

Measuring what really matters

Our obsession with targets and accountability is reaching a dangerous level. Despite unprecedented opposition, government is prepared to go ahead with a policy that threatens the wellbeing of children.



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Teachers would have an incentive to bias pupil results downwards in order to show pupils making more progress afterwards

THE DEPARTMENT for Education currently intends to introduce standardised baseline assessments from September 2015. This goes against the recommendations of its own Primary and Assessment Review Consultation and the advice of numerous expert organisations – the full list shown on the Too Much Too Soon website.

The government has put the process out to tender and, while use of commercial tests will be optional from September 2015, there will, needless to say, be significant pressure put on schools from Ofsted, whose inspection judgements will be linked to evidence in this form. The use of the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* (EYFSP), which was developed as an holistic assessment of development, based on observation over time, will become optional from September 2016.

In its petition, Early Education highlights the fact that the EYFSP is a crucial source of longitudinal national data on this age group, which is important for both education and health professionals and policy makers: ‘For example, without this there will be no national dataset to measure of the effectiveness of the government’s own flagship policy for the Early Years Pupil Premium being introduced in April 2015.’

The NUT is planning a February seminar on the issue, with principled non-compliance for reception teachers a possibility. This reminds me of an Italian project that I was involved in a few years ago when the early years workforce refused to introduce a government policy on the grounds that it would ‘harm the children’. At the time I was very impressed, but I never thought that I would see this happen in England.

I think that we have reached a stage where political involvement in education is now genuinely threatening child wellbeing, and that those engaged in the field have a duty of responsibility to come together to protect the developmental rights of the child. We also need to challenge the right of elected politicians to ignore democratic process. For example, Warwick Mansell provided the following evaluation of the Primary Assessment and Accountability Consultation in his March 2014 NAHT blog: ‘Of 1,063 responses to the DfE’s question, in its July “consultation” as to whether the principles of that paper were right, 57 percent said no, with only 18 percent in favour. Yet the thrust of the proposals are unchanged.

- 51 percent replied that there should not be a baseline check at the start of reception, with 34 percent in favour, with the detailed concerns of expert groups not even mentioned. Yet it is happening.
- Similarly, 73 percent came out against allowing

schools to choose from commercially available baseline assessments, compared to 12 percent in favour. Again, it is happening.

- 68 percent said that if the baseline assessments were to happen, they should not be made optional. They are being made optional.’

No-one is arguing the benefit of observational systems that focus on the ‘whole child’, that encompass both the cognitive and non-cognitive elements of learning, and that can both assess and help predict children’s developmental trajectories. This is the kind of approach that the EYFSP had been developed to achieve. It is also something that experienced practitioners have been doing (without the paperwork!) for decades.

However, the primary rationale for baseline testing is ‘school accountability’, with schools being evaluated by how much progress children have made from their initial starting points by the time they leave the primary years.

As identified by many of the groups opposed to the introduction, teachers would have an incentive to bias pupil results downwards in order to show pupils making more progress afterwards – it would be impossible to produce statistically valid measures of progress when children are at such different ages and stages – and schools could become unambitious in relation to children with low baseline scores.

TACTYC has now published its own summary paper, Early Education has set up a Change.org petition and the Too Much Too Soon Campaign has an entire section of its website consolidating the evidence with ‘Say No to Baseline Assessment’ posters and badges that you can print out and use.

With the forthcoming election, political parties should heed the level of concern and the amount of active and organized collaboration that is taking place. All those working with young children care deeply about their wellbeing and there comes a point that they will ensure that their voice is heard. eye

Useful resources

- TACTYC ‘Say No to Baseline Testing’: <http://tactyc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TACTYC-Baseline-position-paper-1.pdf>
- Early Education petition: <https://www.change.org/p/nicky-morgan-mp-scrap-baseline-assessment-in-reception-classes-and-keep-the-eyfs-profile-as-the-measure-of-childrens-progress-at-the-end-of-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs>