yes the church tower has a parapet..like a wall you can look over<br><br>Rachel: and it goes down and then up<br><br>Teacher: Well, it is there to protect you<br><br>Lucy: from fall | Lucy reads with expression but mispronounces a word<br><br>Teacher takes the attention away from the child and onto the word meaning. She encourages children to focus on examples of buildings with which they are familiar<br><br>The boys give a partial answer which is not followed up, but is taken by the teacher as confirmation that they're following what she is saying<br><br>Rachel links the description with something they are all familiar with the local church tower<br><br>Racel continues to visualize the shape of the wall whilst her teacher explains the function<br><br>Lucy, whose reading prompted this discussion, shows that she has been following this line of reasoning before continuing to read | Emphasis on working together, meaning of a word followed by exploration of meaning in terms of children's experience (task orientated)<br><br>Taking children on a mental journey (learning goal)<br><br>Teacher concentrates on the function of the wall (task orientated)<br><br>Returns to function (learning goal)<br><br>Reinforcing purpose | Interest in word/learning goal<br><br>I/R/F<br><br>R<br><br>I<br><br>R<br><br>Imagination rekindled or images revisited<br><br>I<br><br>F<br><br>R/F clearer understanding of shape<br><br>F<br><br>R/F better understanding by child who made the miscue |

**3. Key**

…..pause
>< spoken at same time
IRF initiation, response, feedback

All children's names were changed to ensure anonymity. For thirty minutes they took turns to read (as instructed) with expression and their teacher highlighted miscues in word pronunciation, lack of close attention to punctuation etc. She is in control and everything

runs smoothly. This is in keeping with her statement: *'I 've got to give them a structure…a structure that they understand.'* But has she? At no time did she share what she was doing with the group. When she left them to continue alone, while she supervised other groups in the room, she had confidence that they could work independently. The following incident indicates that her implicit 'scaffolding' of her pupils and her strategy for identifying a weakness and constructing a meaningful way forward, might need to be made more explicit to her pupils, for them to undertake the same role for one another [9]. The point being made is that the teacher, in the above extract, considers both the criteria for success and the individual needs, but that she has only communicated the learning objectives to her pupils.

| Pupil/pupil interaction | Commentary | Pupil intention | Effect on the recipient of these remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grace: (reads very slowly and quietly)<br><br>Len/Joe: (start to whisper whilst Grace is reading)<br><br>Grace: We started<br><br>Len: I'm bored with this<br><br>Joe: Let's read silently<br><br>Len: Lets just stop this please<br><br>Grace: I can't go any faster<br><br>Joe: It doesn't matter<br><br>Rachel: OK so you can just listen then<br><br>Grace: You must read aloud<br><br>Len/Joe: >boring...boring<<br><br>Rachel: All right keep going<br><br>Grace: (hesitantly) and then he smiled again and pulled a role of script from his giblet<br><br>Len: Stupid…giblet (laughing)<br><br>Grace: (continues reading) I'm Shakespeare<br><br>Len/Joe: >scoffing< | Grace's reading is difficult to follow, both in terms of clarity and expression<br><br>Both boys have had their turns at reading and both have been helped by their teacher to understand unfamiliar words in the context in which they appear<br><br>Len is a very competent reader who enjoys a wide range of books<br><br>It was noted that Joe always tries to supply correct answers for other pupils<br><br>Len doesn't show the sensitivity his teacher extended to him<br><br>Signs of lowered self esteem<br><br>Comfort offered but no account taken of Grace's Sensibilities<br><br>Rachel offers a viable way out of the problem<br><br>Grace shelters behind the objectives set by the teacher<br><br>The boys join forces by using the word that gets everyone's attention<br><br>Rachel has Emerged as a leader in this situation but without the strategies to utilize the situation to help Grace to move forward as a reader<br><br>Grace's miscue is funny and if the teacher had been present he would have been explored fully to inform learning<br><br>Len has no consideration for Grace's feelings by his stage<br><br>The text reference is unfortunate in the Circumstance<br><br>The boys appreciate the double meaning but have no thought about the effect of their actions on Grace | Time could be better used<br><br>Joe offers an alternative strategy<br><br>Self-assessment<br><br>To diminish the importance of the identified problem<br><br>To maintain a peaceful working relationship<br><br>To assert her right to read<br><br>Desperate times call for desperate measures<br><br>Confirmation of frustration with the activity | Grace may feel she is to blame for the discontent with the activity<br><br>Confirmation of failure for Grace<br><br>Reinforcement of failure<br><br>Understanding that she has failed to do what others have done<br><br>Grace may now feel more uncomfortable rather than less because of Joe's kindness<br><br>Grace may feel even more discomfort<br><br>Need to stand her ground<br><br>Grace is backed into a corner |

