

Pressure, anxiety and collateral damage

THE HEADTEACHERS' VERDICT ON SATS

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**more
than a
score**

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The research team

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Annette Braun is a lecturer in sociology of education at UCL Institute of Education. Her main areas of interest are in sociological

policy analysis, teacher identities and teachers' work. She has written and researched extensively on the enactment of education policy, i.e. the translation and interpretation of policy at school and classroom level. Her recent publications include 'Doing without believing – enacting policy in the English primary school' (2018, with Meg Maguire) in *Critical Studies in Education* and 'Headship as policy narration: generating metaphors of leading in the English Primary School' (2019, with Meg Maguire) in *Journal of Educational Administration and History*.

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Note: This research was commissioned by the More Than A Score organisation but was conducted independently. The analysis presented here is the author's and does not necessarily reflect the views of More Than A Score.

Executive summary

This report details findings from a research study which explored headteachers' views on the statutory assessments taken at the end of primary school, known as SATs. Data were collected through an online survey of headteachers with 288 respondents and in-depth interviews with 20 headteachers during March–June 2019. The key findings are:

1. Primary headteachers in England view Key Stage 2 SATs as having a largely negative impact on the staff and pupils in their schools.
2. Headteachers' concerns about SATs mainly relate to the high stakes they have for the school. This results in the need for Year 6 and in some cases the entire school to be organised in ways which maximise test scores, with effects on pupils, staff and headteachers.
3. The impact of SATs is felt through a range of approaches to preparing for SATs. Many areas of school life are affected, including the curriculum, grouping and intervention strategies, provision of out-of-hours and holiday revision, and allocation of teachers and teaching assistants.
4. The approach taken to preparation varies in intensity, depending on factors such as the school's previous results and Ofsted grade, position in the process of academisation, the attitude of parents and the size of the school. The differences in approach cast doubt on the operation of SATs as a 'standardised' test that can be reliably used to compare schools' performance. As one headteacher commented, 'It's comparing who games best not who teaches best'.
5. Headteachers are concerned about the impact on children: 83% agree that 'SATs have a negative impact on pupils' well-being'. The main concerns relate to stress and anxiety, and the impact on pupils with SEND and those seen as 'vulnerable'. Schools employ various techniques to help children manage and reduce the stress of SATs.
6. There are also serious concerns about the impact on staff: 99% of the survey respondents agreed that 'SATs put pressure on teachers', and 92% agreed that 'SATs have a negative impact on teachers' well-being'. The role of the Year 6 teacher has acquired increased significance and is prioritised in staff allocation.
7. Headteachers themselves experience stress and anxiety related to SATs, particularly related to the possibility of losing their jobs if results go down. A considerable amount of headteachers' time is taken up in supporting SATs preparation and making decisions based on the prioritisation of SATs results.
8. Recent changes to SATs are also seen negatively: 91% of survey respondents answered No to the question 'In your view, have the changes made to the content of Key Stage 2 SATs in recent years improved the assessment?'. The division of children into those reaching an 'expected level', and those not, is seen as problematic, and the revised papers are seen as inappropriate by some.

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9. The additions to the assessment framework introduced in 2019 (the Multiplication Tables Check) and planned for 2020 (Reception Baseline Assessment) are seen by many headteachers as unnecessary, inaccurate and potentially damaging.
10. Many headteachers particularly object to the ways in which SATs results are used in a high stakes system of accountability through their links to Ofsted ratings and the negative comparisons they generate with other schools, as well as their impact on the children. As one commented, 'There must be a better way to do it'.
11. Many headteachers accept some form of accountability is appropriate but would prefer more nuanced and complex systems of measuring their success which take into account schools' different contexts and create less pressure than one week of tests. Many suggest using teacher assessment, either alone or alongside standardised assessments.
12. This research suggests SATs have far-reaching and distorting effects on school organisation and the curriculum. As one headteacher put it, 'With high stakes testing, the whole of the school's activity is based around passing tests'.

Background

What are 'SATs'?

Key Stage 2 national curriculum assessments, known as SATs, have been taken by pupils aged 10 and 11 in England since the early 1990s. They were introduced as part of a series of reforms to increase accountability by providing comparable attainment data on all children at the end of their primary school years, and to help parents choose a school within a market-based system. The data from Key Stage 2 SATs are compared in performance tables – commonly known as league tables – and form a key part of the data used by Ofsted to assess a school's performance. As such, they are high stakes assessments for primary schools.

The form and content of Key Stage 2 SATs has changed over the years with different governments prioritising particular areas of the core subjects of English and mathematics, and previously, science. There have also been different weightings given to different elements, and the role of teacher assessment rather than formal tests has altered over time. The current system, in place since 2016, includes test papers as follows:

- Grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS)
- Reading
- Mathematics (arithmetic and reasoning)
- Mathematics (reasoning).

There are also teacher assessments in writing and science (STA 2018).

Year 6 children aged 10–11 across England take the SATs tests at the same time over one week in May, and these are marked

externally. In 2019, 65% reached the 'expected level' in reading, writing and maths (DfE 2019b). Pupils and their parents were told whether they had 'reached the expected standard' or not, and if they were 'working at greater depth'. These labels have replaced the national curriculum assessment scores of Levels 3, 4 and 5. The categorisations are based on the conversion of raw marks in the tests into scaled scores of between 80 and 120, with those reaching at least 100 designated as reaching the expected level. These conversions differ year by year, with the intention of keeping the expected standard the same over time, even though tests may vary in difficulty. In 2019, 21% of children were designated as not reaching the expected standard in maths, 27% in reading, 22% in writing, and 21% in GPS. This led to headlines such as 'SATs: A third below par in reading, writing and maths' (BBC News 2019c). The Department for Education (DfE) press release, in contrast, was titled 'Results show primary pupils are ready for secondary school' (DfE 2019b).

Over the last four years, as schools have become more familiar with the new tests and revised curriculum, results overall have improved, but there continue to be disparities between results for different groups of children. The DfE provides more detailed analysis of results by various pupil characteristics which show that in 2019 the expected standard was reached in reading, writing and maths by 47% of pupils in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM), compared to 68% of all other pupils (DfE 2019). Taking all children together, 60% of boys compared to 70% of girls reached the expected standard. There were also clear month-of-birth effects with 71% of September-born children

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reaching the standard compared to 58% of August-born children. 22% of children identified as SEN reached the standard, compared to 74% of their peers. The gaps for pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) is much smaller, at 64% compared to 65% of non-EAL pupils.

While there has been a range of research on SATs conducted since their introduction, there is however little research on their impact in their current form, or the views of headteachers on SATs; this report attempts to address this gap. The remainder of this background section addresses the place of SATs within the accountability regime, the political debates related to the tests, and the previous research.

Testing and the high-stakes accountability regime

Key Stage 2 SATs form a central part of the accountability framework for primary schools, offering data on students' end points after seven years of primary education. At present, primary schools conduct statutory assessment in five year groups (out of seven):

- Reception (the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile)
- Year 1 (the Phonics Screening Check)
- Year 2 (Key Stage 1 SATs)
- Year 4 (Multiplication Tables Check)
- Year 6 (Key Stage 2 SATs).

The Multiplication Tables Check was a new addition to this framework in 2019, and there is a national pilot for a revised version of Baseline Assessment at the start of Reception in autumn 2019, with this

becoming statutory in 2020. Primary schools are thus subject to a heavy load of statutory assessments in comparison with secondary schools, with Key Stage 2 SATs being the most significant for a number of reasons.

SATs results, in the form of a percentage of children reaching the expected standard, are vital in determining a school's league table position. Data comparing Key Stage 2 SATs results with those from Key Stage 1 assessments are also used as a measure of the progress children have made over four years, and have a prominent place in the league tables. The progress score is calculated by comparing the Key Stage 2 results with the scores of children with similar Key Stage 1 results across England (rather than based on specific children and their previous results). SATs results thus provide information for parents when choosing a school as part of a market-based education system.

SATs also provide information for secondary schools, which use Key Stage 2 data to make decisions on groups and streams when children first arrive (Hutchings 2015; Taylor et al. 2018). Moreover, since the introduction of Progress 8, the accountability measure for secondary schools that compares Key Stage 2 data with GCSE results in some subjects, SATs results have become important as a baseline for the tracking of secondary students' attainment. The use of progress measures is controversial, however, with some evidence that it advantages schools with intakes of more advantaged children (Leckie and Goldstein 2018).

SATs results are also used internally to assess the performance of individual teachers and, of course, headteachers. Since

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the introduction of performance-related pay for teachers and senior leaders (DfE 2013), results in assessments have been used as performance objectives which determine whether teachers' pay increases each year. Finally, SATs are 'high stakes' for primary schools because the results form part of Ofsted's analysis of a school's quality. Poor results can trigger an Ofsted inspection, and in the longer term there is a risk that a school may be required to become an Academy within a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) (Simkins et al. 2018). Press reports suggest over 300 primaries have been removed from local authority (LA) control after inadequate Ofsted judgements in the last three years (McIntyre and Weale 2019). The academisation issue is important as far fewer primaries have become academies than secondaries: 67% of primaries remain in LA control compared to 24% of secondaries in 2019 (DfE 2019a).

Thus SATs continue to be a key element of the accountability framework across the education system, and a 'high stakes' assessment; this is why they remain controversial.

Public campaigns and the political reaction

SATs were introduced in order to raise standards in primary schools, and government policy on their purpose and usefulness remains committed to the principle of standardised assessments as a method of monitoring and comparing the quality of primary schools, despite many critiques and campaigns from the education sector, including a national boycott in 2010 where a quarter of schools did not take

part. Education Secretaries have repeatedly defended the SATs system, arguing:

English and maths are the non-negotiables of a good education. Since 2010 primary teachers have led a revolution in school standards with 90,000 more pupils now starting secondary with a good grasp of the basics. (Nicky Morgan quoted in Ross 2015)

Good assessment supports good teaching and helps to prepare children to succeed at secondary school. (Justine Greening in DfE 2017)

[T]hese tests give parents an idea of how well their children are doing in English and maths and, in some cases, what additional support they may need at secondary school. (Damian Hinds 2019)

In 2018, there was widespread press coverage of the pressure placed on students and teachers by SATs, and educational organisations and unions have stated serious concerns about the current system of accountability. For example, a representative from the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) commented 'Schools do their best to protect their pupils from stress and anxiety, but action is clearly needed to reduce the pressure of the current system... The problem is not the tests themselves but the fact that they are used as the main way of judging primary schools and the stakes are extremely high' (quoted in Weale and Adams 2018).

Survey results continue to suggest that school leaders view the current system of SATs as problematic: a YouGov survey published in March 2019 (also funded by More Than A Score) found that:

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- 96% of senior primary teachers have some concerns about the effects of the tests on the well-being of pupils.
- 83% say they have been contacted by parents who are concerned that Key Stage 2 SATs are making their child stressed and anxious.
- 89% felt Key Stage 2 SATs cause stress in teachers' working lives.
- 95% agree that pupils spend too much time preparing for KS2 SATs (MTAS 2019).

It is clear from these results based on the views of headteachers, deputy heads and senior teachers that SATs continue to be a controversial part of the primary school accountability system. However, Schools Minister Nick Gibb has rejected these concerns, saying 'I think schools have adapted extremely well to what is a more demanding curriculum that we introduced in 2014. But we want to go further. We want every young person leaving primary school to be fluent in reading and fluent in arithmetic' (quoted in Weale & Adams 2018). There has been some recognition of the issues relating to SATs from Ofsted: the revised inspection framework in place from September 2019 will 'focus on what children actually learn, ahead of results' and is 'Designed to discourage a culture of "teaching to the test"' (Gov.uk 2019).

In the political arena, SATs have become a dividing line between the government and Labour opposition, with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn promising in April 2019 to remove the 'regime of extreme pressure testing' in schools by abolishing SATs' (as well as the new version of Baseline). This plan was supported by the major teaching unions, including the National Association of Head Teachers and Association of School and College Leaders. Abolition of SATs was described by the Conservative government as a 'terrible, retrograde step' that would 'enormously damage our education system' (Whittaker 2019).

The distance between the government position on SATs and the concerns of many professionals about the high stakes for schools was further demonstrated in comments from the then Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds, in 2019. He suggested that schools should not engage in intensive preparation and that Year 6 pupils should not feel under pressure when taking SATs: 'The truth is that pupils only need to treat SATs in the same way that they treat other work like a spelling or times table test – they just need to do their best' (Hinds 2019). In contrast, research suggests that SATs cause a great deal of stress for headteachers, teachers and pupils.

Previous research

The impact of SATs

There is an extensive literature on the impact of high stakes testing on schools' practices and priorities both in England and internationally (such as Au 2011; Booher-Jennings 2008; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Stobart 2008), with specific literature focused on primary assessment (such as Alexander 2009; Bradbury 2014; Pratt 2016; Reay and Wiliam 1999). As with any high stakes assessment, SATs have an inevitable impact on the practices and priorities of headteachers and school staff in primary schools, and of course on the children themselves (Mansell 2007). As summarised in the Cambridge Primary Review 2009, teachers are not against accountability, but have concerns over the way that 'the apparatus of targets, testing, performance tables, national strategies and inspection is believed to distort children's primary schooling for questionable returns' (Alexander 2009, p. 2). According to Alexander (2009), the 'collateral damage' incurred due to SATs is felt in the narrowed curriculum, teacher and pupil stress, and organisational systems such as grouping by attainment.

