
Some Modest Proposals

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ABSTRACT This text represents two extracts from a submission to the House of Commons Select Committee's investigation into primary school tests. The first part is a critique of the 2016 tests, particularly the Reading and Grammar tests for 11-year-olds and also the highly regulated 'teacher assessment' of Writing. The second part is a set of proposals for rethinking the whole suite of primary school tests. This includes consideration of how teacher assessment might draw, at the teacher's discretion, on a national bank of test items; and suggestions for sustaining curricular breadth and engagement.

The House of Commons Select Committee on primary assessment invited not only comments on the existing tests but suggestions on how they could be replaced. After brief extracts from the critique of the 2016 tests, the suggestions reprinted here are an attempt to consider how assessment might encourage a broad, interesting and age-appropriate curriculum.

Criticisms of Current Tests

1. Primary school assessment has been brought to a point of crisis by a combination of a poorly revised *National Curriculum* and the 'high stakes' ways in which testing is locked into a *wider system of control*. Both have exacerbated the damage to children and education, and encouraged 'teaching to the test' and curriculum narrowing.
2. The consequence of a curriculum clumsily planned to make England a 'global winner' in PISA, and the failure to consider children's development, is a high failure rate which is seriously *demoralising* as well as test results distorted by each child's age.
3. Specific problems with current test design include a phonics check which *relates poorly to real literacy*; a KS2 reading test which is *remote* from children's experience and biased against disadvantaged groups; spelling and grammar tests which *relate inadequately to children's writing*; and writing assessments which encourage *formulaic writing* rather than high quality communication.

4. Recommendations centre on the need to make assessment *fit for purpose*, with an emphasis on assisting children's individual *progress* and fruitful communication with their parents. Increasing *trust and professionalism* are encouraged, and suggestions are made as to how various tests can be reformed.

Reading KS2

Passage 1 was based around two children straying from a garden party in the house formerly owned by the girl's family, and rowing a boat across a lake to find a statue commemorating her ancestor. Such a situation would be inconceivable to many children – a garden party, a garden large enough to contain a lake, owning a house, an ancestor, a statue of someone in your family?

Many sentences set up an ironic distance for the reader from a more normal situation or meaning, which requires the pupil to be familiar with that expected norm. Consider the following (passage 2): 'She adored warthogs but their Hollywood movie star eyelashes didn't fool her.'

Some sentences depend on children already having substantial cultural capital, probably acquired outside school – e.g. 'many of the artists had no knowledge of *natural history*', 'Mauritius... was *spat* out of the ocean floor by an *underwater volcano*'.

Grammar KS2

- Most children use a wide range of clauses fluently without being able to name them as coordinated or subordinated, temporal or concessionary.
- The concept of 'modal verb' caused teachers and Year 6 pupils anxiety, yet almost all children use modal verbs in their various tenses appropriately and sensitively before they begin school.
- Conversely, almost the only subjunctive an 11-year-old would use would be in the formulaic expression 'If I were you'.

Writing KS2

Quite appropriately, this assessment was carried out by teachers and based on a portfolio of work. It is ironic, therefore, that ministers and the DfE insisted on such tight criteria that months were spent re-editing writing to match them. Teachers rightly complain about 'shoehorning' fronted adverbials, subjunctives and semi-colons into texts to be able to award higher levels, resulting in dull and formulaic writing. The problem here is basically a lack of trust in the teaching profession.

Some Proposals

1. The DfE should work with the teaching profession and other experts in establishing new structures of quality control which are more positive and less punitive. The emphasis should be on improving professional judgement rather than on external top-down control.
2. It is important to have shared standards, but these should be expressed in terms which are aspirational. As an example, Finland's national curriculum documents describe '*good performance*' at key points, rather than 'meeting/not meeting expected standards'.
3. The key aims of assessment should be discussed with the teaching profession, and the various purposes distinguished. For example, in order to evaluate overall standards and improvement nationally, sampling would be sufficient; it could be more extensive without overburdening individuals and would avoid distortions due to 'teaching to the test'. On the other hand, diagnostic assessment should not result in numerical scores which lose the key information. Teachers should have access to a bank of assessment tools to complement or verify their own ongoing observations.

More specifically and immediately:

4. The phonics check should be abandoned, as it is too narrow and gives poor data and information. Year 1 teachers should be expected to carry out diagnostic assessments of various aspects of reading (phonics, irregular word recognition, breadth of vocabulary, expressiveness in reading aloud, attitudes to reading) using their own observations, flexible tools such as miscue analysis, and, if necessary, some test items drawn from a national assessment bank. Information should be shared with parents descriptively, not as pass or fail.
5. Assessment of writing should be based on authentic purposes. Rather than mismeasuring through lists of fixed artificial criteria, teachers' evaluations should be strengthened through guided moderation involving training, local panels to review sample scripts and visiting moderators.
6. Separate tests of grammar, punctuation and spelling should be abandoned, and teachers expected to draw from banks of test items as they see fit to supplement their assessment of writing.
7. The assessment of reading by the end of Year 6 should reflect a wider range of genres and purposes than at present, including more extended texts, reading for information (locating, selecting, modelling, etc.) and critical literacy, as well as non-print media. It should be based primarily on teacher assessment underpinned by moderation (see point 5 above) and focusing on authentic reading activities, and with a bank of test items for optional use. If designed to reflect different standards of achievement, these might be judged as met at an earlier stage rather than all at the end of Year 6.
8. A challenge should be set to pupils in various school years requiring knowledge and skills from several subjects and drawing on elements of literacy/communication/mathematics. The products and processes would

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indicate progression and development over time, provide feedback to the child, and facilitate discussion with parents and with the next year's teacher or school. This would create a more balanced assessment and provide opportunities to assess critical and creative aspects of learning.

9. Teachers should collect samples of work for each child across the curriculum, to be passed on to Year 7 teachers in secondary schools. Like point 8 above, this would avoid curriculum narrowing.
10. Assessment should serve teaching, not the reverse. None of the above procedures should be made so elaborate that it places a strain on teachers' workload and distracts from teaching.

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