

Are schools now exam factories? What are we doing to children's education?

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Counterpoint discussion in the [Green Room](#), Porthcawl, 27 October 2017.

Why a talk on education in the Green Room? The other talks in this series were about plastic in the sea, an obvious interest for Sustainable Wales, and painting, which fits in well with the Green Room focus on arts events. Education is a less obvious topic – but if successive generations are to improve the world and the way in which we live, it is crucial that our education system should inform young people about environmental problems and develop their creative abilities.

My focus is the use of tests in schools - not the tests a teacher might set to find out how well her pupils have learned what she has just taught them – but externally imposed tests which are part of accountability structures. And one consequence of an excessive emphasis on tests is that creative and environmental aspects of the curriculum tend to be neglected.

This talk is based on research I conducted in England for the National Union of Teachers about the impact of accountability measures, including externally imposed tests. The research report had the title [Exam Factories](#), because this metaphor was used so often by teachers. For example, a primary teacher said

Everything is about test results; if it isn't relevant to a test then it is not seen as a priority. This puts too much pressure on pupils, puts too much emphasis on academic subjects and creates a dull, repetitive curriculum that has no creativity. It is like a factory production line chugging out identical little robots with no imagination, already labelled as failures if they haven't achieved the right level on a test.

And this was a secondary teacher

Currently we are turning our schools into sausage factories churning out identikit, neatly packaged, quality controlled, food stuff to fuel the employment sector. Don't we want something more, something individual, something creative, something personal for our children and something better for society?

These quotes sum up very neatly the points I want to make.

While the research took place in England, the report also drew together research findings from other countries – particularly the USA. I am well aware that in Wales the education system is different – and so far has avoided some of the worst aspects of what is going on in England. But Wales is subject to the same pressures to 'raise standards' as England, and I

hope you will reflect on how far these problems are present in Wales – and consider how teachers and parents might respond.

The talk covers three main areas: why the government wants tests; what effects testing has on pupils and teachers, and what people are doing to try to improve the situation.

Why do we have national tests?

Ever since state-funded education was introduced, governments have come up with the idea of testing children to find out whether the teacher is doing an effective job and they are getting value for money. In Britain, we had the payment by results system during the 19th century. Inspectors visited schools to test children, and the school funding (and teacher pay) depended on the results.

The [negative impacts](#) of this were widely noted – these included narrowing of the curriculum to the subjects that were tested; teacher and pupil anxiety; teaching focusing entirely on the demands of the test; learning by rote at the expense of understanding; various forms of cheating; and a decline in number and quality of teachers. A similar factory metaphor was used to describe this – one schools inspector said that teachers were ‘treated as machines’. Payment by results continued for 35 years before it was finally abandoned. National testing ceased, and inspectors took on a more advisory role.

The same trends were present in the USA in the 19th century. In 1888, [Emerson White](#) discussed ‘the propriety of making the results of examinations the basis for...determining the comparative standing or success of schools.’ His conclusions are still relevant:

They have perverted the best efforts of teachers, and narrowed and grooved their instruction; they have occasioned and made well-nigh imperative the use of mechanical and rote methods of teaching; they have occasioned cramming and the most vicious habits of study; they have caused much of the overpressure charged upon the schools, some of which is real; they have tempted both teachers and pupils to dishonesty; and, last but not least, they have permitted a mechanical method of school supervision. (pp. 199-200)

The current focus on testing and accountability in England was introduced in a series of measures following the Education Reform Act of 1988. The Tories introduced a national curriculum, national testing, school league tables, and an inspectorate with a judgemental rather than advisory role, Ofsted. Since then further tests have been introduced (though some have also been dropped). It has been claimed that English children are the [most tested](#) in the world. Currently an English pupil may have to take the following tests.

- A baseline test during their first half term at school. This was introduced in 2016, but following criticisms, was withdrawn. However, the government’s intention is to implement [new baseline tests](#) from 2020. The main purpose of baseline testing is to

allow the amount of progress each child makes during their primary school years to be measured, in order to assess the quality of the school.