Researchers have explored how SATs narrow the curriculum in Year 6, with an explicit focus on maths and literacy and test preparation until 'SATs week' in May; this means that other subjects and particularly PE and the arts are not taught in the spring term and first part of the summer term (Boyle and Bragg 2006; Hutchings 2015; NUT 2016). This narrowing of the curriculum or 'teaching to the test' has also been noted in younger year groups (Ofsted 2017). There may also be a narrowing within subjects, as the elements that are tested become

the key focus (Beverton et al, 2005 cited in Stobart 2008); this means that non-tested areas such as speaking and listening receive less attention, while areas introduced to the tests such as grammar receive more. There may also be an impact on pedagogy, with more rote-learning (Harlen and Crick 2002). The prioritisation of children on the borderline of getting the expected level, for example through the use of 'booster groups', a process known as 'educational triage' is commonplace; indeed in the mid-2000s the government provided 'booster packs' of materials designed for these target children (Stobart 2008). These practices vary from school to school, but there are some patterns: Hutchings (2015) found that the use of strategies increased among schools with lower attainment and pupil progress, less good Ofsted overall judgements, and/or a higher percentage of disadvantaged pupils. There is also research suggesting that SATs encourage schools to put children into attainment – or 'ability' – based groups or sets for maths and literacy in Year 5 and Year 6 as this is seen as the best way to improve results (Towers et al. 2019).

More recently, attention has turned to pupils' well-being. There is emerging evidence that SATs have an impact on pupils' well-being: in a 2018 National Education Union (NEU) survey, nine in 10 teachers thought the system was detrimental to children (NEU 2018). Quotes from teachers suggest that Year 6 pupils are reduced to tears by the pressure of SATs and some come to 'detest' school (Hutchings 2015; NEU 2018; NUT 2016). A 2017 survey of primary school headteachers for The Key (a support service for school leaders) found that eight out of 10 reported an increase in children

Previous research

presenting with mental health issues due to assessments and curriculum changes over the last two years. Almost 80% of participating primary headteachers said that they had noticed an increase in stress, anxiety and panic attacks amongst their pupils in the last two years, while 76% had seen an increase in fear of academic failure (The Key 2017).

There may also be differentiated effects on particular groups of pupils: an NEU survey of teachers found that 88% thought that children identified as SEND are particularly disadvantaged; 66% thought the same for EAL pupils and 54% for summer-born children (who are younger when they take the test) (NEU 2018). One teacher commented: “SEND children are generally ‘written off’ because they won’t ever achieve the standard, and in preparation for SATs all of the attention goes on the children who will and need to make it” (NEU 2018).

The role of primary headteachers: high stakes headship

The current context of significant policy change under the Coalition and Conservative governments since 2010 – the ‘policy storm’ (Bradbury 2018) – has left primary headteachers with a number of serious challenges. Tensions between external pressures and the immediate demands of headship take a ‘toll’ (Hammersley-Fletcher 2013); they are one of the causes of problems in recruiting and retaining headteachers (Busby 2019; Turner 2018). The impact of the volume of reforms instigated under the Coalition and Conservative governments has also been significant: research suggests headteachers feel ‘punished’, ‘under the cosh’, ‘bound down and broken’ and ‘at sea’ (Bradbury

and Roberts-Holmes 2017b). They need to respond quickly to policy reform, becoming ‘jugglers who cannot afford to drop the ball’ (Maguire and Braun 2019, p. 12). Combined with rapid changes to local school markets through academisation, the system as a whole is in a state of flux (Coldron et al. 2014, p. 391). Many primary heads have resisted widespread academisation into large MATs, preferring smaller groupings (Simkins et al. 2018, p. 9). However, there is also evidence of some distancing of primary schools from the corporate values of some local authorities (Boyask 2018); thus the primary sector as a whole is more fragmented than ever before. During the New Labour years, there were also claims that headteachers were experiencing extreme levels of stress due to the pressures of accountability (Pratt-Adams and Maguire 2009; Thomson 2008); however, the scale and speed of reform to local education structures since 2010 marks an intensification of these pressures as the potential consequences of poor Ofsted grades or lower results have become more significant (Simkins et al. 2018).

At the same time, headteachers face many tensions between government prescription and their educational values. Clearly, different primary headteachers respond in very different ways to the policy context; however, overall, it has been argued that there is ‘much less space to be edu-heroes who challenge and resist aspects of policy that they are less comfortable with’ in primary schools (Maguire and Braun 2019, p. 5). The context of high stakes headship means that SATs results, intrinsically related to Ofsted grades and local standing, are hugely significant for primary headteachers.

Research questions

Given this historical and political context and the existing literature, More Than A Score commissioned this research to find out what serving headteachers think about SATs and the impact on their schools. There is little up-to-date research on the current practices operating in primary schools in England¹ and none which explores the current form of SATs. There is also very little known about what headteachers, as the mediators or enforcers of government policy, think about SATs.

The research was conducted independently by a research team at the UCL Institute of Education. The questions that guide this project and report are:

1. How do headteachers view the impact of Key Stage 2 SATs on their schools, in terms of the allocation of time, activities and resources?
2. How do headteachers view the impact of these activities and organisational systems on different groups of students, including SEN and EAL pupils?
3. What are headteachers' views on the claims of adverse effects of SATs, such as the narrowing of the curriculum, and the impact on pupil well-being and teacher workload?
4. What are headteachers' views on the recent and planned reforms to primary assessment, including the changes to the content of Key Stage 2 SATs, the new Multiplication Tables Check and the return of Baseline Assessment?

¹The other parts of the UK operate different assessment systems.

The research study

Data collection took place in the period March – June 2019 and used a mixed methods approach involving a nationwide survey and interviews with 20 headteachers.

Online Survey

The survey was compiled using Opinio software, based on the research questions and good practice in survey design. The survey was piloted within the research team and with a primary headteacher, and the responses incorporated in the survey design. The link to the online survey was distributed via the NEU and social media, with a specific request for headteachers to respond. It was completed by 297 people in the period March–June 2019 (when SATs were completed by Year 6 pupils). The respondents were leaders at Community Primary Schools, Faith Schools, Academies and other schools, with a range of Ofsted ratings (though ‘Good’ was the most common). Further details of the sample are provided in Appendix 1. Data here are included from respondents who were headteachers or executive headteachers (n=288); they had occupied these positions for varying lengths of time (approximately 30% each from under 5 years, 5–9 years, and 10–19 years, and 5% over 20 years).

Respondents were asked a series of questions about the impact of SATs and the preparation for SATs on children and staff in their school (see Appendix 2 for the full list of questions). They were also asked to identify different areas of school life that they thought were affected by SATs (such as extra-curricular clubs, the organisation of the school year and staffing). They were also asked if they strongly agreed, agreed, neither agreed or disagreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with a number of statements, which were based on existing literature

and material related to SATs. A number of questions allowed respondents to write in free text answers, and these are denoted in the report by a W when quoted.

The data generated by the survey was exported and analysed using Excel. Not all respondents completed the later questions on the survey. In cases where there were non-responses, percentages are reported as a proportion of those that answered the question, rather than of the whole number. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 20 headteachers at primary schools in various regions of England. In two cases the headteacher requested that the deputy head joined them in the interview. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the headteachers represented different types of school as well as different areas (see Table 1 and 2, where the information on region is presented separately to aid anonymity). Contact was made through the existing professional networks of the research team and through survey respondents who volunteered to be interviewed. A priority of the sampling strategy was to explore regional and local variation, following recent discussions of the ‘London effect’ and regional disparities (BBC News 2019b), and the existing literature on the particular challenges of urban headship (Pratt-Adams and Maguire 2009). The inclusion of schools that are academies, both recent and longer-standing converters, and part of both large and local MATs, was also a key aim. Headteachers in the sample varied by gender (nine female and 11 male), age and length of time as a head.

The research study

| Region | Number of Schools |
|-------------|-------------------|
| East Anglia | 2 |
| Midlands | 4 |
| North | 3 |
| London | 5 |
| South East | 4 |
| South West | 2 |

Table 1: Regions of schools where interviews took place

| Name | Type of School | Ofsted | Size | Area |
|----------|---------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| School A | Community School | Good | 2 form entry | Village |
| School B | Academy | Outstanding | 3 form entry | City |
| School C | Community School | Requires Improvement | 1 form entry | Village |
| School D | Community School | Good | Mixed age classes | Village/Rural |
| School E | Community School | Outstanding | 2 form entry | City |
| School F | Academy | No Ofsted yet | 2 form entry | Town |
| School G | Church of England Academy | No Ofsted yet | 1 form entry | Town |
| School H | Church of England School | Good | 1 form entry | City |
| School I | Academy | No Ofsted yet | 3 form entry | City |
| School J | Academy | No Ofsted yet | 2 form entry | Town |
| School K | Catholic School | Good | 1 form entry | City |
| School L | Community School | Good | 1 form entry | Village/Rural |
| School M | Community School | Good | 2 form entry | Village |
| School N | Academy | Good | 2 form entry | City |
| School O | Church of England Academy | Requires Improvement | Mixed age classes | Village/Rural |
| School P | Church of England School | Good | 1 form entry | Town |
| School R | Church of England Academy | No Ofsted yet | Mixed age classes | Town |
| School S | Church of England School | Good | 2 form entry | City |
| School T | Community School | Outstanding | 3 form entry | City |
| School W | Community School | Good | 1 form entry | Town |

Table 2: List of interview participants

The research study

Headteachers were interviewed using standard interview schedules by a member of the research team. Interviews were recorded and transcribed professionally for analysis. Qualitative data analysis focused on the themes generated by the research questions, and then identified significant sub-themes through thematic coding. These are represented in the findings sections that follow, which combine data from the survey and the interviews.

Ethical considerations

The research was conducted within the ethical guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association and the UCL Institute of Education. Ethical approval was gained from the UCL Ethics Review Board. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity and data has been stored securely and processed within GDPR guidelines.

The direct impact of SATs

This first section of findings reports on the ways that SATs preparation has a direct impact on the organisational life of the school. According to the survey and interview respondents, primary schools prepare for SATs in a wide range of ways, including changing the curriculum in Year 6, changing the curriculum in other year groups, organising pupil groupings around SATs predictions, setting and streaming, and provision of interventions in school time, before or after school and during the Easter holidays. The greatest impact of these was felt in Year 6, but there were some preparation strategies which affected the whole school. Many headteachers explained that SATs should not be an issue only for Year 6, but acknowledged that in reality the majority of strategies were deployed in Year 6. For example:

So, all the work should be done before the start of Year 6 and it should just be a little bit of a gentle push to get them over the line in Year 6. That's in theory but in practice, there is still a little bit of "hot-housing" that goes on. (School I)

The reality of preparation in some schools was a total orientation of the organisation of the school towards improving results in Year 6, involving a broad range of strategies. This emphasises how SATs are a 'hard' policy lever (Wallace et al. 2011) in terms of policy altering practice. However, it is important to note that there was great variation in the intensity of preparation, in that some schools used all of the practices listed above, and some used very few. Overall, there were few schools in our interview sample that engaged with none of the strategies mentioned, and few that engaged with all of them: most fall into the middle of a spectrum from 'intense' to 'less intense' preparation. The main strategies used are set below, before a discussion of why there is such variation in preparation approaches.

Changing the Curriculum and Pedagogy in Year 6

The most common strategy to prepare for SATs to emerge from the survey and interviews was changing the curriculum in Year 6, particularly after the Christmas holidays, so that there was over a full term to get ready for the SATs. In many cases, this was referred to as 'narrowing the curriculum', so that the focus became predominantly maths, reading, and SPAG, which are covered by the SATs papers. For example, respondents referred to the fact that the 'Curriculum [is] very much driven by the English and maths agenda' (W²) and the 'Curriculum is strait-jacketed by the need to prepare the children for the tests'. The survey responses to the statement 'SATs narrow the curriculum in Year 6' were as follows (n=188):

| Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 51% | 40% | 4% | 4% | 2% |

Thus, over 90% agreed that 'SATs narrow the curriculum in Year 6'. In practice, this results in subjects being removed from the timetable for the Spring term, or the time for them being reduced:

The curriculum is ALWAYS directed towards SATs as the tests are so influential to Ofsted (& so then reputation, league tables etc.). (W)

²Here 'W' indicates a written comment on the survey.

The direct impact of SATs

We try to keep a broad and balanced curriculum but there are still too many times when the more creative elements are lost. (W)

I would say that art doesn't get a big enough airing. Probably geography doesn't either. The morning is packed with those core subjects. The foundation subjects are fitted around the edge of the core.³ (School P)

Well, they narrow the foundation subjects because they don't get to do the wider, creative curriculum because of the timescales and the content that they need to get done and that's quite a lot so that restricts how many other things they would do, in terms of topics. (School M)

At some schools, the narrowing of the curriculum meant that almost all other subjects were removed, so that as well as morning sessions focused on SATs subjects, afternoons were also spent doing English and maths. For many headteachers, this loss of more creative and physical subjects was a source of concern:

We teach a curriculum that we would not otherwise feel is appropriate for 10 - 11-year-olds. (W)

We are not a SATs ramming school and refuse to make Y6 about SATs but know we have to prepare them for the tests and as such, our curriculum is not as broad and balanced in Y6 as it should be. (W)

For those children in Year 6 this year, and last year, it's intense, it's grotty. It's just reading, writing, maths, pretty much and I wouldn't choose that for any child, particularly if they're not very good at reading and writing and maths. It's fairly horrendous for them to have to do that all day, every day [...] In an ideal world I would not want to ever put a child through this. I would like them to have reading, writing, maths lessons of course but to have the broad spectrum of the curriculum. I think it's quite intense for them. I think it's quite gruelling for them. I think it's relentless. I absolutely know, of course they'd like to be doing other things. (School J)

There are clearly many tensions for headteachers related to the need for preparation for SATs, and the wider needs of the pupils beyond English and maths. As the head at School J comments here, focusing entirely on maths, reading and writing is 'intense' and 'gruelling'; she recognises the impact on the children, but discussed later in this chapter, feels under intense pressure to improve SATs results.

