

Getting the right balance: preparing for the Key Stage 2 tests

Many schools very effectively help children to prepare for end of Key Stage assessment without 'teaching to the test'. How do they go about it?



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What is the issue?

We know that children who, by the end of primary school, have both a secure grasp of key skills and a breadth of enjoyable learning experience are far better placed to take full advantage of future educational opportunities. We therefore want all children to:

- make optimum progress in English and mathematics, including at least 2 levels in Key Stage 2, within the context of a broad-ranging, engaging and creative learning curriculum;
- feel confident that they can do their best in a formal test situation; and
- do themselves justice in the national tests, so that they, their parents and their next school are properly aware of the progress they have made, and so that primary schools can accurately evidence for themselves the effectiveness of their practice.

Many schools already take a balanced approach to test preparation and do not 'teach to the test'. We would like all schools to respond in this way. There is good evidence to suggest that 'teaching to the test' can turn children off learning, and can reduce what, and how, they learn about a subject. In short, we feel the approach is counter productive and one to be discouraged.

This booklet highlights how the right test preparation can not only help children to understand better the subject they're learning about, but can also help them to get the results they deserve. It is also intended to try and reduce the pressure that senior leaders and Year 6 teachers may feel as the national tests approach.



What is in this booklet?

The Expert Group on Assessment – a group of head teachers and education professionals tasked with reviewing key stage tests and assessment in England – recommended that the Government should provide schools with examples of how teachers are successfully preparing their pupils for Key Stage 2 tests, without unnecessary ‘drilling’ or ‘teaching to the test’. Evidence was gathered from visits undertaken by a team of School Standards Advisers to primary and middle schools, and further supplemented by detailed consultations with head teachers and teachers.

The schools represented a wide range of sizes, locations and catchments, but all had been identified as effectively preparing children for end of Key Stage 2 tests without compromising curriculum coverage or the provision of high quality teaching and learning. Although many used different approaches, they were all very effective schools. School Standards Advisers said that the achievements of their children at the end of Key Stage 2 was underpinned by:

- **high expectations** for all;
- **target setting and tracking** of progress that was rigorous and regular; and
- an unrelenting **focus on learning**, pursued within an engaging curriculum and a supportive ethos.

This booklet summarises the key findings.

How could it help you?

We hope this booklet will support Senior Leadership Teams in schools with Key Stage 2 children by:

- stimulating discussion and debate;
- providing a touchstone against which to evaluate your own school’s practice¹; and
- encouraging consideration of the most appropriate ways forward for the school.

1. A very brief self-evaluation tool, which could be used to support this, is included as Annex 1.

What the schools do

1. Maintain an ongoing focus on progression in learning

Their aim is to ensure that all children:

- make optimum progress through every single term and year of their time in primary school; and
- experience a broad-ranging, creative and personalised curriculum which engages them and facilitates this learning.

They are confident that children who learn enthusiastically and make good progress throughout their primary schooling will have the ability to perform well in Key Stage 2 tests. More specifically:

- accountability for progress is seen as a shared responsibility across the whole school and not just for Year 6 teachers;
- target setting, tracking and pupils' progress reviews are rigorous and regular, identifying strengths and what the children need to focus on to support next steps;
- children are involved in their own learning: their voices are listened to;
- quality first teaching is designed to enable progress for the full range of children and includes guided learning and individual support as appropriate;
- key skills are developed within a learning context that is engaging and creative. This often includes a focus on talk for learning, visual and media literacy, using and applying in mathematics, investigative science and the integration and application of ICT; and
- if the progress of a child or group of children is stalling then a range of interventions, for example 1:1 tuition, is put in place immediately.

'We quickly realised we needed to move the emphasis down through the school so 'test preparation' was about progression in learning and not preparation just at the point of tests' (Subject Leader)

School A makes full use of the Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) approach in supporting pupils' learning in reading, writing and mathematics. At the end of each term the teachers in Years 1-6 make a judgement on each pupil's attainment using the APP criteria, drawing on evidence of the pupil's work during the term. This allows teachers to identify obstacles to progress for individual pupils as well as some that may apply to certain groups or even the whole-class. It also allows the senior leaders and subject leaders to track progress across the whole-school.

'We do not leave things to Year 6 - each year has a part to play' (Subject Leader)



School B uses the Primary Framework to review and adapt planning, to ensure that teaching meets pupil needs. For example, in mathematics teachers make use of the *Overcoming Barriers* materials to accelerate progression. For improving writing teachers use the *Support for Writing* materials, particularly the pupil writing targets for guided writing sessions. All pupils are set curricular targets half-terminally and progress against the targets is regularly checked and discussed individually with them. Targets are also shared with parents so that they support their child with related homework. Pupils are encouraged to self and peer assess using success criteria and prompts displayed in the classroom.

