

HOW AM I TEACHING?

SATs and league tables are dirty words for some, but Lord Bew's recent report – accepted by the Government – attempts to calm the troubled waters of KS2 assessment. Kevin Harcombe gauges its success...

What was Michael Gove to do when faced with 25% of schools boycotting the 2010 SATs and unions complaining vociferously about the unfairness of league tables and the alleged inconsistencies in external marking? He needed someone with experience in resolving the seemingly unresolvable, someone who could tiptoe through long-established and culturally ingrained prejudices and antipathies. Step forward, Lord Bew, who played a role in formulating the Good Friday

Agreement in Northern Ireland. Shrewd chap, Gove.

Bew's report was published in June and the headline was that SATs (or National Curriculum Assessments, as the government is unsuccessfully trying to rebrand them) stay. Maths and reading see little or no change, though the report states, "the most crucial aspects of reading at the end of Key Stage 2 are accuracy, fluency and comprehension" (p.14), which may mean those "complex inference" questions are to go and we will see more

simple inference and, consequently, more Level 4s.

Writing, amongst the thorniest of Lord Bew's problems, has been dealt with in a very counter-intuitive but clever manner – more tests! A new, externally marked, spelling, punctuation and grammar test is to be trialled from 2012. Creative writing will remain but is to be assessed internally by teachers, in cross-phase Y6/Y7 groups, with the additional check of external

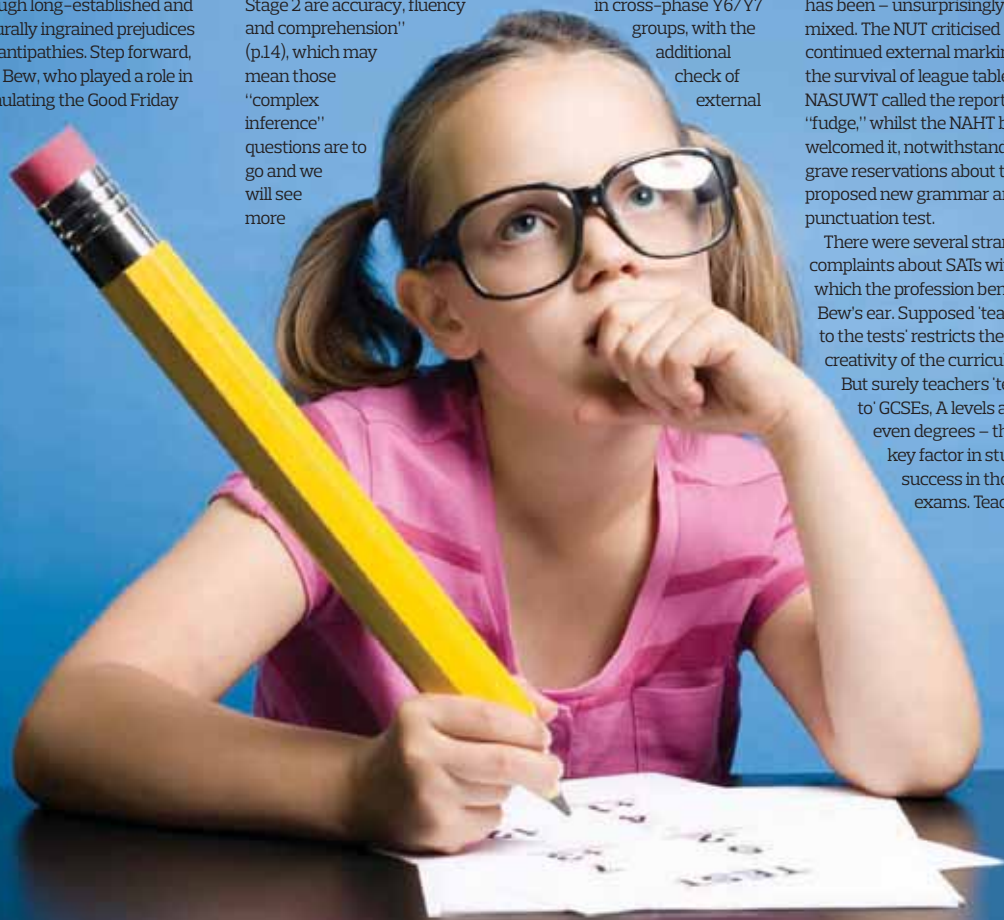
moderators. Moderators will be able to scrutinise a child's exercise books for the whole year (so children can't just shine on exam day) and even interview selected children. League tables, albeit broader and with greater emphasis on progress, also remain.