Although curriculum narrowing was the most popular form of preparation strategy, many headteachers did explain that they wanted to reduce the impact of curriculum narrowing, and took steps to prevent the loss of wider learning, often phrased as the 'broad and balanced curriculum'. As one head commented 'there is a focus on SATs, but that doesn't mean the kids don't do lots of other exciting things' (School W). Indeed, some schools protected their afternoon lessons (when non-English and maths subjects are usually taught) in a deliberate attempt to resist the narrowing of the curriculum. These schools took a less intense approach to preparation in general, for reasons discussed below.

³ 'Core' subjects are English and maths, and foundation subjects are all other areas of the curriculum.

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Other schools cut down on ‘distractions’ from SATs preparation:

Christmas celebrations cut right back to have the minimum amount of impact and time taken out of learning. Yr 6 kept out of community events and preparation from timetable that may be needed prior to the event. (W)

We’ve only just started doing trips and things again for any year group, and we didn’t have a sports day for the last couple of years. We haven’t had a Nativity; we don’t have a Christmas tree. We don’t dress up on Book Day. (School F)

A further change was a greater focus on exam technique in maths and English lessons and increased use of past SATs papers or individual SATs-type questions from a database; this alteration in focus for teaching was aimed directly at improving test scores. For example, at School F, where there was intense pressure to improve results:

We use the questions on papers more and more and we use commercial bought in variations of it. [...] once a week they will do a reading paper and once a week they will do a reasoning paper. (School F)

From January, the children will start to be feeding in practice papers and so on and then the children, throughout that period, that five-month period, they will be working on those papers, some of the time. (School G)

These comments about altering teaching confirmed the finding from the survey, where headteachers responded to the statement ‘The content of SATs means we have to ‘teach to the test’ were as follows (n=193):

| Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 33% | 40% | 8% | 15% | 4% |

Thus 73% of headteachers agreed SATs had an impact on teaching, whereby the focus was on the test requirements. Some headteachers saw the more intense forms of teaching based on the tests at other schools as inappropriate:

There then becomes a great sense of fear amongst everyone so there’s lots of drill and practice. All the ideas of really good teaching goes out the window really. It’s a sledgehammer approach. (School E)

This idea of ‘drill and practice’ reflects the association in other research between testing and increased rote-learning (Harlen and Crick 2002). This alteration to pedagogy, where the focus becomes preparation for tests alongside developing understanding, suggests further alteration of the focus of lessons for Year 6 pupils.

Intervention strategies

A further common strategy was the use of ‘interventions’, a phrase used to refer to the removal of small groups of children or individuals from the main classroom by an additional member of staff, for some form of targeted work during the school day. These systems, sometimes related to bought-in specific programmes of work, are in widespread use in primary education (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017a). However, in Year 6, they appear

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to be more focused on SATs preparation. This issue is related to curriculum narrowing in that many of the interventions take place in the afternoons, and children may miss the non-SATs subjects when they are taking place. Interventions also take place in assembly time and during lunchtime and breaks.

We hold many intervention groups and booster groups start now with Year 5 after SATs and through to Yr 6 SATs. (W)

Afternoons are taken for interventions and trips are restricted. (W)

The class teachers just do additional literacy and numeracy in the afternoon to try and plug any gaps the children have. (School A)

So they tend to be all in the class together, in the mornings for maths, English and reading lessons but then in the afternoons, they miss a lot of the non-curriculum for intervention work. (School O)

... the teachers can keep some children in assembly to do same day intervention. (School L)

In some cases, interventions are specifically focused on SATs-related skills or issues related to sitting the tests themselves; for example:

In terms of SATs interventions, we had a group of girls that were struggling around confidence, so twice a week, for an hour a week, in the lesson before lunchtime, I did a top-up group for those. (School R)

These programmes of intervention vary in their length, focus, timing and who teaches them. They appear to be a key strategy for preparing for SATs, with a particular focus on resolving 'gaps' in children's knowledge and skills. The idea of 'same day' interventions was often cited, where teachers aimed to resolve any misunderstandings immediately following the lesson during assembly time or break time. For example, one headteacher explained 'it's not a case of having intervention groups, it's responding to what's happened in the morning or in that session' (School P). This is a labour-intensive form of grouping where teachers have to make immediate assessments and prepare interventions depending on what the children are believed to need.

Interventions and other 'booster groups' were often aimed at 'cusp' or 'borderline' children who are nearly reaching the expected standard or nearly reaching the higher standard of 'greater depth'. This system of focusing on the borderline pupils is a trend associated with high stakes tests at all stages of the education system, known as 'educational triage' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Marks 2014).

It's very much driven by the data and resources are very much targeted at children who are borderline, in other words, children who might get it or we might get them across the line with some intensive interventions and so, those children are very much targeted. (School W)

...probably three afternoons there's maths intervention. With a qualified teacher [...] it depends who we think could benefit. If they're cuspy, both top and bottom probably. So, the higher ability probably get some and then the cuspy ones get some. (School F)

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Intervention groups are focussed on the children that are borderline to pass the tests at the expense of other children The rest of the school is held hostage to these tests as staff want to give the children the best possible chance to do well. (W)

In other research this prioritisation strategy has been associated with the perpetuation of disparities in attainment through the selection of who is deemed to be 'borderline' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000). It is not clear if this is the case here where children are identified using data. Focusing interventions on 'cusp' children is clearly a common strategy aimed specifically at improving SATs results.

One important related factor is the impact of providing interventions on allocation of staff, and the impact on the rest of the school; for example, 'We put the children into small groups which means taking support staff and leadership away from other parts of the school' (W).

Grouping, setting and streaming

There is an association within the literature and in professional discussion between preparation for high stakes tests and the 'setting' of pupils, where children are split into attainment-based groups rather than kept in their own class for some subjects (Bradbury 2018; Campbell 2014; Marks 2016; Towers et al. 2019). While for some respondents there were clear links between these practices, setting in Year 6 was far from universal. The survey responses to the statements 'SATs mean we have to group pupils by ability in English' and 'SATs mean we have to group pupils by ability in maths', indicated variations in perspectives (n=183 and n=188 respectively):

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| English | 13% | 22% | 21% | 33% | 11% |
| Maths | 17% | 30% | 18% | 27% | 8% |

For English, 35% agree while 44% disagree that SATs require grouping by ability, whereas the proportions are reversed for maths with 47% agreeing and 35% disagreeing. As suggested by previous research (Marks 2014), the use of grouping remains more common in maths than in English subjects, though the variety of different lessons that come under the term English may confuse matters here. Even if we remove the schools which are one-form entry (where the practical possibilities of setting are lower; leaving n=71), a similar pattern remains for English, as 32% agree and 41% disagree. For maths, 52% agree while 28% disagree. However, there were clear suggestions in the interviews that grouping practices were affected by size. Some heads of smaller schools noted the impracticality or budget constraints which prevent setting, and in small schools with mixed-age classes children had to be organised differently for a period. For example, one headteacher commented: 'if you've got a large school with more than one form entry then you have got more scope to do that' (School W).

Across the range of different size schools, and as suggested by previous research (Hallam et al. 2004), the idea of setting generates very strong feelings relating to morality and fairness as well as good pedagogy, and there are some headteachers who object strongly to the practice:

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On a sort of moral level, I'm opposed to setting, although that's exactly what I have in Year 6, but not just two or three sets, on a daily basis there might be six sets. I'm not a fan of it, but it [SATs] definitely encourages setting and I know that lots and lots of schools set from Year 3, 4 onwards. (School J)

... if it's that strict and that regimented and there is not a lot of flexibility and not a lot of movement, pupils get into a psyche of failure because they've always been in the bottom set. [...] You're just written off. That isn't, in my view, right or fair. (School B)

In order to stand a chance of children being able to cope under pressure we do set them from Feb onwards particularly for maths. I worry about the effect this has on children's maths mindsets and it goes against everything I believe in. (W)

In contrast, other headteachers see it as a normal strategy in preparation for SATs:

We do set in Year 5 and 6, just for maths. (School N)

Effectively they have an English set and a maths set, but when we do science [and topic] they are mixed ability. (School F)

We do it [set] in maths so that we can move those children on and it can be at a greater depth. Then, we build up the other children so that they can go at a slower pace, but not [in] English. (School M)

The likelihood of setting in response to SATs thus varies by subject, and non-SATs subjects are not set at all. When asked about the different choice for English, the head at School M responded:

For writing, we've always said that if you split for writing, those lower achieving children don't hear that rich vocabulary that they then could use in their writing. So, you're really putting a ceiling on their writing by not surrounding them with all that higher level thinking. The same with reading, I suppose, if they don't ever get to hear that higher level thinking then they're never going to use it. (School M)

The different approach for different subjects, already noted in wider literature (Marks 2014), is intensified by the needs of SATs. Even those headteachers who did not set for practical reasons, explained 'I can see why some schools do ... setting is easier' (School W).

In some cases, where setting was used, there were attempts to alleviate the known negative impact on children's self-esteem; in others there was scepticism about claims to be mixed-ability:

In Year 6 we have more sets but again, we try and have a bit of a mix in those sets. We don't just have a bottom set because if you're in the bottom set then in terms of mental well-being, you constantly think you're bottom. (School B)

... a lot of schools would [claim not to set]. So, they would say, "Oh, no, we're mixed ability at this school and all our learners learn together and everyone's happy." But then they get to Year 6 and they stream them. (School I)

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Attitudes towards setting in Year 6 are part of the overall approach to pupil grouping taken by the school. For instance, at School N, quoted above, where they set for maths in Year 5 and 6, they also set for maths in all year groups from Year 1 onwards. In some cases, schools use streaming (where children are placed in classes based on their attainment for the whole year); this can be just in Year 6 or throughout the school from Reception onwards. At School I, there was a system of higher, middle and lower classes through the school, which the head argued meant that they did not need to divide into further groups in Year 6:

Yes, so, we have the high ability [name] class, with 30 odd children in it and I suppose the expectation is that all of those children are going to get “Exceeding” plus a few of the others in the middle ability class. So, no amount of splintering or sub-grouping is going to help that. (School I)

This is the most intense form of grouping by ‘ability’, and relatively rare, based on the data collected. However, some schools also referred to past streaming practices, for example at School E where they described using three streamed classes in the past, and at School R where there had been past streaming under a previous headteacher. This is perhaps due to a greater prominence of research on the detrimental effects of attainment grouping (George 2019); for instance the head at School C commented ‘research shows that that’s not always effective’. Many other schools used varieties of in-class ability grouping and other looser forms of differentiation, as well as the intervention strategies described above.

It is clear that approaches to grouping as a necessary strategy in preparation for SATs vary as much as attitudes to grouping in general. The more intense forms (such as streaming and setting throughout) were present in the small number of schools in the sample that were aiming for a rapid improvement in results in order to ‘turnaround’, as I discuss in more detail below. Less vulnerable schools appear to be less likely to engage in attainment-based grouping practices, though this is not a consistent connection. Overall, while the sustained campaign of challenging attainment-based grouping in secondary schools has clearly had influence on some primary headteachers, a multitude of practices in grouping remain and a significant proportion of schools continue to use setting in preparation for SATs.

Out-of-hours sessions

At some schools, additional preparation sessions were held outside of school hours, including in the Easter holidays:

We do Easter revision, we have four days of Easter revision. We have Saturday additional hours. They start in January. We have after-school additional hours. (School B)

Holidays, so we don’t do every day – on purpose – because they need to have a break and they need to have downtime, etc. So, at half-term we did two days, we will do Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday next week, the same the week after [...] we started in January. We do morning school two days a week, so that is from 8 o’clock until quarter to nine when the school day starts. (School F)

They come in for two days in the Easter holidays, just long mornings [...] 9 until 1. And we do a session on reading, maths, and SPaG. (School S)

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We offer additional teaching as well. Eight o'clock, so children can come in at 8 o'clock. There's an invitation to all Year 6 to start at 8 o'clock from January. Saturdays we teach from January, and parts of the holidays. (School N)

This confirms discussion in the media about 'cramming' in the Easter holidays for SATs (BBC News 2019a). In contrast, at other schools with less intensive preparation strategies, headteachers had strong feelings about their decisions not to use additional sessions; for example, arguing 'I think they work hard enough ... I just feel depressed by Easter schools' (School T).

SATs week provisions

The practice of asking children to come to school early during SATs week and providing breakfast appeared to be near universal in the interview schools. This strategy was seen as necessary to calm children down and ensure they were on time, and to reduce the stress of SATs:

It's a chance for them to come in feeling positive, having a bit of interaction before they feel the seriousness gets on. It's just a way of helping. (School A)

We have breakfast club for them, every morning, so they enjoy coming in and having breakfast together and chatting with their friends and if they are feeling anxious, that calms them down. (School G)

We get everybody in and [name] in the kitchen cooks them a nice breakfast. They have a menu, they can choose what they want, and they don't have to pay. It's more to settle them, really. (School R)

Other schools used additional strategies to help children and staff cope with the pressures of that one week, including buying in additional resources and designing the curriculum around staying healthy during SATs:

We paid from the sports premium for boxing sessions to support stress relief and early morning SATs breakfast resources were provided for all Y6 pupils. (W)

In the term that they do the SATs, their topic is called [title]. They do a lean, mean SATs machine. So they look at how to stay healthy during SATs. There is quite a lot of conversation around their whole mental health, their whole physical well-being and what's important. That is all gearing up to SATs. You need to sleep, you need to eat. (School P)

Finally, some schools reported having a 'mock' SATs week including children sitting a series of papers on consecutive days in the room they would be using in actual SATs week:

[Year 6 teacher is] going to run the four days as if it's SATs week. So each day we're going to do the papers, albeit Monday will be Tuesday and Tuesday will be Wednesday, etc. She's going to do the GPS test on the Tuesday and the reading test on the Wednesday. (School C)

[What] we've tried to do is to do a mock preparation for them which before was in the classroom. It was much more sort of laid back about it and we thought, well we don't want them to be anxious on the day so two weeks beforehand is when we've done it in the hall, they've done it as a sort of test. (School K)

The direct impact of SATs

Again, this is a very time-consuming strategy in terms of setting up mock SATs and marking them, but it was deemed necessary in order to help prepare pupils emotionally and academically for the pressures of the SATs week.