What the schools do

2. Make effective provision for 'filling the gaps'

They recognise that some children will still reach the later stages of primary school with certain 'gaps' in their learning and they do everything possible to address these before the children move on to secondary school. This involves providing appropriate 'catch up/keep up' opportunities, whilst still fully involving children in a rich and engaging curriculum.

This provision is more about optimising progress than preparing for the tests. However they are confident that addressing the children's identified learning needs will also help ensure that children do themselves justice in tests. More specifically:

- they see pin-pointing and addressing key gaps in learning as one of their top priorities;
- children themselves are encouraged to take responsibility for recognising and then tackling their areas of difficulty;
- Year 5 and Year 6 children are sometimes regrouped in English and mathematics to provide specific targeted support. Additional adults such as Higher Level Teaching Assistants or the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) are sometimes used to decrease group or class sizes to facilitate tailored intervention;
- one-to-one tuition is increasingly seen as a key support strategy for appropriate children; and
- consideration is given as to whether existing intervention strategies should be extended through the use of 'booster' classes (particularly in Year 6). These are generally held outside regular curriculum time, within a strictly limited 'time frame', and the content of the sessions is tightly focused on key areas of learning.

School C runs a Year 6 programme which they call a 'learning health check'. The pupils use self and peer assessment strategies to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to set appropriate short term targets. They record their own progress towards meeting these targets on 'learning grids'. The two Year 6 teachers use this information, together with their own assessment data, to plan a range of short, focused, fun activities designed to meet the needs of the pupils and build their confidence. Websites, games, drama and art are integrated wherever possible to make the learning interactive and enjoyable. Booster classes and 'drop in' sessions run alongside the programme allowing pupils to work in small groups or individually with the teacher or teaching assistant on particular areas of their work. Throughout the programme pupils are encouraged to share the information on their learning grids with their parents.

'The 'learning health check' is about building the pupils' confidence and helping them show what they can do. By the end of primary school they should be aware of what they are good at and where they need to improve and we want them to be proud of what they have achieved' (Year 6 teacher)

School D has been involved in the *Making Good Progress Pilot*. As part of the pilot, the school received funding to provide one-to-one tuition for those pupils who were in danger of not making two levels of progress by the end of Key Stage 2.

For example, Michael was identified for tuition to support his writing. He received ten one-hour sessions of tuition, provided by a qualified tutor from his own school. The support was tightly focused on some very specific writing targets from the Primary Framework. The tutor used a range of techniques which included building on Michael's interest in his hobbies to find topics to write about and demonstrate the writing process. Very quickly it became clear that Michael's confidence levels had increased and this was particularly reflected in his willingness to have a go at writing, both in the tuition sessions and back in class.

What the schools do

3. Help children to feel at ease in the test situation

They recognise that if children are successfully to show what they can do under national test conditions, they will benefit from some familiarity with the actual tests and an understanding of how best to tackle them.

They find that a certain amount of specific 'test preparation' is helpful, but keep this in proportion. They successfully integrate preparation into ongoing and engaging teaching, dispensing with the need to dedicate specific or additional time.

More specifically:

- when planning units of work, explicit links are made between the skills in literacy and mathematics and those skills required in Key Stage tests;
- teachers model and children practise a range of test techniques, such as reading questions carefully and understanding what is required. As many of these techniques can be considered as study skills and have wide applicability, they are introduced as a normal part of teaching and learning through the whole of Key Stage 2. Sample test questions and tasks are sometimes used to support this, but rarely whole papers;
- children are given the opportunity to work to fixed time limits, and supported in improving how they manage this. This is often done in the context of ongoing work rather than as specific 'rehearsal';
- just prior to the test children are familiarised with the testing environment, and the format of the test paper, although repeated 'rehearsal' is not felt necessary; and
- parents and carers are fully involved and discussions held as to how they can best provide support.

'We teach them how to do the tests so that they are not worried and disconcerted by the experience ...the aim is to achieve their best ... I tell them you need to do this on your own but I put the emphasis on my belief that I know they can do it.' (Year 6 teacher)

School E Within literacy lessons the pupils are given experience of working under timed conditions. Whole class and guided group sessions are also used to analyse 1, 2, and 3 mark questions with a focus on specific reading skills, e.g. inference and deduction. In addition these sessions are used to teach the skills of scanning and summarising a reading paper.

In mathematics lessons, starter sessions or plenaries are used to give pupils regular practice in answering 5, 10 and 15 second mental maths questions. Pupils also have opportunities to work under timed conditions on practice questions. In follow up sessions pupils work in pairs or small groups to discuss the methods and strategies they have used and highlight any difficulties.



