
Succeeding against SATs

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ABSTRACT The lesson to be learnt from a quarter of a century of resisting standardised testing is that educational and pedagogical issues must drive campaigning. Teachers must work together to re-establish confidence in their own ability to control the curriculum and what is offered to our children. This can only be a collective enterprise and teachers must find the spaces, literally and metaphorically, to work out how to do so. Enlisting the support of parents, researchers and academics needs to be central to their actions – as must be their willingness to see the assault on children and their education as part of the wider, ideological drive toward marketisation, privatisation and individualism.

SATS Boycotts: some history and context

In April, 2019 the annual conference of the National Education Union (NEU) voted to ballot its members on boycotting SATs. For some of us, it was almost a nostalgic moment; we'd been there before, the first time in 1993. This article begins by looking at that initial, successful boycott as a way of setting the tone for what for what has been learnt since. It goes on to consider what needs to be done as teachers once again organise themselves to embark on this hugely important action.

For fuller, excellent explanations of the 1993 boycott, readers should go to the contemporaneous accounts provided by Jane Coles and Ken Jones (Coles, 1994; Jones, 1994). As a starting point, however, the Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1988 is as good as any. The Act had four principal components: the National Curriculum, the introduction of local management of schools, the possibility of open enrolment – which facilitated the expansion of 'successful' schools – and the facility for schools to opt out entirely from local authority control. In ideological terms, it was the last three elements, rather than the National Curriculum, which set the platform for the privatisation and the dominance of the internal market which has characterised how schools have been run since. Nevertheless, it was the introduction of the National Curriculum

that excited most interest at the time. It is worth explaining why this is the case, particularly for an audience of younger teachers.

As I have been at pains to point out (Berry, 2016, 2017) there has never been a golden age of teacher autonomy. Nonetheless, prior to the ERA, teachers enjoyed what Roger Dale (1989) labelled 'licensed' autonomy. Put bluntly, this meant that as long as teachers and schools got on with the job and avoided anything outlandish, they were left largely to their own devices. Dale charts the gradual change to a 'regulated' autonomy where, in a reflection of the reach of neoliberalism, indices, units of measurement and notions of 'value for money' increasingly entered the general discourse about education and schools. When the ERA introduced the National Curriculum, teachers got on with the job of quietly folding it into their practice in a pick-and-mix way. As an initial strategy this worked well enough. However, what changed the game was the Act's requirement for children to be tested in four subjects – English, maths, science and technology – at 7, 11, 14 and 16. Teachers, while gently moulding the new curriculum to their own practice, also recognised the threat to their autonomy and their practice.

Another brief word about context is required here. The 1970s and 80s had seen significant teacher involvement in the assessment process, even in the national exams at 16. Although O levels – the precursor of GCSE – remained resolutely assessed by single, terminal examinations, the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) allowed substantial teacher-assessed coursework elements. When CSE and O levels merged into the single GCSE (first examined in the year of ERA, 1988) many subjects incorporated coursework into final assessments. For many teachers (myself included) this level of teacher participation reached its zenith with GCSE English being assessed through 100% coursework. Readers can probably surmise what the reaction of the political Right was to such practice – Thatcher's successor, John Major, bemoaned 'the zealous adoption of fashionable theories' (BBC, 2006) – but teachers were not going to surrender such control of the curriculum without a fight. It was against this background that the campaigning against SATs began.

The initial campaign in 1993 was a massive success. On turnouts of well over 90% from both major unions – National Union of Teachers (NUT) and National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) – over 90% of teachers voted to support the boycott. It is worth pausing to consider the significance of teachers' willingness to vote so confidently for this action, which was not about the standard trade union issues of pay or conditions, but about the defence of the curriculum and their control over it. This article now goes on to analyse why this initial success was achieved, why it was only temporary (or else why would we be back here now?) and what can be learned when pursuing the current campaign from both successes and failures.

Keeping Education at the Centre of the Campaign

The campaign against SATs which began in 1993 and then emerged as the Anti SATs Alliance in 2003 (see BBC, 2003) never veered from the fundamental stance that opposition to standardised testing was rooted in pedagogical and educational principles. When parents were approached to support local campaigns, which they did in numbers – much as they do in the current, admirable More Than a Score movement (morethanascore.org.uk) – teachers expressed their opposition in terms of the educational damage the tests could inflict. The most obvious elements here were the narrowing and reduction of the curriculum and teaching to the tests. Most importantly, teachers took on the potentially complex argument that higher test scores do not necessarily equate to improved standards. There are two important observations arising from this approach.

First, in the early 1990s, teachers still had something to defend: a curriculum which they had framed (even subverted on occasion) and in whose assessment they had an active part. There was room for a discourse in schools about how to shape a curriculum and how best to suit this to the needs of children before the notion of ‘delivery’ became ubiquitous and drowned out any such conversation. Even on the most banal and practical of levels, there were staff rooms and other physical spaces where such discussion could break out in the middle of the usual daily chatter. To the modern teacher in the era of the rushed lunchtime, workstations and isolated offices, the opportunities for such collegiality are limited – as is that for the union organisation that can supplement it. This closing down of space, both literally and metaphorically, limits teachers’ opportunity to imagine what a different curriculum and a different school could look like. Campaigners in 2019 must recreate those spaces: my own research of the past three years confirms that their appetite for such discussion has most definitely not been dulled (Berry, 2016, 2017).

