

National Reading and Numeracy Tests 2015

June 2015

UCAC | yr undeb sy'n diogelu athrawon a darlithwyr Cymru

National Reading and Numeracy Tests 2014

'Then Test time comes round and my pupils feel like failures and are often tearful.'

UCAC Feedback

Introduction

National numeracy and reading tests for Welsh pupils were held between May 5th and 12th this year. UCAC asked members' opinions on various aspects of these tests.

This document outlines the main themes expressed in feedback to our consultation with members. It will be our aim as a union to seek to influence the relevant bodies in order to attempt to improve the system in 2016.

Background

The tests were held between May 5-12, 2015 for children in Years 2-9. Welsh and English reading tests were held for those children following a Welsh programme of study in years 3-9 along with Procedural Mathematics and Reasoning tests.

Seeking the opinions of our Members

UCAC has asked members' opinions on the national tests since their inception. This year, specific questions were asked of our members regarding the tests and an excellent response was received to our request for information. Below, a flavour is given of our members' responses question by question before a detailed account of some specific points raised including a response from some heads.

Has there been an improvement in the organisation / administration of the tests this year?

It appears that there has been very little change in the organisation and administration of the tests this year with several schools expressing the same frustrations as before.

'We are not testing ability in literacy or numeracy but the ability of our children to work under test conditions'

It is clear that there are great variations across the country regarding the marking of the tests with some schools using the funding received to pay teachers to mark papers but it is clear that this is not the practice in all schools. We understand from our members that many schools are using what little funding is received from the Government for the administration of the tests on invigilators' pay. This often means that there is no money left to pay teachers for marking the papers.

Does a national timetable for the tests need to be considered?

A number of comments were received across the two sectors expressing the opinion that there ought to be a national timetable for the tests. Of the responses received there is a majority in favour of a timetable being organised so that children in all schools sit the same test *'in order to ensure consistency and fairness.'*

'It needs to be ensured that all pupils sit the tests at the same time in order to have consistency, particularly considering the increasing emphasis arising based on the test result data.'

A number of members expressed the view that the tests were not held at the ideal time. Some indicated that it would be better to hold them later in the summer term. A number of members raised the fact that a week is very little time for schools testing the children in Welsh reading since there is one additional test to be timetabled. It was felt that the time should be extended. Concern was voiced that the test timetable overlapped with the GCSE timetable.

It was noted last year that the 2014 National Tests were extremely challenging, especially for less able pupils or pupils with additional learning needs. Was this the case this year?

This appears to be the case for the 2015 tests as well. One opinion highlighted again and again in the responses received was the lack of differentiation in the tests. Schools differentiate work for learners on several levels on a daily basis. Different targets are set for different groups of learners so that all pupils experience success in order to raise their confidence. This is now second nature for teachers in all sectors and, of course, this is expected to happen when Estyn conducts inspections. There is a strong feeling that the national tests utterly sweep away this way of teaching since all children receive the same paper depending on age and not ability. There is a general feeling that the advantages of formative assessment are set aside during the test period which has a negative impact on the pupils' education.

A number of members have told heartbreaking stories of children in tears as they fail to do the tests. Practices of placing unreasonable pressure on children like this have, thank goodness, disappeared from our schools, but some echo of a bygone age is to be found in our schools during test week.

'Then Test time comes round and my ALN pupils feel like failures and are often tearful.'

There was a strong opinion in the responses that the tests were very challenging and that the provision for ALN children needed to be examined in detail. A number of members note that the papers could begin with less challenging questions in order to raise the children's confidence and give them a little success at the start of the test.

Were the Literacy (Welsh), Literacy (English) and Numeracy tests of the same level of challenge for the age group(s) you teach?

A number of members expressed the opinion that the content of the Welsh reading paper for year 6 was dull and uninteresting and a number of members have expressed an opinion on the dialect of some of the Welsh papers. A strong view came from the valleys on changing the nature of the language in the Welsh papers in order for the children to have a better understanding.

'It may not be "perfect" Welsh but this is how our children speak!'

Perhaps this issue needs to be raised nationally, beyond the context of the tests. Ought we now, on some occasions, to use Welsh that is intelligible to all learners whether they live in Aberdaron or Abergavenny?

A number have noted a concern that not enough time had been allocated for the tests.

