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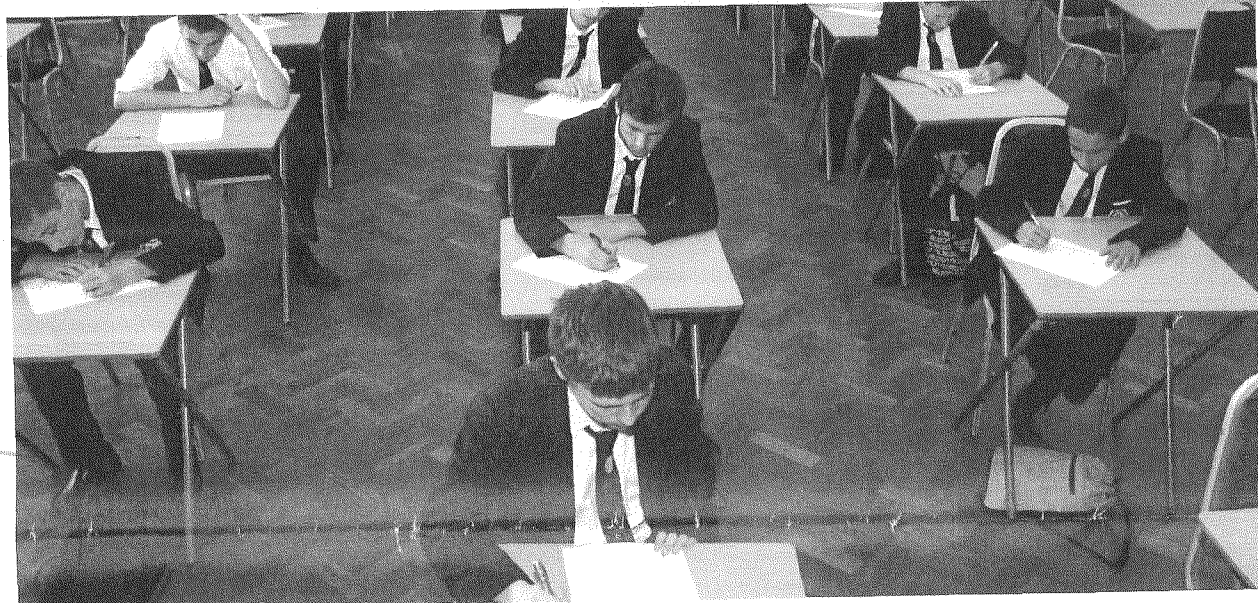


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Testing times: Educationalists have backed calls this week for the end of key stage exams to be scrapped for children aged under 16

Debate rages over call to scrap tests

by Pete Henshaw

Despite strong support from teachers and parents, both the Labour and Conservative parties have emphatically rejected calls to scrap end of key stage tests for under-16s.

The week has been dominated by a row between educationalists and the government, which started when Keith Bartley, chief executive of the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE), called for the tests, which are sat at age seven, 11 and 14, to go.

Education secretary Alan Johnson rejected the calls immediately, while the Conservatives labelled the tests as "crucial".

However, education unions backed Mr Bartley's stance and on Monday the GTCE released new evidence showing that some parents think the key stage test results and league tables are merely "promotional tools" for schools and "do not help children achieve their potential".

Mr Bartley originally made his

call as part of the GTCE's evidence to an inquiry being held by the Education Select Committee on testing and assessment.

In his submission, Mr Bartley told the committee: "England's pupils are among the most frequently tested in the world, but tests in themselves do not raise standards. Tests are used for too many purposes and this compromises their reliability and validity."

He recommended that the committee should consider replacing key stage tests with a "nationally-devised bank of tests/tasks to be used when the teacher judges that the pupil or pupils are ready."

He said he wanted to see an increasing degree of teacher professionalism, and increased government investment in teachers' assessment skills.

The call was backed by unions, including the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, whose deputy general secretary Martin Johnson said: "We need to give teachers the freedom to inspire youngsters so they want to learn,

not just pass tests, and give pupils the space to develop as rounded people.

"The most successful school systems test latest and least often which is why we agree that the time for national assessment is at school leaving age," he added.

The Association of School and College Leaders said that the review of testing and assessment is "urgently needed".

However, the education secretary hit back, saying that the tests helped parents to know what their schools are like. Mr Johnson added: "They like to know what the educational attainment is in each of the schools in their locality. They want transparency, they want openness and they want accountability."

"I don't think, incidentally, that any government of any political persuasion is going to go back to those days (when schools were closed institutions); certainly we have no intention of doing that."

Conservative education spokesman, David Willetts, was equally blunt saying the tests are "crucial" for improving standards. He added: "If it weren't for testing we wouldn't know that 40 per cent of 11-year-olds leave primary schools without reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and arithmetic."

