

Reflections on the 2003 Key Stage 2 tests

Changes to the national tests for 2003 were announced last year, and were supported by QCA with written advice and a useful website with sample materials and exemplifications of children's work (www.qca.org.uk/ca/tests/2003sample). In summary, the new elements of the Key Stage 2 English and mathematics tests were:

English

- two set writing tasks, one longer, one shorter, with handwriting assessed as part of the longer task;
- a new marking scheme;
- a spelling test.

Mathematics

- a higher proportion of questions involving problem solving, communication and reasoning.

After any new experience, it is worth taking stock to see what can be learned for the next occasion. This leaflet contains some reflections on the new tests and gives some pointers to help schools review their own plans.

How did we do nationally?

The 2003 cohort of pupils performed extremely well. 75% of 11-year-olds achieved level 4+ in English and 73% in mathematics. At level 4, reading standards improved again for the first time since 2000. Results in writing, English overall and mathematics were maintained at last year's levels. At level 5, there was an impressive 4% improvement in reading and a 1% gain in mathematics, although performance in writing and English overall fell slightly from last year.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the changes to the tests have been introduced smoothly and, in general, children's performance remains as high as ever. Of course, there will be schools where the picture is different from the national scene. Each school will want to evaluate its own results to consider how well the changes have been absorbed. And all schools will want to ask themselves whether there are things that it would be helpful and practical to do to improve their current performance next year.

What might we do differently this year?

We asked some headteachers and teachers who have already thought about the implications of their results what modifications they are making to this year's teaching plans and the organisation of classes. This is what they said.

On English

Make use of the marking schemes

- ‘On reflection, we don’t think we thought enough about the new marking schemes for English. We can see now that we could use the different focuses of the marking schemes for Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 to help us to identify children’s strengths and weaknesses, particularly in writing. So we are going to improve our assessment of children’s writing, not just in the literacy hour, but in subjects like science, history and geography too. We will use the information that we get from our assessments to give our teaching of writing a better focus.’

Analyse the scripts

- ‘We are going to study the scripts of the 2003 optional and Year 6 tests very closely to see what our pupils were good at and where they might have done better. We will then give these things extra attention, especially in Years 5 and 6. We have always been able to do this in maths. Now we can do it in English too. We are particularly keen to find out which aspects of writing boys find hardest and where we need to give them more focused support.’

Help children to structure and organise their writing

- We found that our children were quite successful with the shorter writing task, but less so in the longer one. We need to help them with the structuring and organisation of what they write, and to sustain their writing to a good ending. We will be working on this during the year.’

Stress form, audience, purpose, language

- ‘We feel we may not have prepared children to distinguish between the different demands of the new writing tasks. We are making sure that all pupils are more aware of the different kinds of writing, and teaching them to think more carefully about the approach to take. We are stressing four things in all the writing that children do across the curriculum.
 - What **form** of writing is needed? Is it a narrative, a news story, a poem, an advertisement, a report, a letter, a set of instructions, a diary entry, ...?
 - Who is the **audience** for the writing? Is it private writing or writing for someone else? Is the audience someone you know well, such as a friend, a family member or teacher, or someone you don’t know? Will adults or children read the writing?
 - What is the **purpose** of the writing? Is it to entertain, to persuade, to inform, to explain, to describe, ...?
 - What kind of **language** would be appropriate?’

Make links from what they read to what they write

- ‘We still have a significant difference throughout Key Stage 2 between our very good results in reading and our results in writing. We want to capitalise on children’s good reading and comprehension skills so that they think about what they read, and the choices that the author has made, to see what implications there are for what they write. For example, if an author writes that a character says something *abruptly*, what does that imply? What are the circumstances that make people *abrupt*? What else do we now know, even though the author has not said so explicitly?’

On mathematics

Show children how to make appropriate jottings in mental work

- ‘Our reflections on the summer 2003 tests have made us realise that our children don’t appreciate how jottings can help them in the mental test. Year 6 children who achieved level 5 made numerous jottings, which seemed to help them a great deal. Yet children who achieved level 3 made hardly any jottings on their test paper. So our plan for all year groups is to make sure that children understand the purpose of jottings and know what form they should take. After all, jottings are just another form of writing, so just as we do in writing we will be stressing purpose, audience and form. In the earlier part of the year, while children learn to

make appropriate jottings, we won't be worrying about their speed of response. Then later in the year, we will be shortening the response time, so that they learn to start jotting quickly as soon as they hear a question.'

Adapt Unit Plans to sharpen children's oral and mental skills

- 'We like the *Unit Plans* produced by the Numeracy Strategy but the lesson starters are mainly linked to the main part of the lesson. We are going to modify some of the lesson starters this year so that more of them help children to keep their mental skills 'on the boil'.'