Perrenoud argues that *'pupils have the right to hesitate, make mistakes, reflect, enter into dialogue and thus learn'* [10].

When she was working with this group the teacher's active and constructivist approach indicated her central focus on the process of learning rather than the outcome. But other considerations such as the dynamics of other groups working in the same room deflect her and thus limit her ability to sit back and observe the effect of her implicit strategies on her pupils. If she had been observing the group she might have had a clearer insight into her pupils' ability to cope with the problems which they encountered when left to work independently. In turn, they might have enabled her to adjust her strategies to help take account of their individual reactions. This is a missed opportunity for developing formative assessments for informing her planning, which hopefully would in turn influence future learning.

To be good learners, however, pupils do need to develop a certain resilience and resourcefulness, experience real world situations, and learn from that uncertainty without becoming insecure and defensive. One could argue that this teacher has provided them with such an opportunity and has the confidence to expect them to cope with the situation, however, insufficient knowledge of her pupils' motivation and reactions to problems (without her presence) would seem to be a strong contributory factor in this situation. Although part of an identified higher attaining group, Grace appears to have accepted her reading problems rather than devising strategies for overcoming them. She displays 'learned helplessness' in overcoming her problems [11]. Her limited resilience when faced with difficulties is not compensated for by the other participants, because they do not appear to have developed the resourcefulness or ability to reflect on the problem which has arisen, and thus move Grace forward. These pupils display the four reactions identified by Kluger and De Nisi:

- Len wants to abandon the goal completely
- Joe wants to change it
- Rachel wants to continue, and
- Grace denies the problem exists

The teacher was unaware that this interchange had taken place and on her return said to the group, '*Carry on to the next chapter [12].*' This is a classroom that is rich in evaluation but unless the teacher can identify the differences in each pupil's attitudes, knowledge and understanding and intervene at this level she may have limited success in helping her pupils to regulate their own cognitive development [13]. When interviewed these pupils indicated a dependency on their teacher at the level of motivation, together with a lack of awareness that their own active involvement in assessment was an important part of their own learning [6].

In the year prior to the incidents reported above, the revelations of the Black and William review had alerted policy makers' attention to the value of formative assessment by now more widely known as 'assessment for learning' [14]. It was the effect of improving standards for lower achievers, which drove future training in England. Little consideration was given to the value of using assessment to build pupils' confidence, motivation, and responsibility for learning [15]. The fact that the results that were published, in the review, were from experimental settings rather than real classrooms was not made clear to all. In the drive to improve standards a cascade model of professional development for 'assessment for learning' was adopted. The trouble with this model is that *'it's a bit hit and miss with messages watered down as they pass to the lower parts of the fountain'* [1]. Opportunities were missed as 'performance goals' (externally driven) were reinforced in pupils and 'learning goals' (internally driven) went undeveloped in the race to improve standards [11]. Policy makers failure to understand that you can change everything about a school except where it is and the community it serves led to missed opportunities for trusting teachers as curriculum innovators who know best how to enhance pupil engagement and learning [16]. If a more rigorous model had been adopted in England, one that honored teachers' professional knowledge and aimed to extend it by allowing them to research their own classrooms, collect evidence and reflect on practice, the learning and assessment seesaw might have achieved a better balance. Instead, teachers found themselves delegated more to the role of technicians charged with delivering externally driven curricula and assessment practices.

To return to the teacher whose practice was analyzed earlier it is argued that because of the 1999 case study she had a window opened on her practice and was able to recognize something that needed to be improved and plan changes accordingly [6]. She did, in the short term, create a better social mix for the group of readers involved in the recorded episode. In the longer term her practice changed to reflect her greater awareness of the need to explain to her pupils why she was doing something so that they could support one another.

