
The Grass Roots Speak

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ABSTRACT This article reflects, and encourages, the growth of grass-roots revolt to bring about change in an assessment system which systematically undermines real education.

There are three groups of people who are directly affected by the current government measures for the assessment of primary education. First, and of the greatest importance, there are the children. All we do is for them, their present and future needs and their wellbeing and their happiness. Then there are the parents and carers, who are better placed than anyone else to judge the level of success in bringing up the children. Lastly there are the teachers – not so often the heads of schools, but the teachers who work with the children and the parents every day.

Assessment by government has had an almost total focus upon head teachers, requiring them to act as agents in ensuring that official directives are implemented and imposing sanctions if and when the results are deemed unsatisfactory. Furthermore, the assessment measures have been used as a sadly efficient way of influencing, and at times directing, not only the content of education but the process of education itself.

The most affected – the children whose study of history is reduced to 30 minutes a week, the parents who deal with the crying child at bedtime because the weekly spelling test is tomorrow, and the teachers who, against their professional judgement, emphasise and coach for the test results which are the measure of their competency – these are the grass roots of education, and they are caught up, powerless, in a politically motivated system beyond their control.

Teachers and heads have long fought against the system, researchers have published reports and written books, orators at conferences have been applauded as they produced evidence of the damaging effects of the dominance of testing. All to no avail: the testing juggernaut grinds implacably on and the political imperative is that the engine which drives education must be that of market forces, as if the schools are no more than competing supermarkets.

It was in May 2016 that the parents of young children first came together to stand alongside teachers in voicing their deep concern with the assessment system and their wish for its reform. Several thousand families kept their children away from schools in an unprecedented protest against national testing. They had not been prompted by teachers; it was entirely spontaneous, and such was the strength of feeling that no more than a Facebook page was necessary to generate a response. The message to the government was enough is enough, stop the incessant testing which is hurting our children and find another way of assessing educational progress. This is a new and potentially powerful chapter in the story of state education. A campaign, More Than a Score (MTAS), intent on reform, was quickly organised, and this has grown in strength. Two parent-led organisations, Let Our Kids Be Kids and Save Our Schools, are joined by teachers' unions and other voluntary associations, reflecting the unanimity of view among the teaching profession. The work of MTAS has not been confined to a demonstration of the failings in the present system but, acting on the advice of leading authorities in the field, it has outlined alternatives which will be put to ministers.

MTAS policy argues that England and Wales can improve assessment by dispensing with SATs at the end of key stages. The current system of testing every individual child in order to judge the effectiveness of teachers and schools is deeply flawed and has negative effects on the quality of education. It focuses the energies of pupils, teachers and parents on achieving success in a narrow range of subjects: the school curriculum is dominated by mathematics and English, and these subjects are themselves distorted by the need to make them testable. When schools are judged primarily on test results, pressure and stress build up in pupils and teachers alike and the system becomes punitive.

MTAS has listed what is required from assessment. An improved system should:

- support children's learning by enabling teachers to identify pupils' attainment and learning needs;
- treat young people as rounded, whole persons;
- inform about the effectiveness of a school in promoting children's learning and development;
- enable a dialogue between parents and teachers;
- support schools in developing improvement strategies in line with their own values;
- inform regarding national standards of attainment across the whole curriculum.

No one test can perform all these tasks, and this demands the abolition of SATs. Different forms of assessment are required for different purposes. In the classroom both formative and summative assessment should be used. Summative tests can be based on national 'question banks', and the two forms of assessment should be brought together in a detailed, rigorous and supportive way.

Teachers should be able to compare the progress made by their pupils with national standards. This can be done by teachers coming together to moderate pupils' work. The results of moderation will feed into the school's self-evaluation and plan for improvement.

Parents are partners in children's learning, and assessment should provide information helpful to them. For reports to be meaningful they should summarise children's development in all aspects of their growth. Such reports should be assisted by supportive inspection of schools. MTAS applauds schools which produce rich, detailed narrative reports on pupil progress using the outcomes of formative and summative assessment as helpful feedback to parents and children. Assessment in the early years, culminating in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, is commended as an approach which can be used to track learning throughout primary education.

National standards of the primary school system should be achieved by the testing of a sample of children spread over a number of schools. This will prevent any undesirable backwash into the curriculum. Such a system is already used to monitor standards of achievement in primary science. It is proposed that sampling should not be confined to the core curriculum.

With changes like these, the assessment system would cover the whole range of children's learning, and not just a small number of core subjects. It would be a system that encouraged teachers to think inventively about learning and how to support it. It would form part of arrangements for a different kind of accountability which combines school self-evaluation with ways of reporting to parents and other stakeholders outside the school.

The voices of those calling for changes like these are wide-reaching and growing louder. Most of the business world seeks learners who are well-rounded and creative. Parents are increasingly frustrated by the way the school system too often works against their children's development. Even within the current system many teachers are working on practical alternatives to the culture of testing.

For too long the needs of external testing have dominated pupils' entire experience of school. Successive governments have failed to acknowledge the damage caused by the overemphasis upon test results and have refused to ask the crucial question: What kind of assessment creates the conditions for young people to thrive in an uncertain and innovation-rich world? It is time for other energies stemming from the grass roots of education to shape the changes which can answer that question.

More Than a Score is calling on the government to initiate an urgent and thorough review of assessment and accountability in schools.

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