Second, there is a lesson to be learnt from how the government dealt with the success of the 1993 ballot. What follows is not sectarian point-scoring but an analysis of tactics and strategy that has current resonance. The opposition of the NUT was based entirely on educational grounds; the NASUWT chose to make it exclusively a workload issue – the expectation was that teachers were to mark the tests. The position of that union is captured perfectly in a terse letter from its General Secretary to the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* in 2001 (TES, 2001) in which he explains how he considered it to be the strength of that organisation’s position. For the government this presented an easy win. By appointing external markers they could split cooperation between the unions and undercut the massive majorities in the original ballots. The requirement for the technology test was withdrawn and so this allowed them to argue that another pressure had been eased and thus enable them to argue that the tests could now simply concern themselves with the holy trinity of English, mathematics and science – ‘the basics’.

It is vital to retain the emphasis on the educational arguments against SATs in the current situation. This is not to diminish the obvious importance of

the stress and unhappiness that such tests cause; these consequences are thoroughly documented and represent experiences that are all too widespread. However, as with the argument about identifying workload as the main issue, they can be more easily countered. We are told by the head of Ofsted (*The Independent*, 2019) that schools can work in a way that streamlines tests so that children don't even know they're doing them; that schools make too much of a fuss. To become embroiled in such arguments diverts us from the main point, which is that these tests aren't worth doing because they narrow the curriculum, waste time by encouraging teaching to the test and can only provide the sort of snapshot that could be easily provided by teachers themselves – an issue dealt with in the section that follows.

Embracing Assessment, Accountability and Alternatives

Organisers of the SATs campaigns in the 1990s and 2000s frequently found ourselves being interviewed on radio and television. With weary inevitability, one would be introduced as 'being opposed to testing'. However, when this happened it presented a gift to those charged with explaining our position. It enabled us to say from the outset that we were most definitely *not* opposed to testing and that we most definitely *did* think that it was important that children and parents knew whether progress was being made and what was needed to do to bring about improvement. This insistence on embracing accountability was crucial, particularly in the face of an ill-informed – and all too familiar – discourse in parts of the media that characterised any opposition as part of a disturbing trend that would abandon Shakespeare for soap operas, Beethoven for reggae and religious education for vague and unfocused discussion of multiculturalism and anti-sexism (Cox, 1995). That this could come from critics on the right was to be expected – although to be fair to Cox, who belonged to that tradition, he did not espouse such beliefs. What surprised some campaigners who had hoped for more when Thatcher and Major disappeared, was the easy adoption of a test-led, commodified and marketised model of education by New Labour.

Nowhere was this enthusiasm for what they inherited manifested more obviously than in the person of David Blunkett, who held the office of Secretary of State for Education in Tony Blair's first government in 1997 and remained in post until 2001. In a move designed to anger teacher unions and to set the platform for the introduction of City Academies – New Labour's authorisation of the full privatisation to follow – Blunkett insisted that teachers were using poverty as an excuse for failure (*Guardian*, 2000) and questioned the use of research as a way of addressing educational issues (Blunkett, 2000). Helping him to reinforce this discourse was former NUT luminary, Michael Barber, who found himself a place at Blair's top table as Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. With the notion of delivery, once the target of much staff-room derision and merriment, now firmly installed, Barber and Blunkett made it their business to perpetuate the notion that teachers' opposition to

testing was rooted in a fear of their own ineptitude being exposed. Barber gained from the experience, going on to make a lucrative living promoting the notion of ‘deliverology’ worldwide (Barber et al, 2011). Both men had a doughty ally in the head of Ofsted, Chris Woodhead, who revelled in a reputation gained by announcing in 1995 that there were 15,000 incompetent teachers in the nation’s schools – a declaration for which he produced not one shred of evidence.

Against such a background, it was imperative that campaigning teachers kept their nerve. The first way of doing this was to insist that they neither feared nor shirked accountability. To refer again to my own research, it has demonstrated beyond question that far from wishing to evade accountability, for most teachers this is a central and non-negotiable part of how they see their job. In hundreds of interviews with teachers over four years, the notion of embracing and welcoming responsibility is overwhelming – as long as doing so clearly benefits the child. Teachers need no lessons from anyone in terms of what is expected of them.

When it comes to assessment, albeit that the days of 100% coursework no longer live in the collective consciousness of most teachers, it is vital for campaigners to be searching constantly for creative, accurate and fair ways of making judgements on children’s overall abilities and progress. A starting point for this has to be Terry Wrigley’s excellent *Another School is Possible* (Wrigley, 2006) which opens up dialogue and possibilities that have their contemporary echo in the Northern Rocks Conferences (Northern Rocks, 2018), designed to keep alive notions of pedagogy and child-centredness in an age of metrics and measurements. There is no shrinking from the difficulty of asking teachers to engage in demanding and time-consuming dialogue with each other about constructing such models. No one understands this more sharply than the publishing companies for whom Pearson blaze the trail.