We all learn best, however, by active involvement in the learning process and she may have benefited even more from an opportunity to engage in action research, at the time, rather than listen to the findings of an external researcher. She said, after reading transcripts of lessons and interviews:

*'I find it quite fascinating to have the opportunity to reflect on the children's perceptions of what is going on…and to get a different angle… view em on the process which you don't often get do you? I mean you never get the chance to look back at something that's gone… at the end of the day you have a gut feeling that went well…I think most of the kids got something out of that…most of them enjoyed it and that's the best you can do really….I think so an so grasped the idea…we've got to do a bit more on this…reflecting on our own perceptions…never get enough time to do anymore*

In the years following this case study the accountancy model of professional development superseded the cascade model. This input-output model failed to recognize that schools and pupils are not produced in the same way as manufactured goods and teachers do not deliver lessons like postal packages. By 2005, our focus teacher found herself under increasing pressure from accountability and league tables and admitted to tensions impacting her practice.

*'SATs (Standardized Assessment Tests) are becoming an even more high-status game and although we were able to stand outside for a*

*long time, it is starting to affect us. It is impossible to be top of the league tables tree each year… we had 23% of Year 6 on the special needs register last year and …although we added value we got a C for English whereas other years we've had an A*…it was writing that let us down…the children did as well as expected in class but not in the test…some children with language delay did not make level 3…which we expected.…it was a boy-heavy year with only eight girls…science and maths results were good…we got an A* for science…we tried to persuade ourselves that we were content with value added, but the pressure is always there…the LEA ..for example wanted to know why our English results were not up to the usual standard…the irony is that we still came out high overall in the county'*

***She continued:***

*'The cost of this pressure on my teachers and on skilled teaching assistants is that we're log-jammed by SATs at the end of Year 6…I have to put the high-quality input there…our best formative assessment practice is in Year 6 and I try wherever possible to put staff in to observe Year 6 lessons…but this is not as effective as being able to move experienced teaching assistants out of Year 6 to work alongside teachers of younger children' (Open University 2005, 24-25)*

In his critique of the Black and William review Perrenoud predicted the effect of the emphasis on feedback on policy and practice [10,13]. He wrote that it would *appeal 'to common sense inspired by behaviorism which suggests that all feedback assists learning or to the class teaching of control with the trilogy of objectives, criteria-referenced tests and remediation'* but marginalize more constructivist approaches to learning. In 1999 our focus teacher had maintained an intention to teach within the 'zone of proximal development' of each pupil [17]. By 2005, in common with other primary teachers her intention had shifted in the core subjects of science, literacy and numeracy to teach and assess the next determined thing in a linear progression as she shared success criteria with her pupils and set learning targets based on these criteria. Fulsome praise from Ofsted inspectors ensured that the practice was rolled out across the school. Each classroom displayed WALT posters (We Are Learning To) and every child's literacy, numeracy and science workbook pages began with the identified WALT criteria [18]. Whilst adopted by teachers this practice should carry a health warning. If used exclusively it limits risk taking, removes the problem solving and creative element in learning and assessment and instead of informing learning determines it. A parallel may be drawn in the further educational sector where Torrance found 'assessment for learning' soon became 'assessment as learning' [19].

## 4. The Adverse Effect of Standardized Tests on Disadvantaged Pupils

Moving forward to 2026 most people claim to value education but few can explain convincingly what it is for. Researchers are aware that any form of assessment has its limits but parents trust the system. Senior leaders and teachers interviewed highlighted that SATs only measured a narrow slice of the curriculum [20]. Although schools are held accountable for English and math results researchers found schools were given little credit for also being responsible for the whole child, for pastoral development, enrichment, personal development and preparing children for secondary school and adult life. One headteacher remarking *that 'I think we have forgotten what the word 'primary' means. Primary is what comes first. What comes first is a love of learning and fundamental skills. SATs cuts right across all that.'*

Whilst school leaders and teachers recognize that education and its assessment as currently conceived have flaws and a Curriculum and Assessment review in 2025 acknowledged the challenges to the primary curriculum many in the sector did not think it went far enough. Following the review the secretary of state for education still expressed the belief that primary assessment plays an important part in *'pushing up standards for every child.'* [20].