The impact on the rest of the school

Some headteachers in the interviews suggested a less dramatic impact of SATs, or in some cases no impact at all, on the year groups other than Year 6. At some other schools, headteachers were adamant that the other year groups were not affected, and that the curriculum was not narrowed; commenting 'we keep it separate' (School R) and 'I don't think it affects the other classes at all. I think it's just something that Year 6 do' (School W).

However, in the survey a total of 52% agreed or strongly agreed that 'SATs narrow the curriculum in other year groups' (n=188):

| Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 15% | 36% | 14% | 27% | 7% |

When asked if they agreed with this statement the headteachers we interviewed responded:

To a lesser extent but I think they do yes, especially Year 5. (School D)

To a certain extent yes because we are tracking the children so carefully because we know we have got to get them to age-related expectation. We are pushing those children to the absolute limit in literacy and numeracy. We aren't pushing them to the absolute limit in things that they can really succeed in like art and technology and those hands-on kids who just need to be doing stuff like that we take them away from that and we push them and push them. Some of them want to be singing in the hall during assembly and we are saying, 'No. Come on. You haven't got addition sorted out so let's get down there.' It's just wrong so, yes, I would agree with that one. (School A)

But it does affect the big picture because if Year 3 aren't covering the curriculum in the way they need to do and Year 4 aren't pushing the curriculum or Year 5, suddenly there's gaps and the Year 6 teacher feels that pressure to fill those gaps and because there is a measurable point. (School C)

In other schools there were similar comments about the 'whole school responsibility' for SATs, and the need for everyone to be involved in preparation:

We're really aware now that the work starts right from the moment they enter the school in Nursery and every single teacher, every single year group, plays a part in getting those children where they need to be at the end of Year 6. So, the preparation starts as soon as the three-year-olds step through the door and we try and give that message out to all the staff, as well. You know, good results are everybody's results. (School I)

To be completely honest, ideally, the preparation for SATs starts as soon as they start in Year 3 because it has to not be about just what happens in Year 6. (School L)

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Similarly, the head at School B commented on shifting the focus in the early years (EYFS) to English and maths:

You're trying to get away from a focus on the kind of wider EYFS profile and focusing on English and maths, which is the core of any primary curriculum. (School B)

The impact on the rest of school was particularly felt in some smaller schools, where staff were needed to administer the SATs, leaving the rest of the children without teachers. One headteacher referred to children in other year groups who 'just had holding activities, for five days in SATs week' (School O) because a supply teacher was too expensive.

In some cases, the whole school curriculum and organisation was geared towards preparing children for SATs, so that the impact was felt throughout the school, as in the case of the school with streaming from Reception discussed above. There were indications that SATs in Year 6 encouraged the use of SATs-style assessments throughout the school, to allow for detailed tracking of who might meet the expected standard (or age-related expectation, known as ARE), even when the data were not deemed useful for teachers.

All of the children across the school have weekly arithmetic tests anyway and spelling tests, but they do lots of SATs practice. Particularly since February half-term, there's been lots of SATs practice because there's a certain style of answering questions that they need to be fluent with. (School J)

Well, they all do assessments at the end of term basically and then we analyse them and look at the data and use it to measure progress, accountability. Use it to plan pupil progress and interventions and things like that. And they're all SATs in style: something like test-based or different kinds of assessment formulas. If we weren't being measured, would we do it like that? I don't know. You need to know where the kids... The thing is with the SATs tests that's similar to all the other tests, that data that you get from that is essentially useless for any teaching and learning purposes. (School H)

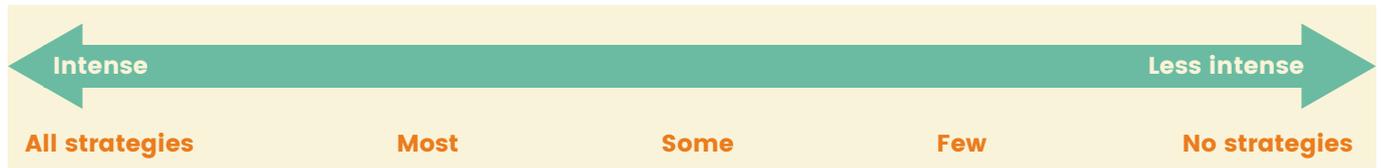
We've set, kind of, boundaries [in other year groups] on whether we think children are on track for ARE, on track for greater depth or working towards the standard, again, to kind of mirror what's going on in Year 6 and then those are reported to parents. (School L)

The aim of this strategy at School L was to avoid 'the panic' when children started Year 6 and those assessed by teachers as 'on track' through Key Stage 2 were found to be actually 'working towards' ARE. As with the intervention strategies throughout the school, these regular assessments suggest long-term planning which is influenced by SATs. Importantly, the data from regular SATs-style assessments used at School H are seen as 'essentially useless for any teaching and learning purposes'; this suggests that the SATs have distorted the school priorities so that time is taken testing and collecting data which they see as meaningless and has no benefit to the children.

The direct impact of SATs

Reasons for the range of preparation strategies

Schools appear to take a wide range of approaches to SATs preparation which can be placed on a spectrum of more to less intense, based on the number of the strategies discussed above that they use.



There were some common features among the schools engaging in more and less intense forms of preparation, which suggest broad trends in justification of approaches, though these are based on a small sample of schools.

Beginning with those engaged in more intense preparation, it was noticeable that among our sample of 20 schools, those that felt under pressure to improve results quickly, particularly where they had been taken over by a MAT or were under pressure from a Requires Improvement Ofsted rating, used more of the preparation strategies listed above:

This place was in a hole and the only way to get out of that hole is to present it looking better. And part of that looking better is one of data, so we need a good judgement by Ofsted, we need a good judgement by the local authority and that does drive what you do. (School F)

It's not a sustainable model and this is only in turnaround schools that I would be throwing absolutely everything and teaching this much and doing all of this, because it's not sustainable. (School J)

The present Year 6 cohort were identified as being two years behind, two years ago at the last Ofsted inspection that the school had and there was obviously significant failings in terms of their teaching, historically. But I mean in terms of trying to get these guys ready for their SATs this year, has really been, literally a year's worth of preparation, lots of extension work, lots of missing other aspects of the curriculum and just trying to get them into a position where they can have a good stab at those exams. (School O)

This connection was also reflected in some comments from the survey:

For schools like mine that are trying to secure data to give us a Good [Ofsted] judgement, the stakes are high. This means that the focus is on doing everything possible to secure a positive outcome. (W)

For schools in the process of being 'turned around' by new headteachers, or who had previously been through this process, there were clear links made between the approach taken to SATs and the pressure for improved outcomes. These links were made by other headteachers too, for example at School E where there was reference to a past system where 'because there was a greater level of fragility, there was therefore more fall back on the test-taking regime' (with fragility here meaning lower results). Similarly, the headteacher at School I referred to the pressure felt in previous points along 'our journey', because SATs are 'the first area that you have to fix before Ofsted will come along and say, "Oh, great! Now you're at the required National Expectation"'.

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This connection suggests that the link between schools with lower attainment and pupil progress and the use of more strategies – as found in Hutchings' (2015) finding from secondary and primary schools – remains in primary schools in 2019. In an increasingly hierarchical and competitive context between schools, each headteacher will respond differently based on their position – they have to 'play the game with the cards they are dealt with' (Coldron et al. 2014, p. 389). At the other end of the spectrum, some headteachers explained that they did not need to use many strategies, though they also acknowledged that this was due to their 'safe' position:

We have a responsibility as school leaders to show that it is actually okay to take a risk based on what you believe is best in terms of best for the children, certainly best for the children, but actually the right educational decision, and I think that schools like ours if we don't take that if we don't make that stand, how's a school in Requiring Improvement ever going to be able to do that? (School E)

I think it depends on the headteacher's attitude to SATs and the situation that the school finds itself in. So here, because we've got generally bright, articulate children, for us, the SATs, to get good results, yes, they have to work hard but we can get those results. [Family member] teaches in a really poor, inner city school and the things that they have to do, to get their children anywhere near is vastly different. [...] They teach very much more ... their curriculum is narrowed and they do teach very much more to the test. So it's all about getting those good results because for them, the implications of not having good results, would affect the school. They could end up in a Requires Improvement or they could end up in a category. So I think for them, it's far more difficult and that's where the unfairness lies. (School G)

There is a clear recognition, in these 'safe' schools, that they are able to risk not engaging in intense preparation, which is placed in contrast to other schools with different demographic intakes. The headteacher at School G explained that at the inner-city school, for example, 'some of them can hardly speak, making it a very different ball game at her school than it is here'.

Similarly, headteachers at the schools using more intense forms of preparation justified their approach through explanations of parental engagement, social deprivation and low aspirations:

Unfortunately, none of our parents really seem to value education, whether they're white British or EAL families. [...] The only way we can really make a difference is that they leave here and that they're numerate and literate and so that's why I think it's worth throwing absolutely everything you possibly can to get them there, because once they get to high school, I want them to be 100 plus so that they are put in the middle band or higher so that they have those life chances. (School J)

We put a lot of emphasis on educational visits connected to what they're doing in English because for our pupils there is a cultural deficit. (School B)

The direct impact of SATs

... what your children, my children might do at home; taken to the library, reading books at night, our children don't do that. So, the way we see additional learning now is that it's actually taking the place of what normally would happen at home. [School I]

A further reason for different approaches was the attitude of parents. Many schools used a parents evening on SATs to allay fears and keep parents informed of how they prepare; several headteachers also commented on parents' anxiety:

...there were a lot of complaints about the fact that, "You do nothing which is fun, everything I remember at school was this, and all this lot." Is your child bored at school? Does your child hate coming to school? Come into the school and watch your child in the lessons, they are so eager, they are so keen, they are so focussed, they love school. And it's because they are being taught properly, and we don't need to do all of that. Now, if the parents aren't seeing that, and don't realise that, then they'll see what we are doing in Year 6 as being hammering them. (School F)

[Parents] stress about it and they all want the kids to do well. They worry about their children. They worry about their children worrying about SATs. They worry about if it's going to affect their secondary schools, which it doesn't. (School H)

I think they worry about it so they get anxious about it before Year 6 has started. I think they do get worried about what it entails [...] even though you say, "it's fine, it's fine." (School K)

However, in contrast to the anxious and 'pushy' parents mentioned above, other headteachers responded that parents rarely expressed views:

There is very little that is said [by parents]. They know that they have to do it. They have accepted they have to do it. They have done the open sessions and they are shocked by what the children have to do and what hoops they need to jump through. Does it affect us? No. I don't think so. We do what we need to do for the children. (School A)

Our parents aren't particularly interested; don't particularly care. We've had lots of meetings throughout the year to explain what we're doing and why. I think the parents send their children for after-school for an extra hour because it's free childcare. They send them in the holidays because we provide lunch and snacks and it's free and, again, it's free childcare. So, in our context, our parents have virtually no interest whatsoever in the SATs. (School J)

No. Zero [influence]. There's a good chunk of them that are apathetic and we are babysitters, and they don't want to come into school, they don't want anything to do with us, really. (School R)

As this range of quotes demonstrates, the headteachers' views of parents affect how much they influence decisions. There is however, no real sense that parents are able to have an impact on the school's approach, an area that requires further research.

The direct impact of SATs

There were also some examples where headteachers appeared to make choices about priorities for their school and attempted to balance the importance of SATs and associated practices seen as detrimental to the children, and those seen as ‘cheating’ or ‘gaming’:

Schools who don't cheat or drill EVERY WEEK or run after-school SATs clubs, or SATs holiday clubs, have lower scores. (W)

The actual measuring system itself is, one could even argue purposely, but it's certainly unjust. It's comparing who games best not who teaches best. (School E)

I'm not going to have some dubious test-taking practices that I'm aware that other schools do; I'm not going to do it; I'm not going to play that game because as I said, primary school has to be about more than that. (School L)

Clearly headteachers' personal ethos and vision for their school is another reason for the different approaches. Finally, as discussed earlier in relation to grouping and interventions, the size of the school and the resources available also affected approaches to SATs preparation. The headteachers from smaller schools explained that they have to engage in different systems of preparation and have far more limited resources to engage in intense strategies, especially where they have mixed-age classes. At School O, having to focus on only a handful of Year 6 pupils in a class with other children meant ‘it's inevitable that there's a degree of slippage with the other year groups’.

The reasons for different approaches are clearly complex. There are a wide range of approaches and a great deal of variation in the strategies used, which may disrupt the idea of a ‘standardised’ test that can be used to compare schools. The different levels of intensity of preparation experienced by Year 6 children raise questions about the reliability of these tests as ways of comparing attainment levels. Moreover, these different approaches are influenced by the position of the school in terms of past results, Ofsted grades and perceptions of the intake. The context that the school operates within affects the approach taken, with practices linked to local factors including levels of social deprivation.

The impact on pupils

This section focuses on what headteachers see as the impact of SATs on pupils. The vast majority of survey respondents agreed with the statement ‘SATs have a negative impact on pupils’ well-being’ (n=189):

| Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 44% | 39% | 10% | 7% | Under 1% |

This finding – that 83% agree that ‘SATs have a negative impact on pupils’ well-being’ – is a serious concern. It indicates that, regardless of their particular context and the specific challenges they face in meeting targets, headteachers feel they need to engage in practices which they see as having a negative impact on their pupils. It also confirms survey research from 2017 which suggested an increasing negative impact on children’s mental health (Weale 2017). Various areas of concern raised by respondents are covered here, relating to anxiety and stress, the problem of labelling children ‘failures’, and the impact on specific groups of pupils.