- Phonics test. This takes place in Year 1. Children have to read both real words and nonsense syllables. Parents are told whether or not their child has reached the expected standard. Those who do not reach it have to retake the test the following year. The test has been criticised because it teaches children that reading is decoding, rather than finding meaning.
- Key Stage 1 standard assessment tests (SATs) taken by seven-year-olds. These will cease to be statutory from 2023 when the new baseline test will replace them in accountability measures.
- Key Stage 2 SATs taken by 11-year-olds, testing maths, reading and writing, together with a relatively new test in spelling, punctuation and grammar (the SPAG test, which has been widely [criticised](#) as having an inappropriate focus on language out of context, and taking up time which, at this age, would be better spent on *using* language – speaking, reading and writing). More challenging standards were introduced in 2016 with the result that *almost half* the 11-year-olds in England were deemed *not* to have met the required standard.
- GCSE and equivalent exams at age 16. Unlike the tests described above, GCSEs have some value for the pupils who take them. However, the government has used the accountability structures to encourage schools to enter for more academic subjects and fewer that are creative or vocational. Consequently some pupils may not be able to take courses that relate to their future aspirations. At the same time, more challenging standards being introduced.

Why is the government insisting on tests?

1. The government claim that one reason for using tests is to inform teachers about pupils' progress – but any teacher knows that there are a range of ways of assessing what pupils know and can do, and national tests are not needed for this.
2. Similarly they argue that test results inform parents about their children's progress. Clearly parents need information, but it is questionable whether test results are the most helpful form of information – particularly when the information may simply be that their child has failed to reach the expected standard.
3. A key factor in government use of tests is the belief that tests raise standards and will improve the national economy. This is a pressure which relates to the PISA international tests created by the OECD. When PISA results are poor, there is a media storm and moral panic (apportioning blame), and often the response is to reform the system.

PISA and its effects have been criticised. For example, a large group of senior academics across the world have [written to the OECD](#) expressing concern that it 'has assumed the power to shape education policy around the world' with no democratic mandate or

debate. They point out that PSA has contributed to an escalation in standardised testing and to an emphasis on what can be measured at the expense of what can't (for example, moral, civic, creative and artistic development), and so impoverishes classrooms and creates stress. They wrote, 'OECD's narrow focus on standardised testing risks turning learning into drudgery and killing the joy of learning.'

Interestingly, similar concerns about tests have been expressed by the [CBI](#) and [Institute of Directors](#). They don't believe that the current emphasis on tests will improve the economy. The CBI argued that the exam system risks 'churning out people who are not sufficiently prepared for life outside the school gates', who fail to show the 'attitudes and behaviours that are vital for success – including determination, optimism and emotional success'. Tests, then, are not producing what industry wants – quite the reverse – so the notion that this is being done for the economy is somewhat bizarre.

Similarly, [university leaders](#) have expressed concerns about the effects of testing:

The problem we have with A-levels is that students come very assessment-oriented: they mark-hunt; they are reluctant to take risks; they tend not to take a critical stance; and they tend not to take responsibility for their own learning. (para 129)

However, there is a problem that both universities and employers use exam grades as criteria for acceptance – even if those skills are not needed in the work.

4. Governments undoubtedly use tests as a way of controlling what schools teach and how they teach it. Examples of this include the phonics test and SPAG test discussed above, and at secondary level the increasing emphasis on academic subjects brought about by the inclusion of only certain subjects in the accountability system.
5. A key reason for testing is to measure the effectiveness of each school. This is demonstrated in the use of league tables and a 'floor standard' (defined in terms of pupils' attainment and progress) which schools in England are expected to meet. School inspection outcomes in England are also heavily influenced by pupil attainment.

Schools that fail to meet the floor standard, or are judged Inadequate in inspection, are generally forced to become academies, and the head and some other staff are likely to lose their jobs. But even in 'successful' schools, individual teachers whose pupils fail to achieve the expected levels may have increments withheld under the performance-related pay scheme.

It is questionable whether test and exam results are really a fair way to assess school or teacher quality. The schools that fail to meet the floor standard are generally those with a high proportion of economically disadvantaged pupils. There are many reasons why such pupils may do less well at school than their more affluent counterparts. Their parents may be less able to support them (as a result of their own educational level, or lack of time to offer support, or lack of money to employ tutors, which is now routinely

done in any affluent homes). Moreover, the consequences of failure are so negative that teachers tend to be less willing to work in schools in areas of disadvantage, and so these schools also suffer teacher shortages, which have a negative impact on attainment.

What are the effects of all this testing?

