

## Responding to COVID-19, Briefing Note 1: Statutory Assessment after Covid



### Introduction

This briefing note sets out key findings relating to primary assessment drawn from an ESRC/UKRI funded research project run by the International Literacy Centre at UCL, Institute of Education. The project explored primary teachers' responses to the Covid-19 crisis; their priorities during lockdown and as schools re-opened; and any lessons learnt for education going forward.

The briefing note is intended to support headteachers and staff in setting priorities for the year ahead that can best meet the needs of their own school during what may be turbulent times. We recognise that priorities will vary according to local circumstances.

## **Primary assessment before and after COVID: Key questions**

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The English system of primary statutory assessment, culminating in SATs tests in Year 6, was suspended during the 2020 lockdown. As schools return to being fully open again for the 2020-21 academic year, there remain many questions about how primary assessment should function in the short to medium term, given the disruption to children's learning. Here we look at three key questions:

- Are schools helped or hindered in rebuilding children's learning post-Covid by focusing first and foremost on statutory tests?
- Can statutory tests accurately be used as school accountability measures, when the impacts of Covid are ongoing and vary by school?
- Has the Covid crisis highlighted more fundamental flaws in the current testing and accountability regime?

## **Key Findings**

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### **Statutory assessments should be suspended while the disruption continues**

The 2020-21 academic year will be unlike any other, given the long period where most primary children did not attend school between March and September 2020. Different communities have experienced the pandemic in diverse ways, and schools will need to recognise and adapt to these differing needs.

Instead of being driven by a 'one size fits all' statutory assessment programme, teachers need to use their professional judgement to assess where children are and how best to teach them from there. As one respondent commented, 'As professionals I truly believe we need to do what we know is right for our pupils whatever the government pressure might be'. Pressure to meet nationally-set targets will be irrelevant to this careful, ongoing process of establishing the needs of the children in that school, and planning from this information.

Both parents and teachers are aware that pupils will need time to settle back into schooling and that children's wellbeing provides the foundations for their capacity to learn (IPPR, 2020). The 'normal' assessment timetable in primary schools, including the Phonics Screening Check in Year 1, Key Stage 1 SATs and the Multiplication Table Check in Year 4, should not create an unwelcome distraction for teachers who will be focused on children's wellbeing and settling children back into purposeful learning in school. Moving last summer's Phonics Screening Check into the autumn term for children now in Year 2 risks distorting teaching priorities rather than helping teachers accurately identify and respond to individual pupil needs (see CEPEO, 2020).

We know that preparing Year 6 for Key Stage 2 SATs will put intense pressure on a year group that has missed six months of learning, and will also be faced with transition to secondary school in an uncertain time. Moreover, external pressure to meet test requirements at the end of the year is likely to be least helpful to those schools working in the most disadvantaged areas, where sufficient time to revisit and consolidate prior learning may be most beneficial.

Any data from statutory assessments will have to be treated with caution in any case; one teacher commented ‘We can monitor progression and ‘catch up’ without the need to formally test this, which might not actually show more than the child’s current ability to cope with a test’. The ease with which the government abandoned statutory assessments in 2020 shows the system can be flexible under difficult circumstances. This flexibility should be used to suspend statutory test requirements in primary for the coming year.

### **Fair accountability judgements cannot be based on test scores alone**

In our first survey, a majority of our respondents felt that it would be unfair for testing and inspection to go ahead next year, given the inequalities in how school closure has affected different communities. This view was held by a majority across the spectrum of schools, with 65% teaching in the more affluent communities agreeing this would be unfair, and an even greater number, 84% of those teaching in the more disadvantaged communities, agreeing with the statement (Moss et al, 2020).

Our research suggests that, thus far, teachers and school leaders have been making decisions based on their local circumstances and attempting to provide the best education they can, taking into account their wider responsibilities for supporting pupils and communities facing basic health, nutrition and welfare issues. Work set and undertaken during lockdown will inevitably look different from work set and undertaken in school during normal times. It is less certain the precise difference this will make for individual children.

The most reliable research evidence suggests that in any group of children some may have gained independently of school inputs, some will have lost, but may also gain back fast, once schooling is resumed. Others will be in need of additional support (Kuhfeld et al, 2020). A lot of different factors come into play in determining outcomes. Many are factors that are entirely beyond the control of the school including the levels of parental support and the richness of the learning environment that children had access to during lockdown, as well as any impacts the pandemic may have had on family mental health and wellbeing.

It would be quite wrong to judge schools operating under such very different circumstances as if their educational inputs were wholly responsible for determining pupil SATs scores when so many other contextual factors will have mattered more (Leckie and Goldstein, 2019).

### **Teachers do not want to return to ‘business as usual’ in testing and accountability**

This crisis has emphasised to many that there is far more to ‘schooling’ than learning: our teacher and headteacher respondents were very much motivated by concerns for pupil and family well-being, as well as for supporting pupils’ learning. Our respondents have told us of their concerns about children’s mental and physical health, and the importance of school as a safe space for children who have suffered during lockdown.

The reliance on statutory testing in primary schools as the main way of driving school improvement or assuring quality is not fit for purpose, given the huge additional burdens placed on schools during the crisis, and the ripple effects this will have over the next few years. Teachers have concerns about how more vulnerable children are

affected by testing, issues which have been exacerbated by a crisis which has disproportionately affected this group. The pressure on staff to teach to the test and the narrowing of the curriculum that may follow, will be even more damaging for these children. Rushing to 'catch up' will least benefit those most in need of consolidating their learning at a steady pace this term.

When asked about their long-term hopes for the impact of the crisis, teachers told us repeatedly that one positive outcome would be the end of statutory testing, and particularly Key Stage 2 SATs. As one respondent commented, 'We have such a big opportunity now to really listen to children's and their families' needs [...] We have to let go of the rigid structures the government have put in place and allow teachers to make decisions as professionals who know the children best'.

## Recommendations

- 1. In the coming year, schools should be focused on reconnecting children with purposeful learning, rather than on preparing children for external tests.**
- 2. Using statutory assessments for accountability purposes this year will be deeply flawed** – the methodology takes no account of the contextual factors driving student learning during lockdown nor of the additional pressures that the Covid-crisis has placed on our most vulnerable communities. Under these circumstances, fair judgements of the quality of schools' responses to the crisis cannot be derived from test outcomes measured against national norms.
- 3. The assessment and accountability system is in urgent need of review – We need a fairer system that is more fit for purpose especially during these challenging times.**

## Project Details

The research project "A duty of care and a duty to teach: educational priorities in response to the COVID-19 crisis" is funded through the UKRI/ESRC Urgent Covid Response Call, project no. ES/V00414X/1, and based in the International Literacy Centre. Our data include: a survey of 1,653 primary school teachers in England, conducted for us by Teacher Tapp between May 27-29<sup>th</sup> 2020; a follow up survey conducted by ILC between July 3-31<sup>st</sup> 2020; in-depth interviews with teachers; and documentary evidence of the wider public debate on education and Covid-19.

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