Children’s anxiety and stress

There was widespread concern among survey respondents over the stress that SATs caused for children, and the growth of anxiety among Year 6 pupils:

Everything has to stop for SATs. There is a different feel to our school. Children and parents report feeling the stress of this system, despite the fact that we try to minimise the impact that it has on everyone. (W)

As a Year 6 teacher for many years before becoming a head, I have seen children cry during and after the tests because they feel they have ‘failed’ or struggle to answer questions. This is far from ideal and not how children should be made to feel. (W)

It’s a negative impact. They are stressed and worry. They are exhausted by the Friday of SATs week. They aren’t in a good place. They don’t look forward to them. They think they are a failure if they don’t pass no matter what we say to them. (School A)

In some cases, these concerns were framed as relating to mental health of this age group:

I am concerned that the curriculum and SATs is expecting far too much for children of a primary age and we are seeing an increase in mental health problems in children as a result. Higher expectations of children should not take priority over children’s well-being. (W)

Children have panic attacks, don’t sleep and have been known to have mental health incidents. (W)

The impact on pupils

I think it causes a lot of mental health, being stressed, especially for vulnerable children. [...] I mean, the first year they introduced the new papers, was the first year in this school we had kids in tears. And that breaks your heart – kids sitting SATs in tears. And what's worse... What's worse than the kids in tears is you thinking I still want them to finish the frigging paper, even though I don't really, because I love that child and I don't want to put them through it. (School H)

These comments reflect a broader concern in education and among parents as to the emotional impact of high-stakes testing (TES 2019; The Key 2017). They also highlight a real concern for pupils' well-being, which can be damaged by too much pressure on four days of tests. The final quote also reveals the huge cost for the teachers of a combination of high-pressure tests and concern for children's well-being. Even where headteachers explained that they attempted to make the experience more positive, and some children enjoyed the challenge, there were still concerns about anxiety:

We would like to think none [impact], but the reality is that the anxiety of parents and staff puts pressure on children at this time of year. We try to keep it as normal as possible, but the test culture is endemic. (W)

There were also references to the pressure and worry beginning in Year 5, as children are aware they will need to sit SATs:

I know when they do the transition visits when they go to visit the next class, that's what the Year 5s will say, "Tell me one thing you're looking forward to and one thing you're worried about." Some children will put they are looking forward to SATs, not very many. Quite a few will put they are worried about it. So, it's obviously something that preys on their mind which is a shame really. (School L)

This suggests that despite schools' aims to begin preparations only in Spring term, children's worries about SATs start long before this, from Year 5.

Furthermore, when asked which groups of pupils were most affected by SATs, many respondents commented on the impact on children already suffering from anxiety; for instance, 'Children that are already nervous by nature or struggling with issues at this time already' (W). Other headteachers commented that children varied in their responses, with some 'high-achieving' pupils enjoying SATs, while others struggle to cope:

Yes, this lot, we had tears on the morning before they started, definitely. Yes different classes, different children obviously are different: some don't give a monkeys, some get really wound up, some enjoy it. We've got some who really seem to like it, the challenge and the fact ... especially the successful ones. (School D)

Attempts to reduce children's stress

In many cases, schools engaged in strategies to reduce the anxiety of children, as discussed in the previous chapter. Many headteachers mentioned the need to keep reassuring pupils, giving them confidence and managing their anxiety:

If you're not extremely careful, extremely careful, it can do [affect children]. I think there's a real risk of that. We do everything we can, can I be honest and say

The impact on pupils

it doesn't affect them? Probably not, but we do everything we can to minimise it. (School L)

25% absolutely hate it. Within that there are some kids who really struggle and some kids who it affects their self-esteem and their feel of success. Our job, as professionals, is to try to manage all those emotions. That's why the pastoral aspect is more important than the actual teaching aspect at this point. I've said it to two kids today. One girl came into my room this morning crying, a Year 6 pupil, "I'm really worried about my SATs". (School C)

I think it's about tempering that anxiety. I take every teaching assistant from across the school for SATs and we make sure we've got so many adults so the group of extra time will all have one to ones, then there will be at least three adults in each classroom, so yes, including [senior leader] and myself, so I think we're very hands on like that. (School S)

These quotes suggest the project of supporting children emotionally through SATs is significant, taking up staff time, including that of the senior leadership team. Careful planning needs to be in place in order to shield children from the pressures, or to minimise their impact. This also means that other activities cannot happen, because SATs take priority. In some cases, it was felt that the idea that you could limit impact was related to resources, for example at this small school:

... inevitably there are some issues around the well-being of the children, around the amount of attention that's put on SATs. I mean it made me laugh when I hear people say that SATs aren't a big deal if you're doing it right, the children won't know. I mean that's just absolute insanity [...] it's absurd, the idea ... I mean certainly perhaps if you have a big school and you've got a big budget, then perhaps you can run it in such a way that you can do that but for schools like ours, it affects the whole school. (School O)

Here context appears to affect not only how much preparation is possible but also the headteacher's ability to reduce the impact on children's well-being.

The problem of labelling

Several headteachers strongly objected to the implications of SATs for children who did not reach the expected standard or age-related expectation (ARE), and how this might label them as 'failures' at a young age:

I think to brand children as failures, in Year 6, I think it goes against everything that we come into teaching for, really. (School O)

They made things even harder, which means... The first year, what was it? 54% of children reached ARE combined? Now, psychologically, 46% of children then felt like failures. [...] Did it make it better? What, telling everyone they're failing? (School H)

It is emotional when you have to give the children their results. That is a very emotional day for a headteacher I think because you know that you are handing over complete disappointment to some children and families. (School A)

The impact on pupils

The simple cut-offs of ARE and not ARE are seen as harsh on some children and detrimental to their self-esteem as they continue on into secondary school; as another headteacher commented, 'it just feels mean' (School T). This system is seen as more problematic than the old Level 3 or 4 division which did not have such negative overtones as the phrase 'not reaching age-related expectations'. The DfE states that it is 'incorrect to say pupils who have not met the expected standard in reading cannot read, or that those who have not met the expected standard in writing cannot write, and so on' (DfE, 2019); however, this phrasing is in common use and the language of 'not reaching' ARE is seen as functioning as a similar label of failure.

These labels were also seen as having an impact on borderline or 'cusp' children who were close to reaching ARE, or the higher threshold of greater depth, and those with 'lower ability' in general. Responses to the survey when asked which groups were affected by SATs included:

Children on the cusp of expected standard. (W)

The children who find it hardest are the borderline children who are desperate to get a pass score and work very hard with no guarantee of success. It is completely demoralising for them to come out of a paper having been unable to answer questions and knowing they have not done well. (W)

It probably affects the self-confidence and self-esteem of lower achievers as children inevitably share their results. (W)

The 'cusp' or borderline children are directly affected by the format of the tests as their proximity to the cut-off for ARE results in more pressure on them to succeed, while the fear of 'failure' among lower-attaining pupils also means the SATs have more impact. This latter finding echoes that of Kelly (2018), whose research in six primaries found that low-attaining children in particular worry about SATs.

Impact on pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) and those from minority groups

Participants were asked specifically about the impact on groups of children, including children learning English as an additional language. In general, this was not a major concern, but for some schools there were concerns about the cultural appropriateness of the content of tests, and the impact on new arrivals with little understanding of English.

For some EAL children, it does not really test their true ability, especially reading. (W)

Pupils who come into our school later than Reception intake. Travellers who are not here all the time. Pupils with EAL find SATs a challenge - all of these are negatively affected by SATs. (W)

I think it's just another thing to add to their already more difficult experience of education. I think it's going to be harder for them because if you're EAL and you can't read very well because you haven't acquired a great command of the English language yet, to sit there with your reading paper with those texts which are quite long [...] I think it must just be horrendous for them. It must be. (School J)

The impact on pupils

They just get on with it. They don't get the reading, especially if they're new to country and you've got a kid that's arrived end of Year 5, so is he really going to comprehend the reading? No. Or will it just count against our percentage? Yes. (School H)

As indicated by these comments, there were also concerns about the impact on children from minority groups such as Travellers. In many cases, however, where there were EAL pupils, their previous experiences in school already and fluency in English were seen as protective factors; as one head noted 'No, it's definitely not [an issue]. They are fluent by the time they get up there' (School A).

Impact on pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

A greater concern for headteachers was the impact on children with SEND. Respondents to the survey repeatedly listed this group as being most affected by SATs; for example:

The SEN & lower achieving children are beleaguered and although they try their best just get lost - many teachers/assistants in tears themselves at witnessing the helplessness of some of our children. (W)

...though we promote a growth mindset and the value of mistakes, then the level of challenge is that high, these pupils are often highly disadvantaged by the need to focus so unremittingly on the areas of the curriculum that they find most difficult. (W)

Because there is now a line to get over, an arbitrary pass mark, I feel for SEN pupils who struggle with English and maths. (W)

SEND pupils feel more excluded from the main lessons as pace and content often goes beyond their ability to process despite support. (W)

There was similarly real concern in the interviews about the impact on children with SEND both during the preparation period and the tests themselves, echoing the findings of the 2018 NEU survey (NEU 2018). A particular worry was the impact of asking children to sit inappropriate tests, or to risk isolating them by withdrawing them from the tests:

I mean it's hard for them as well because do you sit the test or do you make them look different by not sitting the test? (School D)

if there are children that we think would be really stressed by it, we wouldn't put them in for it and we'd just do Teacher Assessment [...] because that would just be cruel. (School M)

With the educational healthcare plan children, we have withdrawn people in the past who we know won't pass. That affects them as well. What do you do with the child at the time? [...] We have had all these discussions about letting them do what they can or putting them through the stress of it when they know they can't do it? (School A)

In addition, some headteachers referred to specific groups of pupils such as those with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as being negatively affected by the pressure around SATs. These children struggle with the test

The impact on pupils

conditions themselves, and their needs at SATs time are clearly greater than usual and may require extra staff support. Other additional needs also required more resources, as staff were called in to be readers for some pupils, and additional resources such as separate rooms and extra TAs needed to be organised. Interestingly, the summer-born issue was not mentioned by any headteacher.

Impact on vulnerable pupils and disadvantaged or 'pupil premium' children

One group which survey and interview respondents frequently mentioned were 'vulnerable' and 'pupil premium' pupils. These were not categories specifically asked about in either the survey or the interviews. The latter refers to children who receive free school meals or have done in the last six years, who qualify for additional Pupil Premium funding. These groups of children were seen as particularly affected by SATs:

So there is a big effect negatively on some children. I fear that that's often the prior low attainers or the more vulnerable children. (School C)

Children who have been identified as vulnerable during their school life are the ones who struggle the most. If they already have anger issues or emotional or mental health concerns then they are more likely to react negatively, both prior to and during the SATs. (W)

Most definitely the vulnerable children; cared for, bereaved i.e. children who have lost parents, children who struggle with self esteem and self belief, shy and sensitive children. (W)

Pupils from deprived backgrounds e.g. pupil premium: lots of social issues. We've had children take SATs who have been made homeless the night before or who haven't slept or are using food banks. (W)

Headteachers see SATs as being particularly detrimental to children who are vulnerable in a variety of ways, including economic disadvantage, mental health issues, and those with low self-esteem.

Throughout this section, the data suggest that headteachers have real concerns about the anxiety and stress caused, and engage in various planned activities to reduce that impact. Labelling children as failures is seen as a problematic consequence of the change of language to 'expected standard' or 'age-related expectations', while there are concerns about the impact on children with SEND and those seen as 'vulnerable'.

The impact on staff

Primary headteachers have serious concerns about the impact of SATs on their staff. In response to the statement 'SATs put pressure on teachers', survey responses were (n=189):

| Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 83% | 16% | 0% | 1% | 0% |

Thus 99% of the respondents to this question agreed that SATs put pressure on teachers (with only two respondents selecting disagree). This concern is part of wider discussion about teacher workload and stress, and the impact of policy change; a 2019 Ofsted study concluded that among the factors increasing teachers' workload were changes to external examinations and 'frequently changing government policies and regulations' (Ofsted 2019).

In this section the impact on allocation of staff and on teacher stress and anxiety is discussed, followed by an exploration of the emergence of the 'Year 6 teacher' as a higher status role demanding specific skills and experience. Despite the concerns raised in the previous section about the impact on children, in general, the impact on the staff was seen as more problematic than the impact on children. As one head stated, 'there is probably far more stress on the staff than there is on the kids' (School F).

Allocation of staff

The allocation of teachers to different year groups was one area of decision-making for headteachers that was linked directly to SATs, as well as where to put in additional staff; as one headteacher commented, 'basically I just throw all the staff there' [in Year 6] (School F).

Oh, without a doubt, the strongest teachers have to go into Year 6, without a doubt, because it's such a high stakes accountability measure. Everything depends on it because if we get bad SATs results, then that triggers an Ofsted. (School W)

Do I cream off the ones who are going to get me the SATs results? Of course I absolutely do with the ones who are experienced with Year 6 and know the papers. (School A)

As we are a 1 form entry, my most experienced staff are deployed to Y6 and are often not able to move out of Y6. This limits the development of other teachers and leads to burn-out of others; the risk of weak data as a new teacher learns the Y6 ropes is too high. (W)

When we look at staffing, the starting point is Year 6 and you want strong teachers in there. So, the demands of the curriculum now means you've got to have really strong and intelligent, able teachers in that year group. (School I)

The impact on staff

In some cases, additional staff were bought in to help specifically with SATs preparation; for example at School H ‘they get an extra teacher in Year 6 and Year 2’, while at School W ‘we do employ someone to do some extra work with those Year 6’s who need, you know, catch-up work’. There were also several mentions of allocating the ‘stronger’ teaching assistants to Year 6: for example, ‘It has to be a TA with good subject knowledge as well and really rigorous’ (School P). Year 6 were also the priority when working out who should get extra TA support, as ‘they really need their support staff’ (School T). Some TAs are moved into Year 6 as SATs get closer: by May, ‘it’s all hands on deck’ (School M). There were also mentions of using student teachers on placement in SATs year groups in order to maximise the number of adults in the classroom. In other cases, budgets were cited as a reason why extra staff could not go into Year 6; one said ‘It doesn’t really [affect staffing] to be all honest, purely because the finances are such that I can’t put extra staff in’ (School L).

