

Customer Voice Research National Curriculum Testing

Sherbert Research



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Research objectives

Overall

To understand parents' attitudes and experiences of testing, namely National Curriculum Tests in primary school (KS2)

Specifically research sought to establish:

- A reading of parent's current knowledge and opinions of National Curriculum Tests and ascertain whether they required further information about these Tests
- Whether parents understood the reasons for the introduction of National Curriculum Tests and what they think the school system would be like without National Curriculum Tests
- Whether and how parents' use the results of National Curriculum Tests
- Parents' perceptions of their main role with regard to their children's education generally and National Curriculum Tests, at Key Stage 2 in particular.
- Parents' awareness of what happens in their children's school regarding National Curriculum Tests
- What, if any, communication / information / support parents have received from schools regarding National Curriculum Tests
- What parents would ideally like to see happening in relation to National Curriculum Testing in Primary Schools and how different they feel this is from their current experience.

Research methodology

Eight groups: Parents with children aged 0 to 11 years (6 in each group) all who attended State primary schools

None in the sample had children older than 11 years (Year 6)

48 parents from a range of socio economic backgrounds

Dates and locations

- Research took place between the 18th and 24th March 2009
- Research was carried out in inner city London (Haringey), Hampshire, Kings Langley and Stockport

Research findings

Overview

The majority of parents within this research sample seemed to understand the purpose of testing and seemed in favour of it in principle. They believed that benchmarking their children's progress was important. They perceived that testing occurred for two key reasons:

1. To establish how well their children were faring in their core subjects in the context of other children in their school year.
2. To establish how well individual schools were doing in relation to others in the country.

"I think they need to have some tests. It's a good discipline and an important skill to have"
(Mum, C1C2, Hampshire)

Few parents had any idea of how their children's schools have performed in past tests, suggesting that most have not used the results as criteria for selection (they may talk to other parents or look at the Ofsted results).

"I look for the reputation, word of mouth" (Mums, AB, year 6, Kings Langley)

For the majority of parents, tests are primarily a way of tracking their children's progress at school.

"You have to have national tests otherwise how would you know how well your kids are doing" (Mums, DE, Tottenham)

Any concerns that were expressed about their children being tested during their primary school education, tended to be centred on the approach of individual schools and how they managed the testing process for their pupils, rather than the value of tests per se.

Parents in this sample reported a range of approaches adopted by schools around testing ranging from inconspicuous testing to thorough but relaxed testing preparation and overly stressful experiences. It is important to note however, the majority of parents across this sample appeared satisfied with how their schools were managing the testing process- including communications with parents, support for children and school environment and these schools tended to be preparing their children with minimal stress. Only a minority felt that their children's schools put their children under pressure leading up to the testing period.

"Practice week is good because it lets them know what to expect"
(Mums, AB, year 6, Kings Langley)

"They take SATs really seriously at my daughter's school. It's Catholic so it's quite strict anyway. She's in Year 5 and they're already talking about it"
(Mum, DE, Tottenham)

Whilst there was an understanding of the intrinsic value of the National Curriculum Tests, there seemed to be some confusion among these parents as to how the Key Stage 2 test results would be used and what the results mean for their children. Some reported hearing from their schools that the results would help with their children's academic streaming when they started Secondary school, whereas others were told they had nothing to do with Secondary school. Other parents remarked that they thought the sole purpose was to 'mark'

the teachers and others were not really sure how the results would benefit their children as they thought the results were published during the summer holidays. This lack of clarity precipitated a somewhat sceptical discussion among a small minority of parents who were resistant to testing and felt that if tests were used to highlight school performance only, then 'children should not be made to suffer'. A couple of parents knew that it was not a legally binding requirement on their part to make their children sit the tests.

Terminology

'National Curriculum Tests': Most parents in this sample had not heard of 'National Curriculum Tests' but had heard of 'SATs'. They found that the schools, teachers, pupils, friends and the media referred to them as 'SATs'.

'Test vs. Assessment': Among the majority of these parents, the term 'test' conjured up some negative imagery around the pressure of examinations, hails and fear of failure- with many parents revisiting their own anxieties about being tested and not necessarily 'succeeding'. The majority felt that the word 'Assessment' had an altogether softer ring about it. For many, it felt more child centred, whereby a child's ability can be measured over a period of time and will be done alongside peer. With an assessment, the threat of failure was less keenly felt. Many parents questioned whether testing could be adapted to take into account children's ongoing achievement or be staggered across the school year so that the experience was less intense and did not rely on one paper.