Could do better

Response from the profession has been – unsurprisingly – mixed. The NUT criticised continued external marking and the survival of league tables. NASUWT called the report a "fudge," whilst the NAHT broadly welcomed it, notwithstanding grave reservations about the proposed new grammar and punctuation test.

There were several strands to complaints about SATs with which the profession bent Lord Bew's ear. Supposed 'teaching to the tests' restricts the creativity of the curriculum.

But surely teachers 'teach to' GCSEs, A levels and even degrees – that is a key factor in students' success in those exams. Teaching



children to pass tests is a key part of what we do – but only a part.

Teachers certainly don't like results being published in league tables and I have some sympathy with this. Those working in disadvantaged catchment areas feel it is unfair for them to be compared with colleagues in advantaged catchment areas: it's Man. Utd V Crewe Alexandra and we can all guess the result. Man. Utd is a club with every advantage, Crewe is a club with few. (This general correlation between poverty and educational attainment is the real elephant in the room, but that's a different article.) The counter argument, however, is that schools in deprived areas can and do punch above their weight (mixing metaphors here – I'll never get that Level 4 writing), achieving excellent SATs results, leading to aspirational parents beating their doors down to get their children in, ultimately producing a socially diverse intake that benefits all. Bew soothingly sets out ways – three year rolling averages to iron out cohort differences, for example – in which the

inevitable league tables can give a less crude picture.

Assessing creativity

While few were up in arms over mathematics or reading tests, many got very aerated by the writing test. Because, well, children score lower in the writing than in any other test. Which seems, in some vague way, rather unfair. Oh, and it's inaccurately marked, allegedly. This year's writing SATs aroused the usual levels of controversy (but only after they had been marked). There were anecdotes of children achieving way below what was expected of them, heads asking trained markers to check the papers and discovering that each child had been 'robbed' of crucial percentage points. In a few instances this is undoubtedly the case. Similarly, there will be a few cases of children achieving way above what was expected of them – the difference being that headteachers will not be returning these to Edexcel with a letter of complaint and a request that the papers be reviewed and marked down.

Perhaps we should be asking this: why do children score lower



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in writing than in reading and maths? Or why do we test children on their powers of 'creative writing' in the first place? We do not expect many eleven year olds to be accomplished pianists or painters, so why expect them to knock out a mini literary masterpiece one morning in May? Probably, the answer is that some numpty on the committee that set up the assessments in the first place insisted they should assess 'creativity'. Not for them the mere ability to compose a cogent letter, e-mail or report, they must be proficient in a variety of genres, utilising rich vocabulary, ingeniously manipulating word order within a coherent and cohesive structure, possibly whilst playing Chopin with their spare hand. Small wonder that come results day, teachers and headteachers storm the blogs and message boards with cudgels of disgruntlement when the marks awarded indicate their children are "so so" at writing a newspaper column in 45 minutes or "okayish" at essaying a written speech in 20? Of course, they fume, the marking is wrong – it cannot simply be that what was being

tested was not directly comparable in terms of level of skills and knowledge with what was tested in maths or reading.

So perhaps Bew is on to something by farming out creative writing to teacher assessment and testing grammar separately – grammar being (at the moment) less controversial in marking terms, because answers will be right or wrong, like in the widely accepted maths tests. Moreover, once you remove the difficult task of creating a mini classic in 45 minutes, standards will apparently rise. Clever stuff.

SATs results are high stakes for teachers and heads because the inspection regime places so much emphasis on them: and heads lose their jobs in adverse inspections. Riding on your SATs results are your salary, your mortgage, your pension, to say nothing of your professional credibility. Bew's urging OFSTED to focus on progress as well as attainment is therefore a welcome initiative. Two cheers for Lord Bew! The government has accepted his report – it will be very interesting indeed to see the detail of how they implement it. Watch this space.

“ It would be interesting to see the previous year's SATs results for the 25% of schools who boycotted in 2010. Were they mainly the schools who struggled with low outcomes in 2009? ”

Y4 | PARENT

only
53%

of schools are judged to be 'good' or 'outstanding' at assessment (Bew p50)

