

The impact of accountability measures on children and young people

Introduction and background

The research was commissioned by the NUT to investigate the impact on children and young people in England of the various measures used to hold schools accountable. These include inspections, floor standards, and the whole range of measures published in the school performance tables (attainment, pupil progress, attainment gaps, etc.).

The current English accountability structures were introduced following the Education Reform Act (DES 1988), which led to the creation of Ofsted, national testing and published league tables. Accountability measures have been strengthened over the years by: collection and publication of a wider range of data; the introduction of floor standards which have become increasingly demanding; and increasing specification of which subjects 'count' in secondary league tables; more challenging tests at primary and secondary level; and the introduction of a phonics test for six year olds.

This report presents the findings of research which aimed to explore the impact on children and young people in England of these accountability measures. It uses data from an online survey (completed by 7,922 NUT teachers across all phases of education and types of school), along with interviews with staff and pupils in seven case study schools across the country.

Key points

Previous research

- There is a considerable body of evidence to show that accountability measures have a range of negative impacts on pupils. Much of this evidence relates to high stakes testing. As long ago as 1888, Emerson White discussed the appropriateness of making the results of examinations the basis for a judgement on the standing or success of schools. He concluded that examinations had had a pernicious effect upon many areas of teaching and learning and that they had caused unnecessary levels of stress.
- A wide range of research in the US has shown that: high stakes testing does not improve children's overall knowledge and understanding because teaching is focused very closely on the demands of the test (e.g. Amrein and Berliner 2002; Koretz 2008); and high stakes testing has a wide range of negative effects on teachers and pupils. For example, it results in less creative teaching; a narrowing of the curriculum; a focus on borderline students at the expense of others; pupil anxiety and stress; and temptation to both pupils and teachers to 'game the system' (e.g. Clarke et al. 2003; Pedulla et al 2003; Jones and Egley 2004; Rothstein et al 2008; Ravitch 2010). Teachers in the survey reported a number of dubious practices related to gaming the system, such as teachers giving pupils hints about answer to test questions.

Teachers' and learners' views of accountability structures

- Case study interviewees agreed that teachers should be accountable to children, and most said they should be accountable to parents. Some supported other forms of accountability, but all identified major concerns about current accountability measures. Interviewees were asked which forms of accountability concerned them the most.

The vast majority of interviewees pointed to Ofsted. Ofsted was described as both 'punitive' and 'random', 'a spectre' and 'the thing that keeps me awake at night'. Interviewees talked of 'fear of them coming in and saying that you are no good'.

- The notion that Ofsted is punitive referred partly to the potential consequences of doing badly and partly to a perception on the part of teachers that the attitudes of inspectors often tended to be combative. A lack of consistency was also highlighted by respondents.
- Interviewees expressed concerns about the ever widening range of data which is used to make judgements. They expected that they could be criticised for any aspect of data that was below the national figure, not showing year-on-year improvement, or perceived to be too variable. It was argued that these expectations are unrealistic, and do not take into account the differences between cohorts of pupils.
- Interviewees also argued that the focus on attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is unhelpful because it does not indicate the actual level of attainment of either group.
- Many teachers were concerned about the overriding focus on pupils in receipt of the Pupil Premium. Some felt that the needs of other children were being overlooked whereas others felt that in the drive to maximise results for Pupil Premium pupils, the needs of SEN pupils were being sidelined.
- All the case study schools with an overall Ofsted judgement of 'Requires Improvement' (RI) had changed their practice specifically to please Ofsted. One head said,



'there are things that we do because we know that Ofsted are going to criticise us if it's not there; not because it's the best thing for the kids'.

- While pupils did not share their teachers' anxiety about inspection, some of them expressed criticisms of the timing and outcomes of these inspections.

School strategies for accountability

- The strategies that schools adopt in relation to accountability measures include: scrutiny of all aspects of teachers' work; requirements for greater uniformity of practice; collection and use of data to target individual pupils; an increased focus on maths/numeracy and English/literacy (and in secondary schools, on other academic subjects e.g. history, geography, science, languages); and additional teaching of targeted pupils.
- Many of these strategies were more frequently reported in schools with poor Ofsted grades, below average attainment and high proportions of disadvantaged pupils.
- Teachers expressed concern about many of the school strategies for accountability, stating that they caused excessive workload, over-recording of pupils' work and timetables dominated by subjects which were tested.