First, has attainment improved? The percentage of children reaching the expected standards has increased – particularly in secondary schools. But this does not necessarily indicate that children have greater knowledge and understanding than they did a few years ago. When tests have high stakes, teachers focus all their efforts on the requirements of the test. But research has shown that when the precise content or format of the test is changed, results are lower. One example of this is the different picture shown by GCSE and PISA results. Between 2006 and 2012, the number of young people achieving the required standard in GCSE increased by 15 percentage points, while PISA outcomes showed no improvement. GCSEs attract intense preparation because they are part of accountability structures, while PISA tests are taken only in a sample of schools, and the outcomes have no consequences for the schools, so no focused preparation is undertaken.

The testing regime has had a great many negative impacts. These reflect the impacts of 19th century testing referred to above. The report [Exam Factories](#) provides recent evidence; here I simply summarise the negative effects of testing.

- A narrow curriculum. More time is spent on maths and English, and less time on other areas. Creative arts in particular are being squeezed. Even time spent on science has reduced in primary schools. Half the early years teachers surveyed reported that children rarely had opportunities to read or listen to stories for pleasure in school. The effects are greatest in the year groups being tested. Pupils who are identified as less likely to succeed often experience a particularly narrow curriculum as they attend extra English and maths classes at lunchtime or while their classmates are engaged in other aspect of the curriculum.
- Uncreative teaching, teaching to the test. Teachers said this happened both because of the pressures of covering the test syllabus and test preparation, and because of pressure to ensure that learning was recorded in pupils' books (which are checked by inspectors).
- Teachers reported knowing pupils less well than they did in the past, because pressure to cover the curriculum meant there was not time to get to know them.
- Tendency to treat children as uniform. All children have to take the same tests at the same ages, so teachers 'push' them to learn things for which some of them are not yet ready. This particularly affects younger children.
- Negative effect of 'failing' on children's 'academic self-concept. Some take doing badly as an incentive to work harder, many do not.
- 'Gaming the system'. In my research this was represented by a whole range of strategies (e.g. depressing results at age seven in order to make the gain by age 11

greater; interference in tests; excluding pupils or moving them so that they did not count as part of the cohort taking the test; admission policies that prioritise pupils more likely to succeed).

- Stress for both teachers and pupils. There is evidence that test and exam pressures contribute to mental health problems. Clearly the increase in mental health problems among young people has many causes, including social media etc. However, there is evidence that problems can begin or be exacerbated in the run-up to tests. While the effects were reported particularly among low achievers (because they experienced considerable pressure), high-achieving pupils also suffer from stress because they want to achieve high grades.
- Unhappy teachers, teachers leaving the profession, growing teacher shortage.
- Young people's perceptions of the purposes of education focus on *passing* rather than *learning*. Even in primary schools, children told me that their SATs results would affect their entire success in life.

All these effects are worse in schools with many economically disadvantaged pupils.

What are people doing about testing?

None of this is new – as I pointed out at the start, the effects of 'high stakes' testing have been known since Victorian times – but we have to keep on pointing it out if anything is to change.

Even the government (or some members of it) recognise the problems with tests. Successive Education Select Committees have noted the detrimental effects of testing but have largely been ignored. A former Education Secretary, [Nicky Morgan](#), was aware there was a problem; she said:

... we run the risk of creating a generation who excel at passing exams, writing essays, absorbing information, but children without the skills they need to tackle the challenges that lie ahead and participate in society as active citizens, to make the right decisions and build their own moral framework.

One of her proposed solutions was for schools to add character education to the already crowded curriculum. She also argued that an increase in competitive sport would improve pupils' mental health.

Teacher unions continue to argue against testing, but can be reluctant to acknowledge some of the effects – they feel that if they talk about teachers teaching to the test, or cheating, this would be turned around to blame teachers.

They, and others, have suggested alternative forms of accountability. For example, just a sample of pupils could be tested to assess national standards, and forms of assessment that are more informative than the current tests could be used to inform parents and teachers about children's progress.

Parent groups have organised boycotts of primary school tests. But they are conscious that they need to work with teachers to have the maximum impact. The [More than a Score](#) campaign brings parents' groups, teacher unions and researchers together. It argues, like its US counterpart, that children should be viewed as more than test score.

As I said at the start, Wales has different education policies, and ones that perhaps avoid some of the worst extremes of the global drive to measure schools' success by test results. But even now, teachers in Wales note some of the effects I have identified, such as a narrowing of the curriculum. It remains to be seen whether the new curriculum, informed by the [Donaldson](#) review, can counteract this. But if the next set of PISA results do not improve, there is a risk that more punitive policies may be introduced.