The appeal of such companies’ products worldwide is alarmingly simple (Hogan et al, 2015; Lingard et al, 2017). Look, they tell us, at the modern world with its pressures, its requirements for data at every turn, its need to stay ahead of trends. Look at the life of the teacher. Beleaguered, overworked and with ever-increasing demands. Here, they tell us, is the pre-packaged, curriculum-compliant, online, versatile answer. No more brain-racking, time-consuming evenings of drudgery. Click, download, deliver and enter the outcomes. And will you, and those outmoded trade unions who purport to represent you, now please stop whining?

All of which is by way of saying that it is naïve to ask teachers not to look for ways of easing themselves through their working lives. However, if they are to convince their principal constituency – the parents whose part in this this article goes on to consider – they need to have a compelling, clearly articulated notion of what a suitable curriculum looks like and how they can also develop fair and reliable mechanisms for diagnosing needs and assessing progress. These won’t be found in an off-the-peg box of materials but from ongoing professional dialogue and a developing sense of teacher autonomy.

Widening the Campaign

To win on SATs and to continue campaigning for a curriculum that works for all children, teachers need to look to wider constituencies than just their professional colleagues. The final part of this article argues that this fight needs to be taken into two areas. First, and uncontroversially, teachers need to requisition the assistance and support of parents and fellow education professionals. Second, and perhaps more contentiously – and uncomfortably for some – the argument about SATs needs to be put into a wider political and economic context.

In the pre-Internet era of the 1993 SATs boycott, communicating with parents was not easy. In my own case, and in that of many of my colleagues at the time, twisting the arms of head teachers to be allowed to meet parents to discuss the issue was a challenge. However, local campaigns drew strength from the fact that parents were unconvinced and sceptical about the purpose of the tests – even before the introduction of league tables. To reiterate the point, workload was not an issue. To have addressed parents, themselves subject to ever more intrusive and demanding work practices, with complaints about how hard we were working, would have been unwise in the extreme. The focus was always the quality of education on offer.

In 2019, the mechanisms for organising with parents and other educational organisations has made life significantly easier for activists. Organisations such as More Than a Score (see above) and Better Without Baseline (betterwithoutbaseline.org.uk) are able to lobby, petition and organise to ensure that the issue of testing remains firmly in the public arena. For teachers, such bodies are central to their own actions and critical in terms of maintaining confidence.

Such confidence needs to be bolstered by the knowledge that the weight of informed, academic opinion is firmly on the side of those opposed to standardised national testing. It has been the hallmark of government education policy since the 1970s that it has remained a theory and research-free zone. Fifty years ago, the architects of the National Curriculum could, at least, call upon their own gurus who had, at least, made the effort to articulate an educational philosophy, howsoever misguided, through the publication of the Black Papers (Cox & Dyson, 1971). These make for perversely entertaining reading, expressing opposition to teacher-led examinations and the growth of comprehensive schools, anxiety about unfettered freedom in junior schools and issuing a concern that the move to comprehensive schools set the nation on the road to a Soviet Russian system that was already a proven failure. They further advocated the extension of schemes to allow access to independent schools and bemoaned the growth and range of polytechnics. All of which would be a merry distraction were it not for the fact that it informed a good deal of government thinking for half a century. Fortunately for campaigners in 2019 the full weight of all credible research is firmly on their side of the argument.

Reclaiming Schools (reclaimingschools.org) and *The Mismeasurement of Learning* (Berry and Wrigley, 2016) were initiatives established by academics,

with the support and backing of the NUT, to furnish schoolteachers with evidence and research to combat the mixture of nostalgia and dogma that passed for education theory. Such material is the key to finding the arguments to take on everyone from the middle manager fretting about the 'need' for data to a Secretary of State for Education who professes himself weary of experts (*Financial Times*, 2016). Teachers, many of whom through no fault of their own have been through on-the-job training devoid of any consideration of pedagogy or theory, can equip themselves to deal with the crude assertion that 'testing raises standards' by acquainting themselves with material that furnishes them with alternative ideas, evidence and arguments.

Ultimately, however, any industrial action taken by teachers must locate itself in a more general struggle. The need to combat SATs must be seen as part of the same drive to stem the wholesale academisation of the school system. It is bound up with the identification of, and fight against, poverty and its effect in schools. It must be seen in the same light as the careless and cynical use of exclusions and the shameless manipulation of examination entries. And beyond the school gates, teachers need to make the connections between the privatisation of their places of work and that of local and national services. Standardised testing is part of the central fabric of the marketisation and commodification of anything and everything that can possibly make a profit. It is against this background and with this in mind that teachers need to pursue this important campaign.

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