Attainment levels: There seemed some understanding about the different attainment levels, as a measure of where their children are currently and where they are aiming to be. Parents reported that schools made an effort to explain this to them, although some conceded to feeling confused about the relationship between letters and numbers of different levels, some muddling these with the different Key Stages. This was felt to be challenging mainly because the marking system is different from the one used when they were at school.

0 to 4 year olds

Amongst parents with children aged 0 to 4 very little was known about the nature of National Curriculum Tests. For the few who knew about them, this tended to be because they were looking for primary schools and did not want to rely on word of mouth alone (although friends and neighbours were their first port of call). For Mums of children aged 0 to 4, testing was not in their mindset and any sort of assessment did not feel relevant to them in this current stage of life. The milestones and benchmarks they were using tend to focus on more basic development from first steps, to potty training to counting and knowing the alphabet rather than anything formal.

Key Stage One (KS1)

It seemed that Key Stage One tests offered little cause for concern. A small number of parents with children in reception to Year 5 knew a little about National Curriculum Tests. They tended to have children in Year 2 or above. However, only a small amount of information about this phase of testing is retained and many felt their children were unaware that they were being tested.

Many parents did not think the Key Stage One Tests were widely publicised and that this testing phase seemed to pass without incident and made little impact. There seemed to be little extra preparation undertaken by parents in the lead up to Key Stage One tests, with many reporting that they supported their children 'as normal' e.g. helping with homework, reading together. Parents claimed there was limited discussion with other parents about the process

Most of these parents claimed that if they learnt that their children's school had achieved poor results in the National Curriculum Tests, they would feel disappointed and concerned for their children's education. However, most parents seemed unlikely to pursue matters with teachers or head teachers. Only a couple in the sample had moved their children to different schools as a consequence of test results.

Key Stage Two (KS2)

Awareness of Key Stage Two (KS2) tests seemed to become more apparent once children enter Year 4, but even amongst these parents the details seemed sketchy and perceptions tend to be based on hearsay and experiences of 'friends' children'. The majority of parents with children in Years 4 and 5 seemed to know that tests are run at the end of Year 6 and children, parents and schools may feel under some pressure to prepare and revise. Some had heard about after school or breakfast maths booster clubs.

Among the parents of children currently preparing for KS2 National Curriculum Tests, only a few of them seemed to have strong feelings about testing. They perceived an undue pressure placed on their children by the school or teachers. Most other parents felt that the experience of KS2 Tests was essential in facilitating part of the transition to secondary school, as they imagined tests would continue throughout Key Stages 3 and 4. But all parents wanted to ensure that schools offered a healthy message around tests, rather than placing undue pressure on Year 6 pupils. They wanted to ensure this so that children (and parents) would keep a perspective and not feel too pressured. The majority of Year 6 parents felt this was happening to some extent, although a few expressed concerns that their schools place too much of a burden on children and parents during KS2 tests, this seemed to be the case when schools may have been under special measures or 'coasting' (N.B. parents did not use these words).

Most parents felt that the schools approach to testing shaped how the children coped with this experience. Most found that their children's schools prepared and supported their children sufficiently, for example they set up extra classes and gave mock tests so that children would not be fazed when it came to the real test. Many parents reported that the schools gave them guidance on how best to support their children, for example buying revision aids and pointing them to websites. Schools held parents' evenings and some had more of an 'open door' policy around testing time so parents could speak to teachers as need be.

Parents' roles

Whilst all parents claimed to support their children and ultimately wanted them to be happy at school, there was a discernable attitudinal difference between parents from AB and DE socio-economic groups around National Curriculum Key Stage 2 Tests. AB parents reported having a strong belief in the value of education and therefore placed the tests as a priority in the amount of input and support they gave their children and they claimed to take the results seriously. In contrast parents from a DE socioeconomic background seemed to attribute less weight to the National Curriculum Key Stage 2 Tests and the meaning of the results. They claimed that they encouraged their children to do their best but not to worry if they did not do very well. They supported by buying the books and allowing their children to go on the recommended revision websites but they may not necessarily do the work with them.

"The school want us to help them but the maths is beyond me, so I just tell my kid to chill"
(Dad, DE, Tottenham)

"We get practice test papers sent home"
(Mums, AB, year 6, Kings Langley)

All parents, whatever their opinions on testing were reluctant to abolish National Curriculum Tests altogether.

"You have to keep testing; it's part of their education. Just don't stress them out"
(Dad, AB, Manchester)

"Rather than concentrate all the exams around May, they should stagger them throughout the year. It might make the children feel like it is part of their normal school work"
(Mum, AB, year 6, Kings Langley)

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