In my lifetime education has become near universal and compulsory in all developed and developing countries, starting at an earlier age, and finishing when many reach adulthood. Testing is also universal because governments want to know how standards are maintained or otherwise across the sectors. Formal education costs taxpayers a fantastic amount of money and occupies a large amount of parliamentary attention [21]. As long ago as in 1997 the administration of national tests was estimated at £100,000,000 so how much more will it cost today?

## 5. Defining Disadvantage

In interviews and where polling asked respondents about disadvantaged pupils, 'disadvantage' was defined as pupils who face additional barriers to learning compared with their peers, 'Including pupils eligible for free school meals, pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, pupils with English as an additional language, pupils with long term health conditions, and pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds [20].' For KS2 assessment the Department for Education (DFE), however, defines disadvantaged pupils as those eligible for free school meals in the last six years or who have been in care [20]. Researchers identify three areas where SATs may not be serving disadvantaged pupils well.

i. Perverse Incentives and curriculum narrowing. The accountability framework incentivizes schools to narrow the curriculum and focus on tested subjects, particularly during preparation periods.
ii. An accountability framework that does not reflect school context. Schools are judged against a single benchmark without meaningful account taken for the communities' schools' service and the cohorts they have each year. This can obscure genuine performance, particularly for schools serving more disadvantaged communities, and leave senior leaders facing scrutiny they feel bears little relationship to what their school has delivered.
iii. Increased teacher pressure makes its way into the classroom. Sats-related accountability pressure contributes to teacher stress, affects pedagogy, and is a factor in decisions to leave the profession. These effects are felt most acutely in schools

with the least capacity to absorb them, with consequences for the quality of teaching and pastoral support that disadvantaged pupils often depend on more than their peers.

The researchers poll also revealed the extent to which these views are held across the primary teaching workforce.

- Eighty-two percent of primary senior leaders polled felt that SATs disproportionately impact on disadvantaged students, with 90% of respondents reporting that pupils with SEND experience the greatest negative impact.
- Ninety-three percent of those polled felt that preparation for SATs impacts the breadth of curriculum in primary schools, with 77% reporting more time being spent on tested subjects when preparing for SATs
- Just 9% of senior leaders believed that SATs should be kept as they are [20].

## 6. Conclusion

The world of education at national and classroom level is by no means an uncontested social arena. Policy makers may control the National Strategies and continue to insist on the value of regular testing of pupils even though as long ago as 2008 there was a vociferous voice in the educational and popular press against testing [22,23]. An interim report commissioned as part of the independent Cambridge Primary Review supported the need for a more balanced curriculum in the primary years [24]. A committee of MPs investigating the effect of testing on learning called for national tests to be scrapped in their present form [25]. But as recorded above tests are still with us in 2026 with policy makers convinced of their value for improving standards and school staff suffering from stress with teachers leaving the profession earlier in their career than normal. A curriculum should serve the needs of the child now and in the future. The Lost Wilderness project was typical of an approach adopted by primary schools before the advent of the National Curriculum. Areas of knowledge were linked in this model and learning was what the teacher quoted in the 2026 survey, alluded to above, felt that was missing from current primary practice. The recent research quoted in this paper is hosted by the Institute for Public Policy Research, a charity working for a fairer, greener, and more prosperous society. Like them I do not aim to remove tests but seek ways to review and refine them to ensure inclusive practice in primary schools. I would, however, widen concerns to also include readers and writers from advantaged backgrounds [26]. In adding my concerns to the ongoing debate to achieve a better balance for curriculum and assessment in the primary years I hope that those that control policy come to understand that whilst scores on tests inform about standards what has been tested are too easily forgotten by the children. Teachers interviewed during my own research were concerned that testing had also adversely affected pupils' attitudes to reading and writing with pupils no longer reading for pleasure. The world children are growing up in today is quite different from when my generation was in school; systems need to take account of this if the curriculum and assessment are to achieve a better balance in the primary years.

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