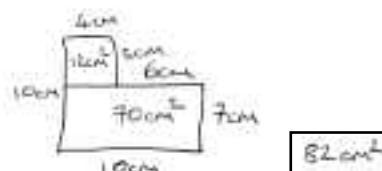
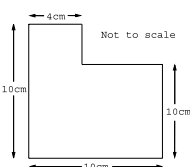
Discuss problems with the whole class

- 'We like the new questions on problem solving but our pupils undoubtedly find them more difficult. We have decided that all the staff will introduce more word problems for the whole class to discuss. Then we will identify key words, discuss what they mean and relate them to the operations. We will make sure that we include examples where more than one step is involved.' (There are more helpful hints about teaching problem solving in *Changes to assessment 2003* _ see the reference list at the end of this leaflet).

Clarify what is expected by 'show your method'

- 'We are going to make sure that children understand that when they are asked to show their method, they can explain what they have done by doing a calculation, by annotating a diagram, or by writing a sentence.'

What is the area of this shape? Show your method.



Some general points

In 2003, about 95,000 11-year-olds achieved at least level 4 in English but not in mathematics, or vice versa. Most of those who succeeded in mathematics but not English were boys, while those who succeeded in English but not mathematics were mainly girls. Primary schools often create groups of pupils for extra support. This is what some headteachers and teachers told us they would do this year.

Review the composition of target groups regularly

- 'We intend to identify groups of pupils for targeted support early in the school year, using a profile based on results in the optional tests. We are also going to ask both pupils and their parents what they think children need special help with. We hope to make the most of all the resources we have _ our teaching assistants, parent helpers, and the teaching materials. We intend to review the composition of the targeted groups every three weeks so that children can move in and out of the groups as appropriate. For example, a pupil may be in a target group for problem solving but not for calculation, or for persuasive writing but not narrative writing.'

Help children to apply success in one subject to the other

- 'We realise that it is important to target the right children for extra support. Different children are likely to need extra help in each of mathematics and English. We hope to get them to apply their success in one subject to the other.'

Get to know all the intervention programmes

- 'We feel that at least one experienced teacher needs to be fully familiar with all the various intervention programmes, such as the *Literacy Support* and *Springboard* programmes, so that she can help other staff to select from them. We are giving the deputy two days in the autumn term to do this. The deputy is also giving our teaching assistants an introduction to these materials.'

Provide a rich, broad curriculum

- 'We were fairly satisfied with our results in this year's tests but we still think that our pupils need a broader range of contexts for applying and refining their literacy and numeracy skills. So this year we will ensure that our daily literacy and

Secure good teaching and learning throughout the school

mathematics lessons don't over-run, and that a rich curriculum in other subjects provides varied opportunities for children to apply their skills.'

- 'We feel that the best way to maximise children's achievements in tests and in other ways is to secure good teaching and learning of the national curriculum throughout the school, backed up by good assessment for learning techniques. We have done all the sensible things like analysing the test data and adjusting our teaching programmes; we have studied the new marking schemes and discussed approaches to problem solving as a whole staff. Our aim this year is to learn from each other. We are having a series of workshops for staff where the more experienced teachers teach a 20-minute mini-lesson to colleagues, who then give feedback. Later in the year, the less experienced will do the same. The mini-lessons this year will focus on two things: teaching children to write non-fiction, and teaching them to solve mathematical problems mentally.'

Further suggestions

Primary Strategy literacy and numeracy consultants have been looking at children's scripts with teachers and headteachers from schools that they are supporting. In some cases, the schools have also made good use of the *Diagnostic software* sent to schools by QCA in the summer term. We asked the consultants what they had noticed about the way that children had tackled both the optional and Year 6 tests, and whether there were things that it might be helpful for teachers to rehearse with children when they prepare for the tests next summer.

Help children to make quick, effective use of the planning page for writing

- They said that some children need more help with how to use the planning page that accompanies the writing tasks. Children need to be more aware that they should just do the minimum necessary to help them to organise their work. Instead of talking to a partner about their plans, as they do in the literacy hour, they need to talk through their plans 'in their heads'.

Show children how to annotate questions, highlight key words and use jottings

- The consultants also said that, in both English and mathematics, it was clear that some children had been taught to annotate questions, highlight key words and phrases and use jottings to support their thinking, but that this was not so in every case. In general, where children had done this, their answers were better.

Explain to children what they can gain credit for

- One headteacher told her consultants that this year's experience had made her realise the importance of conveying to children what they can gain credit for in the new tests. To do this effectively, teachers need a thorough understanding of the marking schemes. They also need to be aware of the different requirements of boxes labelled, for example, 'show your method' or 'explain why he is correct'. This particular headteacher is sending her newly qualified teachers to the LEA's training on 'Helping children to do their best'.

Useful references

- *Changes to assessment 2003: guidance for teachers of key stages 1 and 2* (ref: QCA/02/978) is worth looking at again (see www.qca.org.uk/ca/tests/2003sample).
- QCA's leaflets on the implications of the 2003 tests for teaching and learning, to be sent to all schools in November, will highlight what children achieved and what they need to do to move on to the next level.
- QCA's *2003 Standards report for Key Stage 2*, to be published in January 2004, will give more details of strengths and weaknesses in children's responses to questions.