Clearly the pressure of SATs drives some of headteachers’ decision-making about staff allocation, encouraging them to prioritise Year 6 for additional staff, ‘stronger’ teaching assistants, and their ‘best’ teachers. Others describe feeling limited in how they can improve results ‘if you haven’t got the people on the ground’ (School P).

Teacher stress and anxiety

The survey results suggested that headteachers overwhelmingly agreed that ‘SATs have a negative impact on teachers’ well-being’ (n=188):

| Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 65% | 27% | 4% | 4% | 0% |

Overall 92% of respondents to this question agreed or strongly agreed that there was a negative impact on staff. This issue was also a concern for every headteacher we interviewed.

They are under a tremendous amount of pressure. [...] You can see them. They physically retract into themselves and just haven’t got the confidence towards the SAT papers. They often come into my office and will say, ‘I am really struggling with this child. They aren’t going to get it. (School A)

How does it affect staff? Very negatively. So, being held to account on A, a set of scales and judgements which are not how I would like to measure my children on any level and B, holding to account on things that we don’t necessarily have complete control over. (School H)

I think it’s stressful. You know, it is stressful because they are under pressure. Obviously, we know they’re really good teachers, they’re outstanding teachers in Year 6 and really good in Year 2 but they want the kids to do well and they do feel they’re being judged and they do feel under pressure, there’s no doubt about it. [...] It’s all the marking; it’s all the preparation; it’s the pressure. [...] As I say, I have had them in tears before, when the results have come through, going, “Oh, I can’t believe it.” You know, it’s just one test, on one day but they do take it really to heart; they do take it personally. (School M)

The impact on staff

Some headteachers related the pressure of SATs to other issues such as workload, staff morale and retention:

We are exhausted. We are tired. We are giving up extra time after school because it's not just an hour. It's extra planning, it's extra preparation [...] It has a massive knock-on. They're giving up their holidays. [...] People will not want to stay and work here if that's what they've got to do. I think they're tired and worn-out. Stressed. They feel the pressure definitely as much as the children and they care about these children and they want them to achieve and they've put their all into it. [...] So, I don't think it's particularly good for staff morale. I don't think it's particularly good for staff well-being. (School J)

These headteachers' concerns, which were replicated across the sample and in the survey responses, are an important finding in relation to broader issues about teacher workload, well-being and retention. It is clear from these responses that headteachers see SATs as a major influence on their teachers, with largely negative effects. There is also the problem of creating a hierarchy between teachers, as the Year 6 teacher becomes a higher status role.

The Year 6 teacher

In many interviews the role of Year 6 teacher was seen as a key post within the school, with the 'best' teachers placed there to ensure good results. At the same time, the role of Year 6 is often resisted by staff, who wish to avoid the stress and additional feeling of responsibility. As a result, the position of Year 6 teacher is for many a specific and higher status post, often seen as a path to middle or senior management. Year 6 teachers work closely with senior leaders, require more sophisticated subject knowledge, and are prepared to take on the responsibility of producing the results the whole school will be judged on:

The class teacher of Y6 has to be strong and resilient. (W)

I think without doubt there is more pressure on the Year 6 teachers to perform well because they are held to account in a way that other teachers aren't because their data is published and it's really tough. [...] no one wants to be in Year 6. (School W)

Staff are selected to work in Y6 with the best subject knowledge and confidence to teach the year group, staff who do not become overwhelmed by the 'stress' of the assessment/accountability. (W)

I need teachers in Year 6, who are very, very good at building good relationships with children and motivating children, making children feel settled and happy [...] you really need teachers that understand children's needs, emotional needs and so on but you need fantastic subject knowledge, you need to be able to differentiate through your questioning, your on-going teaching, how you interpret those assessments to feed into your planning. (School T)

Year 6 is different again. So, staff who are very career-minded know that they need to teach Year 6. They may not be happy about that, but they know that they have to do it. (School F)

The impact on staff

In some cases, teaching Year 6 and the additional stress this entails becomes a rite of passage for the ambitious teacher aiming for senior leadership; while for headteachers the choice of their Year 6 teacher is an additional decision they need to make. This distinction between Year 6 teachers and the other year groups is indicative of the importance placed on SATs and the skewing effect of the associated pressure: resources, staff and time are directed towards securing 'good' SATs results. At School E, they referred to a past concern that 'Year 6 didn't feel like it was at the same school any more' due to the different pressures'; the head voiced concerns about 'the teacher that you're creating as the Year 6 teacher', as someone with 'a very narrow idea of education'. Overall, the creation of this division between teachers is an interesting finding which further suggests the extent of the impact of SATs.

Impact on headteachers

Headteachers were asked specifically about the impact of SATs on their own roles and their feelings about the decisions they needed to make in relation to SATs. There were strong feelings of resentment about the pressure and stress associated with tests, and the continual concern about what a poor set of results might mean for their school and their jobs. Headteachers described the ‘intolerable pressure’ (W) of SATs, combined with a fear of an Ofsted visit that might be triggered by lower scores. They also voiced concerns about the additional stress of decreasing budgets and the impact this had on how they could prepare, and the sheer amount of time they themselves spent in activities related to SATs preparation.

Despite these issues, when asked about the system of holding schools to account through SATs there was an acceptance of some form of accountability among many headteachers, even if the method of using tests was seen as inappropriate. As discussed in the next section, there was a continued hope that there might be a ‘better way’. Broadly, the headteachers’ views can be categorised as positions of resistance, concerned acceptance and, in very rare cases, enthusiasm. Headteachers often moved between these positions during the interviews, suggesting a certain flexibility of positions.

Pressure and stress for headteachers

In many cases and in many different ways, headteachers we interviewed and those who commented on the survey described how SATs caused them stress and anxiety:

Yes, stress... I mean from me and my leadership team all the way down, isn't it? So, everyone's stressed. We're held to account on some things that in many ways on some levels we don't have that much power over. (School H)

The pressure from parents, government and the LA to ensure that the children are all successful during SATs - with no one child having 'a bad day' - is enormous. (W)

These comments about SATs and stress came from headteachers of schools both with Good and Outstanding Ofsted judgements, and those with Requires Improvement. In some cases, headteachers referred to the perceived unfairness of having their performance judged on the performance of a small number of borderline children, arguing ‘That’s when SATs feels totally unfair, for me’ (School C, which was Ofsted Requires Improvement).

These feelings of stress and anxiety were often associated with a sense of precarity, and linked to a lack of trust in them as professionals:

Our school will be judged on how well we do in the SATs and if we don't improve on our results from last year I will lose my job. This is an intolerable pressure. (W)

Let's face it, there are headteachers out there, this year, that for better or worse, will probably lose their jobs because of how some children did in some tests and it seems fundamentally wrong that someone's career can be defined by

The impact on headteachers

a snapshot moment, rather than the quality of education that their school provides, over a six year period for those children. (School O)

I feel like I'm like a football manager. I'm only as good as the last set of my results. I feel we have a poor set of results, that could be my job gone. I do feel that. I'll have the local authority swarming all over me, "What went wrong there?" and feeling... so that bit is stressful every year. That never gets better in all the years I've done it. You never feel better about that. Although I take SATs, theoretically, with a pinch of salt and all the rest of it, when it comes to it, I want the kids to do really well. I want to be a good school. I don't want a gap between my disadvantaged and my non. It all matters. So it's stressful. Just thinking about it now, I'm thinking, "Oh no." (School P)

How do I feel about it? I think SATs give you the fear, don't they? I mean, my accountability as a professional, rides on the performance usually of about three children in Year 6. (School H)

It is noticeable in these comments that some headteachers feel very vulnerable, and just one set of lower results is seen as a source of increased intervention and potentially a change of headteacher. This is high-stakes headship, where even those that have the security of a Good Ofsted judgement, such as at School P and School H above, have 'the fear'. The analogy of a football manager – notoriously a role which is precarious and entirely reliant on the latest results – further emphasises the notion that headteachers feel they are unfairly judged on SATs results. As one headteacher put it, 'if anything goes wrong, you get the sack, everything comes back to you' (School T); a survey respondent commented, 'Many colleagues have lost their jobs because of poor SATs results'.

One particular source of resentment was the lack of context for results, which leaves some headteachers feeling unfairly treated:

I'd like to see an end to demonisation of schools in challenging circumstances which comes about through how SATs data is used. (W)

In a very impoverished area, with extreme poverty, violent crime and drugs, what we provide is so much more than the sum of our SATs results. (W)

So, the field of judgment is very narrow and sometimes we don't have control about that and then we get in trouble for stuff that almost we've got no control over that we don't agree with. So, it is quite frustrating. (School H)

There was also anxiety about the administration of the tests themselves and the possibility of 'spot checks'; one headteacher commented 'I find that very stressful' (School G), and another that 'that level of pressure on me and my deputy is huge and really unnecessary' (School P). These pressures are important in a context where headteacher recruitment and retention are a problem (Busby, 2019).

Finally, the competition between schools for applications and the damaging effect of a Requires Improvement Ofsted grading meant that inspections were seen as a danger to be avoided if possible, leading to great pressure on headteachers. However, many balanced this with their wider view of what their school should prioritise:

The impact on headteachers

I'd be lying if I didn't feel the pressure of having good Key Stage Two outcomes because I'm measured on that. Ofsted will look at that. The local authority will look at that. My governors certainly will look at it. I'll certainly look at it. That's not the be all and end all of our school. I guess if we were a factory, which we're not because children are not objects, but we judge them on their outcomes, in the sense of our end product and the end products of your school is the young people that come out at the end of your school. (School C)

This last quote is an example of concerned and partial acceptance; the head understands the importance of SATs for Ofsted and accountability, particularly in his school which has a Requires Improvement Ofsted judgement, but rejects the idea that results are the 'be all and end all'.

The time spent on SATs and budgetary pressures

Many headteachers explained how involved they were in SATs preparation, taking groups and interventions and often spending more time teaching in class during the spring term than in the rest of the year. As the headteacher at School J commented, 'I really believe in having a work-life balance but, at the moment, I can't model that because I'm teaching all morning so then I'm staying really late after school to do the headteacher bit'. This extra work was often deemed necessary given the demands of the tests: for example, 'Experienced staff are needed to manage the requirements of SATs preparation' (W). The tests were also seen as a distracting 'added burden I could do without' (School O) for headteachers with teaching responsibilities.

Headteachers' views on the related issue of budgets were varied: some argued reduced budgets limited resources and staffing particularly, while others commented that budgets were so constrained anyway that the school was not in a position to be affected by SATs:

Our budget is so tight we can't let SATs interfere with it to be honest. (School A)

Our budget is about time [for staff], we can't afford to do anything over and above what is normal. (School R)

Well, we haven't got any money to spend, so there is no spare money. By the time we've paid the things that have to be paid, like our salaries and the services that we have to pay for, there's very little money left over. (School G)

We have had to cut back on some of our teaching assistant hours. A couple of years ago, we had more teaching assistants supporting Year 6 than we currently do. (School W)

... in the old days, when there was a bit more money floating around, I had a third teacher who would cover in the afternoons [...] but I can't afford that, which is why I use my deputy. So that would be a budget decision. (School T)

This context of budget restraint or increasing costs appears to mainly affect the amount of staff allocated to Year 6 and therefore the time senior leaders spend on SATs preparation.

The impact on headteachers

The logic of accountability

Many headteachers, when asked their views on SATs overall, had sympathy with the idea that schools need to be held to account in some way, particularly as they are publicly funded:

I think that we need to be held accountable, I don't have a problem with that. (School G)

I do agree with us being held to account, it's public money, and there are too many schools like this one was, I think, where expectations aren't high enough and that's not okay for those children. (School L)

Schools should not be held accountable for the result of a test but, on the other hand, how do you hold schools accountable? There are some really, really dire schools, still, in this country that have slipped under the radar for a long, long time [...] I think there does need to be some kind of accountability measure and unless it's quite challenging, I don't think schools are going to do as well as they do now. (School I)

This is the reality, this is the world we live in. It's not for us to change it because we're paid to deliver it. We are a public service paid by the public purse to deliver it. Our duty is to ensure that the public purse, the money that's given to us, is spent efficiently and effectively, there is no wastage etc., and that we deliver what we have been asked to do. Part of that is that we are going to be tested. So that's the reality. So we're going to be tested, we're going to be judged on it. (School B)

For these headteachers, who have perhaps spent their entire careers in an accountability-based system, the logic of being held to account is clear. For some, such as the headteacher at School B, this included acceptance of SATs as the only available tool in place for this purpose, while for others, there were better ways to hold schools to account, as I discuss in the next section. For some headteachers, there was acceptance of 'what you have to do' because of how schools are judged, combined with concern for what is 'right':

So, at the end of the day, that's what we're judged on, as a school, rightly or wrongly. So, our progress, our attainment, our everything is judged on that one week which is ridiculous but you have to do the best for the children and the school, you have to play the game, really. It's not right, but that's what you have to do. (School M)

This concerned acceptance demonstrates the difficulty of headteachers' positions, as they attempt to reconcile their concerns about SATs with the need to 'play the game'. SATs take up a significant amount of headteachers' time, both in planning their approach and also in teaching Year 6. Some feel a sense of precarity, in that their jobs depend on the SATs results. This adds to the general sense of stress described by heads, which was also related to Ofsted. Despite this impact, many headteachers understand the need for them to be held accountable, but as described in the following section, there are changes they would make given the option.

