

CIVITAS: Media Briefing, 7 August 2007

Faking it. 'Best ever' Key Stage 2 results - but how many children who reached Level 4 can actually read this sentence?

Key Stage 2 results published today by the government don't stand up to scrutiny, says independent think tank Civitas. Teachers have been compelled to generate artificial results, at horrifying costs to pupils.

Results show that 80 per cent and 77 per cent of pupils have reached the government's expected standard, Level 4, in literacy and numeracy respectively. However it is widely accepted by educationalists that Key Stage 2 results cannot and *should not* be taken at face value.

'Not only are these results exaggerated, achieving them has had hugely damaging consequences for children,' says Anastasia de Waal. 'The only people these "record" scores serve is the government.'

Experts are unanimous in their condemnation of the way results are being arrived at.

Professor Dylan Wiliam, deputy director at the Institute of Education University of London, describes the government's current testing arrangements as doing 'substantial harm to some children'. He commented: 'There is no doubt that pressure, through assessment, can be very good for children: I have never been a believer in allowing children to just do what they want. But when the pressure is too great it leads to cheating, stress and disengagement among pupils, as we are witnessing in many schools today.'

He illustrated how these distortions have made the Key Stage 2 test scores difficult to interpret: 'There are many children who can reach Level 4 in May of Year 6, but cannot reach the same level a year later, because they'd been coached for the tests.'

The real score

Independent consensus amongst educationalists is that the government's Key Stage 2 results do not reflect genuine levels of achievement, particularly in literacy. For example:

- David Jesson, York University: found that 1 in 6 pupils achieve a higher level in their Key Stage 2 tests than their teachers think they merit. (Unpublished paper, David Jesson and Anthony Farrell, Cornwall 2006, cited in Warwick Mansell, *Education by Numbers, Politics*, London: 2007, p.43)

- The Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM), Durham University: found in their own tests between 1997 and 2002 no evidence of improvement in literacy and only meagre improvement in maths, despite significant rises in Key Stage 2 test scores. (CEM, Durham University, Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) Project: Standards Over Time 2002 and also the Middle Years Information System (MidYIS))
- National Foundation for Educational Research: found no improvement in standards despite rising Key Stage 2 scores. The NFER standardises the test scores for Key Stage 2 tests. If actual standards are rising the tests have to be re-standardised so that all the scores do not shift upwards. However, despite four years of raised Key Stage 2 test scores, by 2002 the NFER found no need to re-standardise. This indicates no genuine change in achievement. (cited in Peter Tymms, 'Are standards rising in primary schools?' *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol 30: 4, 2004)
- Michael Shayer, King's College, London University: found that a backdrop to rising primary test scores is a historic low in children's cognitive abilities. This casts doubt in particular on Key Stage 2 science results. (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,1693061,00.html>)

Much of New Labour's achievement in primary school, as 'proved' by the Key Stage 2 results, has actually been due to a toxic cocktail of last-minute cramming, teaching to the test and lowered standards. For example:

- Sue Beverton et al.: found that Year 6 teaching was 'dominated by intensive periods of test preparation'. (Beverton et al. 'Teaching Approaches to Promote Consistent Level 4 Performance in Key Stage 2 English and Mathematics', DfES Research Report 669 2005)
- Anne Watson: found that Year 6 booster classes temporarily raised pupils to level 4 in maths but that this rise could not be sustained six months to a year later. (Watson, A. presentation at BERA Mathematics Symposium, 2002)
- The Statistics Commission: discredited the rise in national test scores between 1995 and 2000 as substantial overstatement attributed to external factors, including teaching to the test. (Statistics Commission (2005) 'Measuring Standards in English Primary Schools: Report by the Statistics Commission on an article by Peter Tymms' *Research Report 23* London: Statistics Commission)
- Colin Richards, St Martin's College, Lancaster University: argued that primary achievement gains had been exaggerated between 1995 and 2001 on the grounds that there was 'no evidence' that test standards had been kept constant. (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/sats/story/0,,1554706,00.html>).

- Alf Massey et al.: attributed more than half the gains at literacy at Key Stage 2 between 1999 and 2002 to easier questions. (Massey A, Green S, Dexter T and Hamnett L (2003) Comparability of national tests over time: Key stage test standards between 1996 and 2001: Final report to the QCA of the Comparability Over Time Project Cambridge: University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate)
- Mary Hilton, Homerton College, Cambridge University: found that as Key Stage 2 literacy scores increased between 1998 and 2000, reading tests had become easier. (Hilton M., 'Are the Key Stage 2 reading tests becoming easier each year?' *Reading*, 2001, pp4-11)

The damage to children

Were it a case of the government's claims not adding up, it would be mere false advertising. But underlying these results is not simply exaggerated progress but hugely harmful consequences:

- The shrinking of both the whole curriculum and also within the literacy and numeracy curricula, in order to focus on what is tested. (QCA Annual Report 2003/2004 Times Educational Supplement 27th April 2007, <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/update/strat.html#3Rs>)
- Pupils leaving primary school without basic skills. This has become such an *acknowledged* problem that the government has resorted to 'freeing up the curriculum' in order to provide 'catch-up' classes in secondary school. (<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/14to19/14-19whitepaper/>)
- Teachers compelled to teach to the test through Year 6. (For example, Warwick Mansell in *Education by Numbers*, Politicos, London: 2007, pp33-35: evidence of government advice to practice extensively for the tests)
- Children's development hampered by teaching to the test. (For example, speaking and thinking development: Hargreaves, L. et al 'How do elementary school teachers define and implement interactive teaching in the national literacy hour in England?' American Educational Research Association Conference, New Orleans, 2002)
- Teachers forced to focus disproportionately on borderline Level 4 pupils with, for example, government-funded booster classes described by Ofsted as 'late intervention to ratchet up performance'. (www.literacytrust.org.uk/update/strat.html#3Rs)

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August 2007