However, there was support from the Lib Dems, whose education spokesman Sarah Teather said that teachers should be able to concentrate on what is best for their pupils and should not feel "compelled" to teach to national tests.

She added: "The current system of testing and targets perverts the true purpose of education - children get drilled on how to pass tests, not educated. Now is the time to abolish this stressful and bureaucratic process and make a positive change for our children."

And as the row developed this week, a new study carried out by the British Market Research Bureau for the GCTE said that some parents also think too much time is being spent on preparing pupils for external tests, sometimes to the detriment of their academic achievement.

The parents from London and Birmingham, who took part in discussion sessions in March, said they felt that teachers are in the best position to carry out a pupil assessment because they have "detailed knowledge about the curriculum, the work that has been covered and each child's progress".

Mr Bartley added: "The tests can depress pupils' motivation and increase anxiety. They do not adequately serve the interests of parents or pupils and they lead to a narrowed curriculum and encourage 'teaching to the test'."

"The system diminishes teachers' professional judgements because summative outcomes reached by the teacher carry less public weight than the outcomes from end of key stage tests," he said.

The GTCE suggested that monitoring could still take place, but by using only small samples of pupils.

The Education Select Committee will be making its recommendation to government later this year.

Diary of an NQT

Entering the final furlong

Well I must confess that the trials of the half term break left me both physically and mentally exhausted. On the plus side, we have a place to live. Sadly, it is a room in a national chain of travel motels.

Thankfully, the first day back went really well and helped to put my current housing problems to the back of my mind. There is no question that having year 7 groups for the last two periods of the day is a particular challenge, especially when it is the first day back after a holiday. However, the new half term also brings a new topic and this time we began looking at web design. Hands up all those colleagues who have uttered those magic words to 60 very excited year 7s?

In addition to the web design we have also started new units with the rest of key stage 3, and as if that isn't enough excitement, Big Brother has started. I could just sit back and listen to the continual debates about "she said", "he said", "she did", "she didn't" all day. But wow, 11 "girls" and one "lad", kind of a coursework group made in heaven.

Enough about that though. The passing of the latest compulsory holiday brings about the final furlong for the current NQT population. I think it's fair to say that we've all learned a few lessons over the past 10 months. In addition to this we've also had some new, possibly unexpected experiences; some good, some bad. In the most part though, I think we generally remember the best and worst of the experiences, and subtly absorb the middle ground into our professional psyche.



Nevertheless the learning curve has been, at times, quite severe, but I think I can be quite honest when I say that the past few months have been as easy or as difficult as I thought they'd be this time last year.

I can also be honest when I say that my personal circumstances have made my situation not quite as I had envisaged it last June, but on the flip side I have a great deal to look back upon and be more than happy about.

I've forged fantastic friendships among my colleagues and, some might say, more importantly, I've managed to build strong relationships with pupils from all year groups. I've also been able to take time to look at myself, consider my strengths and weaknesses, and make an effort to narrow the gap between the relative extremes.

I realise that as I write this we still have six weeks to go until the end of term, and as such it may seem a little early to be talking about the past academic year, but I aim to spend the next few weeks making sure that I've appreciated and acted upon any of the weaker areas of my professional development.

But this isn't about "ticking boxes". Far from it. At this stage I hope that the powers that be have seen that I meet the standards. This is only about making sure that I've identified my weaknesses as a professional teacher and made real progress in improving myself.

Here's wishing good luck to all.

• *Diary of an NQT* is written by Stewart Thompson, who started teaching at Shenley Brook End School in Milton Keynes in September. Continues next week.

FALSE ACCUSATIONS

Fighting



Stevens gets even

Letter from America

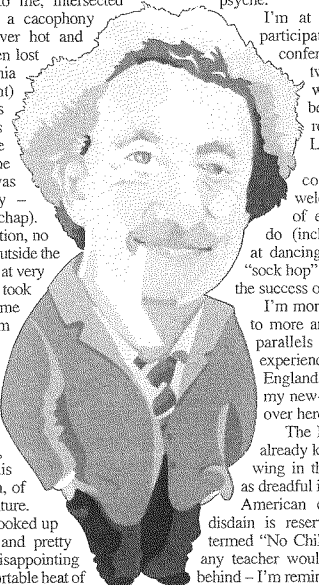
I'M WRITING this in a few snatched hours off from work and play during my first ever visit to America, where I've come to attend a conference of teacher educators in the English Language Arts (as referred to, appropriately enough I think, by my American colleagues) in a university campus near Chicago, followed by a couple of days for purely recreational purposes.

My flight over from England was uneventful enough, then took a turn for the worse. I had something of a nightmare welcome to Chicago airport, a huge construction site, it seemed to me, intersected by runways and drowned in a cacophony of noise: I felt over tired, over hot and over here; my luggage had been lost somewhere between Philadelphia (where I had to break the flight) and Chicago. The customs official who confronted me was less than welcoming (all those back in England who'd told me that everyone in America was - sometimes overwhelmingly - friendly must have missed this chap).