The future of assessment policy

The final area of findings relates to headteachers' views of changes to SATs in the last few years, planned reforms to primary assessment overall, and perspectives on the future of SATs. This includes headteachers' doubts about the system overall. In the survey, only 16% of respondents to this question agreed or strongly agreed that 'SATs are an effective method of assessing what pupils can do', with 65% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing:

| Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 5 | 11 | 20 | 35 | 30 |

One headteacher explained his doubts about the effectiveness of the assessments:

I still think now that we push these children so hard in primary school and they get their levels and they get where they need to be. So, they leave us at the national expectation but are they really? You know, are they really there or is it just because they've been pushed so hard and supported so much and scaffolded and given so much. So, do they leave us with a love of learning? Do they leave us, you know, when they're independent, when they're at secondary school, can they still write like they could when they leave us? Quite often they can't. (School I)

The suggestion here is that SATs are not a good method of judging children because children have been 'pushed so hard' that their results are not good indications of what they can do. Other qualities including a love of learning and independence are not measured but are seen as important in primary education and for their futures in secondary school. This and the survey data suggest a perceived lack of reliability, as well as the issues of relevance discussed below. Throughout the data collection, there was criticism of the current system of papers in reading, maths and SPaG (spelling, punctuation and grammar), as well as the teacher assessment of writing.

Views of changes to SATs

The content and form of SATs were changed in 2016, as part of the reforms to education under the Coalition and Conservative governments from 2010 onwards. Survey participants overwhelmingly rejected the notion that these changes had improved the tests, with 91% answering No to the question 'In your view, have the changes made to the content of Key Stage 2 SATs in recent years improved the assessment?'. Many headteachers elaborated on this response, commenting on the perceived greater difficulty of the new system:

The standard has been increased beyond the reach of many pupils. (W)

The expectation is much higher and challenging or not achievable for a number of children. (W)

The standards expected have put more children in danger of failure. (W)

Similarly, the majority of interview participants saw the reformed system as more challenging, and many also had comments on specific papers:

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It's not content but stylistically it's changed. I don't personally like the reading paper style now. I preferred it old curriculum in the sense of a chunk of text and questions, a chunk of text. The tick-box first page of the old level papers when they maybe had six to eight questions were multiple choice [...] That eased the children into it. I think it's a bit daunting now for some children. (School C)

The actual tests are harder than they used to be, the standard has gone up, [...] they've dropped the writing but they look for the whole year's worth of writing now, so it's a bit more stressful. Yes, I mean the grammar test is ridiculous, I think. (School D)

There was particular criticism of the grammar, punctuation and spelling test (GPS or SPaG) among both survey and interview respondents; for example:

The GPS test has become the new science test and you can hothouse to get irrelevant results. (W)

GPS has been a mess and the disjoint between grammar at the end of KS2 and start of KS3 is ridiculous. (W)

Well, it's ridiculous; they don't use that in real life. It's not teaching the children to be a writer; it's not teaching them the vocabulary and the flair for language and the choice of spelling has always been very abstract; the words that they get asked to spell [...] In the SPaG paper, they're asking them about words that they would never, ever use in their writing because they're eleven. (School M)

This reflects a widespread concern about the role of rote learning in this test and the irrelevance of some of the areas it covers (Mansell 2017).

There were similarly critical comments about the removal of the 'calculator paper' from the maths tests, which was seen as 'a backward step' (W):

The removal of the calculator paper was political spin [...] 'the calculator paper' provided them with a whole other skill set and the sums were always much harder than what they could do without a calculator: also, it wasn't just using the calculator to work out the answer, they were reasoning and problem solving rich papers—skills which have since been dumbed down in favour of basic arithmetic which pupils can solve if they 'know the tricks'. (W)

I think that the removal of calculator questions in maths is also a negative as it de-values those pupils who have conceptual grasp but not yet developed the fluency (memory) of number facts. (W)

As well as these detailed comments, there were also some comments which argued that even if the content changed, the fundamental idea of testing was the problem:

They haven't [changed] - it's the same stuff repackaged, putting it in a nicer box doesn't change the collateral damage it does. (W)

Despite format changes, they have not added to our knowledge of what the pupils can and cannot do and whether they are prepared for coping in Year 7 and beyond. (W)

The future of assessment policy

Have they improved them? No. The pressure is still there. You could do one test or ten tests and the children still want to get that one test passed. I haven't seen an improvement at all. (School A)

For these headteachers, the key factor was the pressure and the 'collateral damage' caused, as well as the lack of useful information they provide.

There were some positive comments, however, particularly in relation to focusing attention on useful skills and some 'coasting' children both in the survey and the interviews:

They show high expectations of the children - which can't be a bad thing. (W)

The raising of standards / expectations in maths has been really positive - it has pushed schools to embrace mastery and teach conceptual understanding. (W)

I think the maths is better because there's more emphasis on problem solving and reasoning. I think that matches the curriculum better. I think it's better not to have a writing test, so that's better. (School P)

I mean there are aspects of it, which I think are positive, I mean I think the way that we teach reading now is significantly better. [...] we very much actively teach reading and we show them how to extract information and we show them how to deduct influence and things like that. So, I think actually the standard of our children's reading has improved. (School O)

There were also some positive comments about the shift to teacher assessment of writing (though also concerns about the stress this produces, as discussed). Overall, however, there were more criticisms than positive statements in the interviews, echoing the survey findings.

Planned changes to primary assessment

Although there is not enough space to explore the planned changes to primary assessment in detail here, it is worth noting that the two major reforms which headteachers were asked about – the new Multiplication Tables Check (MTC) and the return of Baseline Assessment in Reception – were seen negatively by the majority of respondents. In relation to the MTC, there were some headteachers who welcomed this emphasis on key knowledge in maths, but also many who saw it as an unnecessary imposition, such as:

It is an unnecessary measure. Learning your times tables by the end of Year 4 has always been a goal – the Yr 5 maths curriculum needs children to be able to multiply. (W)

Another unneeded test which again suggests schools have no idea how to teach – there is no faith in schools' ability to educate children. (W)

On Baseline, there was widespread questioning of the why an assessment which had to be abandoned in 2015 was being reintroduced. Whilst some did hope that a baseline measure taken at the beginning of schooling would credit schools with the difference they make to those starting from lower levels on entry, others were concerned that gaming the system by deflating results would still be possible (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2016). The fact that the new assessment will not produce data which is available to teachers was also seen as problematic:

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Awful – waste of time. Time-consuming, worthless data. Everyone will try to get as low as possible and no knowledge of how they scored is ridiculous. (W)

I'm really worried about the progress measure of going from Baseline Assessment to Key Stage 2 now. I'm thinking, "That's going to be interesting." I don't quite understand why it's coming back. I don't understand how we can measure, within those different curriculums, from one curriculum to the next. (School P)

I understand, I think vaguely, why they are trying to do it, to try and get a more accurate measure of progress across a whole school, but there are so many varying factors and the last time they tried to do it, it was a complete sham and god knows how much money that cost, and when there is so little money for schools for them to be spending this much money on stuff like this, which nobody wants, I just think it's obscene, I really do. (School L)

We see here that some headteachers do not see the money spent on Baseline, which was also mentioned in several survey responses, as in proportion to the usefulness of the assessment. Headteachers used very emotive language in relation to Baseline, describing it as 'horrendous', 'total and utter madness – worst thing ever', 'ridiculous' and 'obscene'. For some, the idea of measuring progress, particularly with different curricula and high pupil turnover, was always going to be problematic; for instance: 'there's no way to measure progress – not realistically' (School H),

Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 is the national curriculum, Reception is a completely different curriculum and there is a massive jump between Reception and Year 1 and you can't compare the two and they're not taught in the same way. (School G)

Who really believes that assessing 4 and 5 year olds and using that as a benchmark for 7 years of progress is a good idea? Less than 20% of my pupils are at my school for their entire primary education. What will this assessment tell me about my school? Nothing. (W)

However, for others this would provide some recognition of children's 'amazing progress', despite the concerns raised about the impact of progress measures on schools with disadvantaged intakes (BERA 2018; Leckie and Goldstein 2018):

In essence, the fact that they're looking at progress from Reception to Year 6 rather than Year 2 to Year 6, is a good thing. So, you know, they will be looking at our children as they come in to the school and it's really, really low levels. So, for us, it's a win because we make such amazing progress with them. (School I)

Broadly, there appears to be little enthusiasm for the suggested reform of measuring progress from a Baseline at the start of Reception to Year 6 SATs rather than Key Stage 1 SATs in Year 2 to Year 6 SATs, and the fundamental issues related to the content of Baseline compared to SATs remain unresolved. Added to the pressures already felt in relation to SATs, it is clear from these responses that there is a reluctance to engage with additional assessment points in primary education.

Finally, some headteachers' responses suggested that whatever changes were introduced, they would comply:

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Talking flippantly, we're going to do times tables, we're going to do science in the year, we're going to do baseline assessments in reception, all these things change because the government of the day decide to change x and y. But we need to accept that that's the reality for us to work out how to deliver that. We can have an opinion of it personally. We can have an opinion of it professionally, be involved in that dialogue but once it's decided, we need to deliver it. It's not about being subservient because you'd give the feedback if you thought it was wrong. (School C)

This comment suggests a level of reform fatigue, where headteachers are so used to adapting to new policies that they simply 'deliver' what is required. There is some chance for 'feedback if you thought it was wrong', but in general the headteachers' opinions are less important than the need to deliver what is required of them.

The new Ofsted framework

One area of positivity in the interviews arose in mentions of the new Ofsted framework. The new framework, in use from September 2019, has been presented as an attempt to widen the scope of Ofsted inspections: Ofsted inspectors will spend less time looking at exam results and test data, and more time considering how a nursery, school, college or other education provider has achieved their results. That is, whether they are the outcome of a broad, rich curriculum and real learning, or of teaching to the test and exam cramming. (Gov.uk 2019) Although we did not specifically ask about this, there were many comments about the possibilities it might bring, particularly in relation to the curriculum:

Well I think it will be really interesting to see what will happen now with this new Ofsted framework because the outcome section is part of the whole quality of education and it's all around the curriculum, isn't it? [...] Whereas now, it's judged as a separate thing and when Ofsted come in, it is very much geared around the data. So I think if it works out in the way that the Chief Inspector intends and that it is all about the curriculum and less about the data, then I think that will be a good thing. (School G)

I think the new framework is actually a step in the right direction. I think that will benefit schools like ours, where data is so ... each child is such a significant percentage, I think for them to be looking at the quality of their education in a wider sense, is much more beneficial for schools like ours. (School O)

The new Ofsted framework is coming in now so that may well change things further. They're always going to look at data because I think that that's the one unifying piece of information that you can compare schools with. And it depends what they do with that data, that's the thing. [...]. I think schools have narrowed the curriculum, definitely, and now schools must broaden the curriculum. (School R)

However there were some concerns that the expansion of Ofsted's areas of focus might result in more data, not fewer; one head doubted that there would be less focus on data, instead fearing that they would look at 'More data across all subjects that we haven't got time to cover because of the process of maths and English' (School H). However overall, there was a real sense of hope that in the future the results of Ofsted inspections might be less dependent on SATs results and more on the quality of teaching and the delivery of a broader curriculum.

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Headteachers' perspectives on the future

When asked about what changes they would like to see in the system of assessment in primary schools, many headteachers in the survey wanted them to be removed, and many more wanted them to be replaced with teacher assessments. Typical of these comments were:

Provide good quality nationally standardised materials that we can assess the children on in school so that we have a clear idea of whether our children are at the expected standard and trust teacher judgment. (W)

Tests, marked internally, used as an indicator of ability but with teacher assessment being the over-riding factor. (W)

I'd get rid of it, if I'm honest with you, I would get rid of SATs. I just think it is unnecessary. I think teachers should be trusted to give judgements at the end of their tenure [...] teacher assessments would be, for me, a much better way of doing things. (School O)

[I would prefer] using the test to inform teacher assessment, or even teacher assessment being given alongside the test score [...] I do agree with us being held to account: it's public money, and there are too many schools like this one was, I think, where expectations aren't high enough and that's not okay for those children, but I don't think it will ever happen, realistically. (School L)

[Results] could really affect the judgement on your school and that feels wrong. Having said that, if 20% of the school are getting to expected, there's going to be something going very wrong in a school [...] surely, we could just do teacher assessment and pass it onto the next school. (School T)

Although there was some understanding of a need for accountability among many respondents, as discussed in the previous section, teacher assessment was seen as a fairer system than tests; as one headteacher concluded, 'I think it can be done in a very different way' (School P).