'As a department we feel that the questions on the Procedural paper are fair enough for the majority of pupils but the time is not sufficient. Even the best pupils do not have time to check the paper and a number of the

children have not finished the questions! These papers need at least 45 minutes in order that the pupils have a fair chance to perform to their potential.'

Were the nature of the questions and the content and format of the tests more suitable this year?

There is a strong feeling among members that these tests are not in accordance with the ethos and philosophy of the Foundation Phase and are therefore very alien to year 2 children when they encounter them for the first time. A number of strong opinions were received with regard to this. The Foundation Phase methodology encourages children to explore, to discuss with their fellow pupils and to question, the national tests are entirely contrary to this philosophy.

'I have a class that are hitting the mark in terms of the Foundation Phase outcomes but the test results will not show this at all. I strongly believe that there is great inconsistency between the Foundation Phase principles and the National tests.'

It is a real worry that the tests are creating panic among children. A number of accounts causing great concern came to our attention.

'It was heartbreaking to see my confident little children in an anxious state because during the tests they were divided up, could not talk with a partner/group or ask for help from the teacher. One boy was scratching his arm and had broken the skin with nerves and the little children with special needs who cannot read well were really lost.'

'I know of one year 6 class where 7 children out of 17 became so upset trying to complete the reasoning test that it is not possible to come to any conclusions about the learners' ability or knowledge.'

Were the questions better graded this year i.e. starting with easier questions and moving on to the more difficult?

The general feeling received in the responses is that this had not happened in this year's tests. A number of members note that the tests are designed to 'catch children out' rather than discover what they have learnt.

'The most difficult question on the reasoning paper was the first question!'

General Comments

A number of heads expressed concern that the schools are under great pressure to 'prepare the pupils' for the tests. This means that curricular experiences are 'parked for a period before the tests.' There is a feeling that the schools are under pressure from the Government and the consortia to ensure success for the children in the tests as they are compared with schools in leagues. The schools feel that they are under pressure to spend a period before the tests training the children to sit them. This, as one head noted, is in spite of the fact that Estyn in their report on Best Practice recommend that schools "Plan a sequence of learning opportunities for pupils to experience the breadth of the creative arts and develop their creative

skills as they move through school. The report also encourages schools, consortia and the Government to support teachers to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to teach the creative arts well.” There is a strong feeling among the heads that the tests go against this and the good practice established in their schools.

It was frustration with the timetable for receipt of the test results that was raised by a number of heads. It appears that a great many schools deliver the children’s annual reports some weeks before the end of term. This is because of the obligation schools have to hold parents’ meetings when the annual report can be discussed. These reports, naturally, include reporting on the Numeracy and Literacy Framework as well. However, it is not possible to include the test results with the report. A date is not given by the Government for receipt of the results but in recent years they have not been received until the last days of the summer term. This means that schools are sending out another report to parents during the busy final week. The opinion was expressed that it would be a good thing, and would reduce the workload, to include the results report with the annual report. This could be done if only schools were to receive the test results sooner, or at least knew when to expect them.

One member noted that he was not opposed to the testing of children in itself but that the system of national testing was objectionable considering the pressure put on children. It was felt that internal tests could be conducted and that this would be very appropriate in years 4 and 6.

In the wake of the publication of Successful Futures, i.e. a review of the curriculum in Wales by Professor Graham Donaldson, there is room to ask whether the current system of annual assessment of children is in accordance with the principles set out in the report.

Recommendations

- In the wake of the publication of the Donaldson Report consideration should be given to doing away with the tests.

However, if they are held

- The tests should be done away with in the Foundation Phase;
- A differentiating/graded format should be introduced for the tests (i.e. ensuring that the questions become gradually more difficult throughout the paper) in order to give all learners a solid starting point;
- It should be ensured that there is a differentiating element to the tests;
- There should be consultation with the schools with regard to organising a national timetable for the tests;
- There should be consultation with the schools and agreement on a time for releasing the results.

Ywain Myfyr
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UCAC
Undeb
Cenedlaethol
Athrawon
Cymru



Prif Swyddfa **UCAC**, Ffordd Penglais, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 2EU

ffôn: 01970 639950 | ffacs: 01970 626765 | ucac@athrawon.com

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