The customs official in question, no doubt feeling that anyone from outside the USA was a potential terrorist, or at very least an immigrant scrounger, took lengthy persuading that I'd come to the conference purely from academic interest, insisting that I must be receiving payment for services rendered and refusing to acknowledge that financial gain is not the only motive for people's activities. This reminded me powerfully, if perhaps superfluously in this country of unbridled capitalism, of the mercenary nature of our culture.

Never mind - things have looked up since. Following a disturbed and pretty sleepless night in a rather disappointing hotel, torn between the uncomfortable heat of the room and the racket of the air conditioning system, I retraced my way back to the airport to see if my luggage had been found. No, it hadn't, I was cheerfully told, and a good 10 per cent of lost bags are never recovered.

Then I encountered a young woman at the baggage reclaim desk who couldn't have been more helpful and pleasant, making me feel a lot more positive. We got talking, and I explained my professional role as English teacher currently working as teacher educator at Durham University.



"You mean, you teach English to English teachers teaching English to English people in England?" she asked me incredulously. I had no choice but to agree: put like that, it certainly does seem a strange way to earn a living, and it reminded me of just how odd other people's occupations can seem, especially maybe when concerned with education. The important thing is, though, that my luggage then appeared miraculously on the reclaim belt. I'm pretty sure it was all down to this assistant's encouraging "can do" attitude - the positive side of the American psyche.

I'm at Lake Forest College now, participating enthusiastically in the conference where I am one of just two of us from the UK. It's a wonderful campus too, set in beautiful landscaped grounds rolling down to the shores of Lake Michigan.

My colleagues at the conference are warmly welcoming, and seem appreciative of everything I have to say or do (including my clumsy attempts at dancing during the quaintly named "sock hop" held one evening to celebrate the success of the conference).

I'm more and more struck, as I speak to more and more people here, by the parallels between our educational experiences and challenges back in England, and those felt so keenly by my new-found friends and colleagues over here in the USA.

The Bush administration, which I already knew to be oppressively right-wing in the international arena, is just as dreadful in its educational policies. My American colleagues' most venomous disdain is reserved for the euphemistically termed "No Child Left Behind" policy (as if any teacher would otherwise leave any child behind - I'm reminded of our own "Every Child Matters", implying that somehow they didn't really matter beforehand) which in reality means just more targets and reductive testing.

But the strongest similarity between our English and American experiences is more positive: the desire to make the world a better place through good teaching. I'll raise a glass to that, and have a good day.

• *David Stevens directs the secondary post graduate certificate in education at Durham University.*



As part of its Don't Abuse My Name campaign, SecEd has previously reported on the damage that can be caused by the way newspapers often report accusations made by students - accusations that are often false. Here **Sue Roberts**, from the Press Complaints Commission, reinforces what it can do to keep newspapers in check

MUCH HAS been said about the way newspapers report allegations made by pupils and parents against teachers and schools.

SecEd has previously encouraged teachers to complain to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) if they find themselves to be victims of unfair and unfounded newspaper and magazine stories.

But there may be many who remain cautious about taking such a step and who wonder whether it can really be effective. The advice of the PCC would be, it certainly can.

Just a few months ago, a national newspaper claimed that a headteacher had made pupils as young as three provide fingerprint samples on the pretext of a game and told them there was no need to inform their parents.

However, the claim was untrue, and the PCC subsequently received a complaint from the teacher at the centre of the story. When the matter was taken up with the newspaper, it admitted that the allegation was unfounded and offered to publicly apologise in order to resolve the complaint. The teacher agreed that a published apology and correction would settle the case and the newspaper therefore ran an agreed text.

The PCC's jurisdiction extends to almost every newspaper and magazine in the UK. Our role is to administer a 16-point code of practice and to investigate potential breaches of it.

The code covers four main areas: accuracy, privacy, newsgathering, and protecting the vulnerable. While complaints to the PCC from teachers and schools are relatively rare, we are always happy to offer advice and guidance to any teacher when it is required.

It may well be that those who find themselves unjustly attacked are reticent about complaining or are not sure how the PCC could help. In such cases, they might find it useful to use our confidential helpline and speak to one of the organisation's complaints officers, who can help to assess whether the complaint is likely to fall within the PCC's remit.

An emergency helpline is available 24 hours a day. Additionally, the PCC's website has full details about the code of practice; information about the complaints process; and details of all resolved and adjudicated complaints (see the essential contacts list for full contact details).

Probably the most relevant parts of the code for accused teachers are the clauses on accuracy (clause 1), which states that the press cannot publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information; on privacy (clause 3), which states that everyone is entitled to respect for their private lives; and on harassment (clause 4), which says that journalists must not engage in "persistent pursuit".

