

## Education Committee Primary Assessment Inquiry

Written evidence submitted by TACTYC, Association for Professional Development in Early Years

### Executive Summary

- In principle, assessment of any kind should serve to improve learning for children. This should be the criterion against which all assessment practices in the early years and beyond should be judged.
- As children's first and most important educators, parents have a key contribution to make in assessment beyond receiving regular reports. This includes the sharing of information about what their children know and can do, and updates on the progress made by their children at home, as a crucial part of a full picture. Their observations can inform discussions with staff about what the nursery or school is doing to build on children's interests and to promote learning across all areas of development.
- Rather than current negative approaches which increasingly depend on testing, early years staff should rely on observational, formative assessment, especially when children enter a new group or setting. As the recent experience of baseline on entry to school shows, tests at that point are unlikely to enable children to show what they know and can do, and lead to damaging self-fulfilling judgements, especially of the youngest children in the year group.
- Current arrangements in primary schools rely on limited and limiting test results to measure progress across a restricted range of subjects, at the expense of broader areas of learning and development that are shown to be influential in children's long-term progress as learners. They exert counter-productive downward pressures on nurseries. Accountability is important, but schools could be held to account through systematic externally moderated self-evaluation. This could be validated by an inspection system modelled on the professional judgements made by HM, which has proved to be developmental rather than demoralising, while still serving the need for accountability.
- In this context, the announcement that the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is to remain at the end of the reception year at least until 2018 is welcome. We hope that the proposed review will result in approaches to assessment that recognise the importance of the prime areas of learning in the early years, of dispositions for learning, and of a broad curriculum that supports standards and quality in all areas of learning, not just the core subjects.

TACTYC is a membership organisation with over 500 members. Our activities include:

- **'advocacy and lobbying'** - providing a voice for all those engaged with the professional development of practitioners through responding to early years policy initiatives and contributing to the debate on the education and training of the UK early years workforce;
- **'informing'** – developing the knowledge-base of all those concerned with early years education and care by disseminating research findings through, for example, our international Early Years Journal, annual conference, website and occasional publications;
- **'supporting'** – encouraging informed and constructive discussion and debate and supporting practitioner reflection, the use of evidence-based practice and practitioner-research through, for example, our newsletter and website ([www.tactyc.org.uk](http://www.tactyc.org.uk)).

We are increasingly concerned at the negative impact that high stakes testing, linked to an accountability agenda, is having on the learning, development and well-being of young children. This applies not only to SATs in the primary years, but also to baseline assessment of children on entering the reception class. Such an over-emphasis on easily measured narrow curriculum areas does not provide valid or reliable information about children's learning, and leads to harmful downward

pressure on very young children. Professional knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum is being sacrificed to the demands of 'teaching to the test', leading to a demoralised and frustrated workforce in the early years, whose priority is to foster children's inborn motivation to learn.

### **The purpose of primary assessment and how well the current system meets this**

1. The core purpose of assessment is to support teaching and learning, enabling teachers to understand children with greater accuracy in order to plan and provide well-targeted support and challenge for their learning. This kind of formative assessment by well qualified staff who know children well is vital in guiding teaching and curriculum development. This should be separated from approaches to school accountability, which currently are seriously distorting the curriculum as well as teaching and learning processes.
2. External testing of young children is not appropriate as it limits the necessary breadth of learning, and encourages teaching to the test. Tests cannot capture the most important aspects of learning, including personal, social and emotional development, communication, and health and well-being, nor the development of a disposition to learn and capacities such as self-regulation, curiosity, motivation and creativity that are important for successful learning. Parents and children themselves make significant contributions to the reliability of assessment of young children, and should be an intrinsic part of the assessment process.
3. Alongside formative assessment, summative assessment provides valuable information about progress for individuals and groups, which allows teachers and schools to adjust their provision and practice to meet children's varying needs. It is essential to include information about progress from children's different starting points. The progress achieved by individual children should be considered to be of relatively greater importance than attainment relative to national expectations.
4. Current formative and summative assessment processes within the reception year are well-established and can be effective. Assessment is based on in-depth observation of children through a period of time and across a range of contexts, including both play where children show their embedded knowledge and skills and challenge themselves to engage with experiences and other people, and teacher-led activities where children are introduced to and helped to achieve new skills and understandings. Assessment should not be limited to the Early Learning Goals, but should consider children's well-being, broader learning and learning processes. Effective teachers use this approach within the first few weeks of school, building on the information from parents and from pre-school settings which assess in the same way, to establish starting points for each child. They already track their pupils' progress termly in relation to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), differentiating their teaching and approaches to ensure that all children succeed to the best of their abilities and levels of development. The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) at the end of the reception year is intended to reflect the inclusive EYFS framework. The EYFSP judgements are moderated, and provide a reliable and rounded picture of children's learning.
5. The raised expected standards in literacy and mathematics at the end of the EYFS, however, together with the definition of a Good Level of Development, are resulting in many children being labelled as failures early in their school careers. This is exacerbated by approaches to baseline assessment which test children on inappropriately narrow content, and by Primary SATs which are set at an unrealistic level for many children and the validity of whose content is questionable. Such inaccurate labelling of children causes stress and risks damaging children's self-confidence and view of themselves as learners and can also have a negative influence on teachers' expectations. It also has an impact on parents and carers who may perceive their child to have difficulties, whereas they may as yet have lacked opportunities to develop certain skills or gain specific knowledge.