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'When appropriate in a lesson we may look at some example test questions or one section of a test paper – but we make sure that it fits in with what we are doing.'
(Year 6 teacher)

School F uses a range of techniques to provide information, engage and encourage parental support for Year 6 pupils. Two parents' evenings are held, one at the beginning of Year 6 and the other at the beginning of the spring term. During the first meeting the role of end of Key Stage testing is explained and placed within the context of the whole year's work. The meeting in the spring term is used to give parents an insight into the likely demands of the tests, for example by giving the parents examples from the tests. The most important message, however, is how to ensure that parents and pupils feel comfortable/confident as they approach the tests.



What the schools do not do

In preparing pupils for tests, the schools identified said that they don't:

- narrow the curriculum in any way;
- reduce time spent on other areas of learning;
- devote the year to revision of the entire Key Stage programmes of study in English and mathematics;
- narrow teaching within the subject: teach decontextualised 'skills' or a reduced range of content;
- support the extensive or repeated practising of past test papers, or always expect children to work 'under test conditions';
- place undue emphasis on broad levels of attainment, or crossing level borderlines, at the expense of individual learning needs identified through assessment for learning;
- reduce personalisation or focus exclusively on certain groups of children at the expense of others;
- significantly change teaching and learning practices;
- significantly change classroom ethos and environment;
- cut back or reduce children's access to curriculum extension and enrichment experiences, including learning outside the classroom; or
- decide what children need without listening to the children's own views, or those of their parents and carers.

'We are not prepared to compromise on the quality of the curriculum or on pupils' enjoyment and pride in their learning.' (Headteacher)

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School G has a clear ethos and belief that confident learners who enjoy school will demonstrate their learning in a national test without undue rehearsal or endless practice. The school offers a very rich and wide range of whole school curricular opportunities which the Headteacher believes are an essential part of *'keeping the motivation in learning going in Year 6'*.

Through careful planning, the wider curriculum is used both to stimulate and provide a context for applying reading, writing and mathematics skills in sometimes unusual contexts. Enrichment activities such as use of whole school theme day activities which may include, for example, fiction weeks or design and technology 'build days', are incorporated at regular intervals.

Each Tuesday afternoon all pupils from Year 2 to Year 6 are offered enrichment courses during which pupils have the opportunities both to develop new skills and apply those taught in literacy and mathematics lessons. The six-week courses, devised by the curriculum leadership group, focus on five areas: creative arts, physical activities, sciences, languages and design technology.




Annex 1:

Evaluation of current practice

Priorities for Development				
	1	2	3	4
1 = a strong feature of current practice 4 = an aspect needing significant development				
1. Helping children to succeed: focusing on progression				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability for KS2 results is seen as a shared responsibility across the whole school 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a whole-school approach to progression 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress is tracked and regularly reviewed; targets are used to support next steps in learning 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning is designed to support personalised progress; intervention is provided when needed 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Year 6 curriculum is not skewed to create time to 'teach to the test' 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enrichment opportunities continue to be provided both within and beyond the curriculum throughout Year 6 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children are involved in their own learning and their voices listened to 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents and carers are involved in their children's progress 				

Evaluation of current practice (continued)

Priorities for Development				
	1	2	3	4
<p>1 = a strong feature of current practice</p> <p>4 = an aspect needing significant development</p>				
<p>2. Helping children to succeed: filling the learning gaps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific gaps in learning are identified • Appropriate provision is made to address gaps in learning through quality first teaching • Appropriate provision is made for 'catch up' where necessary (e.g. through guided learning groups, focused intervention, one-to-one tuition) • Children are aware of the key areas of learning they need to concentrate on as they progress through the year • Pupil progress discussions are used frequently to provide feedback on learning 				

Priorities for Development				
	1	2	3	4
1 = a strong feature of current practice 4 = an aspect needing significant development				
3. Helping children to feel at ease in the test situation				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test preparation strategies are integrated into ongoing work and do not take up significant additional time • Test preparation strategies are interactive and varied and provide high quality feedback to the children • Children's concerns are recognised and acknowledged and their voices listened to • Children are familiar with the nature of the test environment before they sit the tests • Children are familiar with the format of the KS2 test papers and how the questions are presented • Children have practice at working to specified time limits • Children are fully aware of some useful techniques/ study skills which will help them to do their best in the tests • Parents and carers are informed about the tests and involved in providing appropriate support for the children 				

Annex 2:

Resources

Primary Framework for literacy and mathematics

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primaryframeworks

Three steps, Four steps to help Year 6 children

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primaryframework/library/wholeschool/

Year 6 timeline overview

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primaryframework/literacy/planning/Year6/timeline

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primaryframework/mathematics/planning/Year6/timeline/

Overcoming barriers in mathematics: level 3 to level 4

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primaryframework/mathematics/planning/overcoming_barriers

Support for Writing

www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primaryframework/cpd/literacy/support_writing

Literacy: Key Stage 2 CPD

<http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/236126>

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