There was also a clear objection to the publication of results and the use of league tables. It was this public display of results and the connection to Ofsted inspection which were among the most unpopular elements of SATs:

Scrap high-stakes reporting & league tables, and use of SATs results as a 'risk assessment' by Ofsted. (W)

Have SATs as they are a key indicator if children acquired skills/knowledge ready for Y7 but not league tables and published results. (W)

Happy with a national test which supports teachers and informs parents about their child's progress. Shouldn't be public and should be part of a wider teacher assessment process that gives a more accurate picture of a child's achievements (the test should inform an outcome, not be the sole contributor). (W)

I think they're a useful measure for a school because you're going to use something. I would like them not reported. (School S)

I think that schools need to be held accountable. So, there has to be something to say what you are doing on a daily basis is of good quality and the children are

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getting a good deal. So, I know there should be something. I think it's also good for the secondary schools to know where the children are coming from. I think the emphasis on the league tables are the problem. (School N)

I wouldn't publish them on websites, the outcomes. They can be used internally within local authorities and maybe for Ofsted but to compare schools, I think it's part of... we all live in a world where we've become competitive. (School C)

The problem with SATs identified here is the high stakes attached to them and the inclusion of the figures in league tables so that schools are compared, rather than the tests themselves. The implication is that approaches to preparation would be different if the potential penalties on schools related to SATs were to be reduced; this would then lessen the impact on staff and pupils. The combination of using tests alongside teacher assessment seemed for many to be a happy medium which allowed some accountability but reduced the pressure on the week of SATs. Given the current political debates about the future of primary assessment, it is worth noting that headteachers are not entirely resistant to general scrutiny by outcomes, but would prefer a more complex picture of children's achievements to be taken into consideration, and not be compared publicly with other schools. Importantly, the issue of trust was a key theme which ran through many responses to the question of what changes headteachers would like to see:

Be great if teachers were trusted and the accountability agenda was such that there was no fear. Fear/anxiety is bad for anyone and has the potential to drive them to iffy decisions. (W)

Have trust in our teachers and ask them to provide evidence that these pupils are ARE or GD. Moderate these judgements. (W)

Get rid of them and trust schools to do their job. They only seem to be there for accountability purposes, they don't help the children and secondary schools don't trust the outcomes anyway, and for good reason. (W)

There must be a better way to do it. But they don't trust teachers to do it. (School H)

There is a massive negative impact [on the children] and if I could scrap it tomorrow I would. There are much better ways to assess a child. I don't think there is any trust in the profession at the moment. It is all test-driven, and are you testing us or testing the children? I would question that completely. (School A)

These comments are indicative of a feeling that assessment has become symbolic of a lack of trust between teachers and the government, reflecting a wider issue of de-professionalisation during the Coalition and Conservative governments of the 2010s.

Overall, these headteachers' comments indicate a widespread dissatisfaction with the current system of holding primary schools to account through SATs tests, rather than a rejection of this principle in general. Many would prefer a system which included more teacher assessment of pupils' progress and attainment, and the removal of league table comparisons between schools. Recent changes are not seen as having improved the tests, and new reforms are seen as creating further problems, but there is some hope associated with the broader remit of the new Ofsted framework.

Conclusions

The findings of this research study suggest that headteachers' views of SATs are, in the majority, negative: as one headteacher put it, 'I don't think you'll get many Heads that say they like the SATs, though ... I can't imagine that anyone would say they're for the SATs' (School M). However, the system is so well established that many also find it difficult to envisage a system without SATs.

In summary, the pressure to improve or maintain results means that schools engage in a range of preparation strategies, with significant variation between schools' approaches from more intense to less intense, largely dependent on school context. There are attempts to resist the more negative forms of preparation, such as narrowing the curriculum, but all schools accept some focus on SATs-related activity, especially after Christmas in Year 6. This does not mean that headteachers are enthusiastic about the range of strategies they feel forced to engage in, however; as one head commented, 'sometimes when SATs come round again, you think, oh bloody hell, we shouldn't really have to be doing this' (School T). Many headteachers describe their attempts to protect or shield children from the stresses of SATs; although there are a variety of approaches, most see their chosen strategy as the most appropriate for their school:

I think the sad reality of SATs though is that some schools will have been teaching SATs, to SATs all year and very focused on SATs and we're compared to them. They might limit their curriculum or prioritise maths and reading and GPS results more than everything. We try, and I'm not saying we ever get that right because for one person that might be too much one way and too much the other way than for another but we try to pitch it that they still have a balance in the broad, rich, vibrant curriculum. (School C)

Headteachers' decisions about how to prepare for SATs are important professional choices which hugely affect their pupils; however, some feel very limited by the pressure they are under, and have to accept engaging in practices they feel are not positive for the children. The impact on children is seen as particularly unfair given the lack of benefit for them as individuals:

I don't think it's healthy for children at all. And, what's worse, it doesn't do them any good whatsoever. There's no measurable outcome for the children. I don't think it has any benefit for children at all, basically. (School H)

In general, SATs are seen as having a damaging impact on pupils, and on staff and school leaders. Certainly the survey results, particularly that 93% of headteachers agree that SATs have a negative impact on teachers' well-being and 83% agree the same for pupils, would suggest that many headteachers have negative views of these tests. There is real concern about the impact on vulnerable pupils and those with SEND, and the increased stress for staff, particularly in Year 6. Given the importance of this year group, the Year 6 teacher role has taken on increased importance and headteachers' decisions relating to staffing are often based on prioritising putting their best teachers in this position.

Conclusions

For many headteachers, SATs are an indication of a system which has the wrong priorities:

It is ridiculous. These are eleven-year-old children who should be out playing in the Easter holidays and we are thinking about bringing them in and boosting them for SATs. Why? Is it because we want the school to have the right percentage at the end of the day? That's the only reason. We aren't going to improve the children's knowledge over long term. (School A)

The pressure on one set of tests is seen as 'not right' by some headteachers:

[Teachers] do get upset, they get upset for the children because it's just not right that on one day, for these children, they can be judged on their whole schooling, from Reception to Year 6, just on one day; it's just not right. (School M)

However, as this survey response explains, the system forces headteachers to prioritise SATs results to ensure the future of the school:

SATs are high-stakes for the school and for all staff with direct accountability for the results, from the HT down (inc. e.g. Inclusion Leader). It is therefore important for the future well-being and success of the school as an institution and community that the SATs results are as favourable as possible. This is separate and distinct from the desirable good outcomes in terms of less-quantifiable (or, at least, less-quantified) factors such as curriculum breadth, pastoral care, personal development etc etc that are vital for the individual child's future success and well-being, but which are not the focus of high-stakes monitoring, reporting and accountability. This being the case, it is not only inevitable but imperative that maximising the possibility for good SATs results plays a large part in influencing all the above variables and more. (W)

The emphasis on SATs comes at a cost, which is borne by the staff and children at the school, and by the headteacher themselves. However, the imperatives are such that it is inevitable that schools will be strategic. Indeed, even the schools which aimed to keep SATs 'low key' and had a history of good results, still engaged in a range of practices to prepare children and maintain their results. It is notable that a huge amount of time and effort is spent by headteachers and teachers on preparation, decisions about preparation, and on alleviating the negative effects on staff and pupils. In many cases, this is seen as unnecessary and wasteful, and a distraction from the 'real' business of educating children. For some headteachers facing budget cuts, there are difficult choices to be made about where to allocate staff and how much time they and other senior leaders can commit to helping with SATs preparation.

These findings echo the conclusion of the Cambridge Primary Review a decade ago that SATs 'distort children's primary schooling for questionable returns' (Alexander 2009, p. 2). Overall, this research study suggests that SATs are a significant feature of primary education with far-reaching effects on school organisation and the curriculum. As one headteacher put it, 'It is so much part of school life now, it's actually quite hard to take a step back and think what will it be like without it?' (School P); another wrote, 'With high stakes testing, the whole of the school's activity is based around passing tests' (W).

Conclusions

Compounding these negative perceptions is the fact that recent changes to SATs have been largely unhelpful, with many headteachers arguing that the assessments are more difficult and in some cases, pointless (SPaG particularly), and some pointing to improvements in some areas. Many headteachers would prefer an alternative method of judging the quality of education in their schools, such as using teacher assessment, or other broader measures which reduce the significance of one set of tests. The forms of teacher assessment that would be seen as more acceptable, given the concerns noted by a few headteachers about workload and moderation, require further research. Notably, teacher assessment was mentioned far more as an ongoing process to replace SATs than the kind of teacher assessment used for writing at present. These findings also suggest that there is also a desire among many headteachers for the wider contexts of their schools to be taken into account, such as children's starting points and social factors. However the idea of using a Baseline in Reception for longer-term progress measures remains overwhelmingly unpopular, as this is seen as an inadequate and inaccurate way of measuring schools' performance, and prone to gaming. Although it has not been possible to explore the planned changes to primary assessment in detail here, it is worth noting that the two major reforms which headteachers were asked about – the new Multiplication Tables Check (MTC) and the return of Baseline Assessment in Reception – were seen negatively by the majority of respondents. This suggests the accountability system as a whole is perceived increasingly negatively.

Finally, a key conclusion we can draw from these data is that the principle of a standardised test is questionable in the case of Key Stage 2 SATs: there is great variation in the resources available to schools and the preparation strategies used. Size is also an important factor, with some schools attempting to improve the results of a handful of students, while others work with over a hundred Year 6 pupils. Importantly, a child in a school with intense preparation strategies – with a curriculum focused on SATs, after school revision, Easter holiday sessions, interventions for 'cusp' children and placed in an attainment-based set – will have an entirely different experience to those in other schools. This is more significant now as their SATs results have significance to secondary schools, as they form the basis of Progress 8 measures and set expectations. Yet, the results are produced in entirely different contexts, despite them sitting the same test at the same time.

Overall, the findings suggest that SATs continue to be a controversial measure of schools' effectiveness, with negative effects on children, teachers and the curriculum and pedagogy. The views of headteachers, as presented in this report, are in line with a broad mass of educational opinion that seeks significant reform to this system.

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Appendix 1: summary of survey respondents

There were 288 respondents who were heads or executive heads (9 selected Other and their data are not included). The 288 are made up of 268 headteachers and 20 executive headteachers. Information on the respondents is provided here. Note that many respondents did not complete the survey, including the questions on type of school, size and Ofsted rating at the end of the survey.

Length of time as a headteacher:

| | | |
|---------------|----|-------|
| Under 5 years | 95 | 33.0% |
| 5-9 years | 89 | 30.9% |
| 10 – 19 years | 87 | 30.2% |
| Over 20 years | 17 | 5.9% |

Type of School:

| | | |
|------------------|-----|-------|
| Academy | 39 | 13.5% |
| Community School | 87 | 30.2% |
| Faith School | 42 | 14.6% |
| Other | 3 | 1.0% |
| No response | 117 | 40.6% |

Size of school:

| | | |
|------------------|-----|-------|
| Four form entry | 8 | 2.8% |
| Three form entry | 16 | 5.6% |
| Two form entry | 47 | 16.3% |
| One form entry | 67 | 23.3% |
| Other | 34 | 11.8% |
| No response | 116 | 40.3% |

Ofsted grade of school:

| | | |
|-------------|-----|-------|
| Outstanding | 23 | 8.0% |
| Good | 131 | 45.5% |
| RI | 18 | 6.3% |
| No response | 116 | 40.3% |

Appendix 2: list of survey questions

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Q1: What is your role? If you have chosen “other”, please specify:</p> | <p>Headteacher Executive headteacher Other (please specify)</p> |
| <p>Q2: For how long have you been a headteacher?</p> | <p>Under 5 years 5–9 years 10–19 years Over 20 years</p> |
| <p>Q3: In your school, which of the following are affected by KS2 SATs and preparation for SATs? Pick as many as are applicable. If you have chosen “other”, please specify:</p> | <p>Curriculum Allocation of staff Grouping of pupils Allocation of resources Extra-curricular activities Intervention groups Timing of events Other (please specify)</p> |
| <p>Q4: How are these areas affected? Please try to give as much detail as you can.</p> | <p>[free text response]</p> |
| <p>Q5: What impact do SATs and preparation for SATs have on pupils in your school?</p> | <p>[free text response]</p> |
| <p>Q6: Are there any particular groups of pupils who are more or less affected by SATs?</p> | <p>[free text response]</p> |
| <p>Q7: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, which are all based on views of KS2 SATs voiced by teachers and school leaders?</p> <p>SATs narrow the curriculum in Year 6</p> | <p>Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree NA</p> |
| <p>Q8: SATs narrow the curriculum in other year groups</p> | <p>Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree NA</p> |
| <p>Q9: SATs put pressure on teachers</p> | <p>Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree NA</p> |

Appendix 2: list of survey questions

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Q10: SATs mean we need to group our pupils by ability in English</p> | <p>Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree NA</p> |
| <p>Q11: SATs mean we need to group our pupils by ability in maths</p> | <p>Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree NA</p> |
| <p>Q12: The content of SATs means we have to ‘teach to the test’</p> | <p>Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree NA</p> |
| <p>Q13: SATs have a negative impact on pupils’ well-being</p> | <p>Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree NA</p> |
| <p>Q14: SATs have a negative impact on teachers’ well-being</p> | <p>Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree NA</p> |
| <p>Q15: SATs are an effective method of assessing what pupils can do</p> | <p>Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree NA</p> |
| <p>Q16: In your view, have the changes made to the content of KS2 SATs in recent years improved the assessment? Please explain your answer.</p> | <p>Yes No</p> |
| <p>Q17: What changes would you like to see to KS2 SATs?</p> | <p>[free text response]</p> |
| <p>Q18: What are your views on the new multiplication tables test?</p> | <p>[free text response]</p> |

Appendix 2: list of survey questions

| | |
|---|--|
| Q19: What are your views on the planned return of Baseline Assessment in Reception in 2020? | [free text response] |
| Q20: Finally, it would be useful for us to know some information about your school. What type of school do you lead? If you have chosen “other”, please specify: | Community school Faith school Academy Other |
| Q21: What size is your school? If you have chosen “other”, please specify: | One form entry Two form entry Three form entry Four form entry Other (please specify) |
| Q22: What was your most recent Ofsted rating? | Outstanding Good Requires Improvement Inadequate |
| Q23: Thank you for completing the survey. If you would be willing to be interviewed by a member of the research team, in your school at a time of your choosing, please fill add your details below. Note that this data is kept separately from your answers so that you cannot be identified, and the interview would also be anonymous. | No, I would not like to be interviewed. Yes, I would be willing to be interviewed. My name and email are: |



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