Impact of accountability on school leaders and teachers

- Teachers' excessive workload and stress levels have been well-documented elsewhere e.g. NUT (2014), TNS BMRB (2014), and Gibson et al (2015) reporting teachers' responses to the DfE Workload Challenge. Teachers felt that they were often held accountable for things which were out of their control. One teacher, for example, reported that 'when holding someone accountable, senior teachers or Ofsted will not accept the obvious reasons: social background of the pupils, recent history of the department in terms of absences and leadership etc. This leads to a sort of witch hunt where you may be singled out even if you have done everything that you reasonably could'.
- Over 70 per cent of teachers agreed strongly that they were anxious about whether pupil targets related to their appraisal were realistic; over sixty per cent agreed strongly that they spent a disproportionate amount of time on documentation related to accountability; and just over 60 per cent agreed strongly that they were anxious about Ofsted inspections.

Impacts of accountability measures, choice of schools, attainment, curriculum and teaching and learning

- One aim of the accountability measures introduced as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act was to improve information to parents so that they could make informed choices of schools. It was assumed that this would create a market in education which would have the effect of expanding 'successful' schools and forcing those that were not successful to close. Competition between schools would therefore raise standards. International research has, however, shown that markets have had very little impact.
- In England, fewer than half of all parents reported in a YouGov survey that they used school performance data or Ofsted reports in choosing their children's schools (Francis and Hutchings 2012). Recent research by NFER showed that the factors parents considered the most important in school choice are the 'school that most suits my

child/children' and 'location'. 'Ofsted rating' and 'examination results' were ranked 4th and 6th respectively.

- Three of the case study schools in this research had been judged by Ofsted to 'Require Improvement' (RI). None of these schools reported that parents had removed children as a result of this. Coverage in local newspapers was generally supportive of the schools and critical of Ofsted.
- As stated above, (see section on previous research) there is no conclusive evidence that high stakes testing leads to improved pupil attainment.
- Research has shown that home background is a much larger influence than the school attended and thus attainment gaps are very difficult to reduce. Rasbash et al (2010) examined variation in pupils' progress at secondary school and concluded that only 20 per cent of this is attributable to school quality. Most of the variation related to family factors, the neighbourhood and so on. Other estimates of the 'school effect' are lower: Wiliam (2010) reported that OECD analysis showed that in the USA, only eight per cent of the variability in maths scores related to the quality of education provided by the school, and analysis of data in England showed that the school effect contributes only seven per cent of the variance in attainment between pupils.
- Some research has suggested that accountability measures has a negative effect, tending to widen gaps because those with lower attainment may become discouraged following poor test results, and lose motivation (Harlen and Deakin Crick 2002).
- Teachers in this research raised serious concerns about the impact of such measures which prioritise certain areas of the curriculum, arguing that pupils are now experiencing a narrower curriculum; that the increased academic demands are inappropriate for some pupils; and that some pupils are 'not ready' for what they are required to learn.
- The phonics screening check for six year olds and the preparation which pupils must undergo for it was cited as a cause of stress for pupils and teachers. There were concerns that children as young as four were feeling that they had failed because they were behind their peers, or that teaching to the test meant that improving test scores did not necessarily mean that pupils' reading skills had improved.

Impacts of accountability measures on teacher-pupil relationships and pupils' emotion health and well-being.

- Many teachers in this research stated that the quality of their relationships with their pupils had been adversely affected by factors such as their own stress levels, pressure to cover a syllabus; or lack of time due to their workload.
- Over 70 per cent of teachers agreed a lot with the statement 'I do not have enough time to focus on the needs of individual pupils' and 70 per cent agreed a lot that 'My stress levels sometimes impact on the way I interact with pupils'.
- There has been a significant increase in pupil test anxiety on England. For example, the charity Childline noted a 200 per cent increase in counselling sessions related to exam stress between 2012-13 and 2013-14.

The full document can be downloaded from :
<https://www.teachers.org.uk/files/exam-factories.pdf>