6. In order to enable improved support for vulnerable children, factors that may have affected progress and attainment should be shared. Ideally, measures of progress also need to be placed in the context of the child's circumstances, as progress is likely to be affected by factors at home, in school (including attendance) and their wider life experiences.
7. The current focus on defined levels of expectation for all children disadvantages children with special educational needs; where progress is not given as much attention as attainment, there is a danger that children are perceived as failing.
8. Summer born children, who predictably achieve at lower levels in SATs as well as the EYFSP due to their relatively shorter experience, are at risk of being mis-identified as having special educational needs.
9. Judging the effectiveness of schools to ensure they are accountable for the progress of pupils is not a valid purpose of assessment in primary schools. Such judgements should be made on the basis of information a school provides on children's progress, with summative assessment growing out of ongoing formative assessment rather than test scores for individual children.

### **The advantages and disadvantages of assessing pupils at primary school**

10. As described above, assessment is an essential part of effective teaching in primary schools. Research has consistently demonstrated that the most important assessment is formative – the on-going assessment for learning which is used to inform teaching and provide children with constructive feedback, helping them to see their own next steps. This is entirely different from a 'pass or fail' judgement. (Assessment Reform Group, *Assessment in schools: Fit for purpose? A Commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme* 2009, Institute of Education; Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998) *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment*, Kings College, London, Dept of Education and Professional Studies; Clarke, S, 2001, *Unlocking Formative Assessment*, Hodder Education; Wiliam, D., *Assessment for Learning: why, what and how*, 2009, Institute of Education).
11. Assessment systems need to be manageable, with recording limited to the necessary minimum for reference, sharing with parents and other professionals, and moderation. Where there is over-emphasis on record-keeping and marking, this adds significantly to teachers' workloads without benefit to children's learning.
12. The assessment systems need to be transparent so that results are readily understood by all, and serve as a baseline for the child's next setting or school. Ideally it should be clear if results are normative, curriculum- or criterion-based. Scores that are not age-adjusted can be particularly unreliable and alarming to parents and carers unless presented with sensitivity and thought.
13. Children learn and develop at different rates, consolidating new concepts and establishing new skills in overlapping spurts and plateaus rather than in a predictable linear pattern. It is therefore dangerous to use assessment to set particular targets for individual children, and can lead to self-fulfilling low expectations in both parents and teaching staff or harmful levels of stress for young children.

### **How the most recent reforms have affected teaching and learning**

14. The Year 1 phonics check is an example of how testing can distort the curriculum and approaches to teaching. It is predicated on a simplistic view of learning to read that is having a negative influence on practice in nurseries as well as in the reception class and Key Stage 1. It is demonstrably causing anxiety to many children, and parents too, with no compensating

improvements in children's motivation or ability to read for meaning. (Clark, M. 2014, *Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning: an evidence-based critique*).

15. The majority of schools used one of the approved baseline assessment schemes in 2015, which resulted in increased workloads for teachers in and out of school, and disruption to the centrally important work of settling children into school in the early weeks. In some cases teachers were told to delay teaching until the baselines were completed. Only 7% of 12000 teachers surveyed thought that Baseline assessment was a good way to assess how schools perform, and only 8% thought that Baseline assessment was an accurate or fair way of assessing children. 71% reported that baseline assessment did not help to identify children who may have special educational needs, 68% thought it did not help to identify the needs of children who speak English as an additional language. 92% pointed out that their schools already had established systems of assessing children's starting points. (Bradbury, Alice and Roberts-Holmes, Guy, 2016, *"They are children... not robots, not machines": The Introduction of Reception Baseline Assessment* )
16. SATs tests potentially limit the curriculum available to many learners because teachers are constrained by this narrow approach and feel that they have no alternative but to 'teach to the test'. The effects of continual testing appear to concentrate teachers' efforts on particular elements of the national curriculum such as English and maths, at the expense of a broad and balanced curriculum. The government needs to place more faith in the professionalism of teachers and, with the aid of simplified assessment systems, encourage a creative, high quality environment for successful teaching and learning for pupils and teachers.

#### **Training and support needed for teachers and senior leaders to design and implement effective assessment systems**

17. Early Years Teachers who have specialist early years qualifications should be granted Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and thus be eligible to work in schools. Headteachers and other colleagues as well as pupils in YR and Key Stage 1 would benefit from their expert knowledge of observational assessment and of the pedagogy that is most effective in helping children to make progress in the early years. It makes no sense to have unequal 'tiers' of qualification, especially as the most effective contribution to narrowing the gap in achievement is demonstrably through investment in high quality provision for education and care in the early years.
18. Moderation meetings are an important feature of reliable assessment, both within schools and between schools in the same year groups, and across year groups at transitions enabling effective use of assessment information to support children's continued progress.

#### **Next steps following the most recent reforms to primary assessment**

19. We were relieved by the wise decision to withdraw baseline assessment plans for 2016-17 and to continue the statutory requirement to complete the EYFSP at the end of the reception year. Solutions imposed from government without adequate attention to the profession have proven to be a waste of time and money, and harmful to children's learning. The Minister's recent announcement that changes will be deferred for at least two years, coupled with a comprehensive review of primary assessment, is very welcome. It is imperative that this pause is used to engage fully with education professionals and schools to develop the best way forward.
20. An advisory body should be convened to look at assessment across the age range from the beginning of the EYFS through to Year 6. This body should consider the issues surrounding assessment which supports teaching and learning, drawing on existing effective practice. It would need to consider the content as well as the form of assessment, to ensure that a narrow focus does not detract from aspects which are of greater importance in supporting and challenging

young learners, and ensuring that they want to keep learning rather than thinking education is solely about progressing through tests.

21. Assessment to support teaching and learning should be considered separately from the demands of school accountability. A range of other approaches used internationally, such as school self-evaluation and inspection, should be examined, together with pupil sampling where results are not linked to individual children.
22. SATs should be suspended for 2016-17, and possibly beyond as necessary, to allow for a full, informed development, evaluation and implementation of principled, coherent and effective assessment approaches from the EYFS through to Year 6.