

# Exam factories?

## The impact of accountability measures on children and young people

Research commissioned by the National Union of Teachers  
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[teachers.org.uk](https://teachers.org.uk)

## Foreword

This research investigates the impact on children of the approach to accountability being pursued in England. Teachers expect to be accountable: but in ways which are sensible, proportionate and which benefit children's education. This is not the case in English schools.

Getting accountability measures to operate in the right way is vital because targets drive behaviour within the system. Targets determine how teacher time is deployed, and teacher time is valuable.

This independent study by Professor Hutchings uncovers how the accountability agenda in England has changed the nature of education in wide ranging and harmful ways. It is not serving the interests of children and young people and is undermining their right to a balanced, creative and rewarding curriculum. It is an approach which is cultivating extreme pressure in both the primary and secondary sector and risks turning schools into 'exam factories'.

The findings about the experiences and concerns of children and young people are shocking and sometimes upsetting. The study exposes the reduction in the quality of teacher-pupil interaction; the loss of flexibility and lack of time for teachers to respond to children as individuals; the growing pressure on children to do things before they are ready; and the focus on a narrower range of subjects.

Teachers object passionately to the accountability agenda imposed on them because of the consequences that flow from it. These are undermining creative teaching and generating labels which limit students' learning. Crucially, they also threaten children's self-esteem, confidence and mental health.

It does not have to be like this. There are much better ways to construct school accountability. Countries such as Finland, Canada and Scotland do it very differently.

I hope that, after reading this report, you will work with us to use this evidence as a platform for change. We need better and fairer ways to evaluate what happens in schools, what works, and what matters.

I urge politicians and everyone involved in education policy to act without delay to ensure that the needs of children and young people are not ignored.

**Christine Blower**  
NUT General Secretary



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## The research team

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**Dr Naveed Kazmi:** Research assistant

Naveed holds a PhD in education from London Metropolitan University. He started his career as a secondary school teacher in Pakistan and worked in various leadership roles. He has taught extensively on the BA and MA in education at London Metropolitan University and on the MA in Education: Emotional Literacy for Children at the Institute for Arts in Therapy and Education in Islington.



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I am particularly grateful to Dr Naveed Kazmi for his assistance in the early stages of this research, and particularly for conducting three of the case study visits.

This research could not have been undertaken without the help of heads, staff and pupils in the case study schools. They gave their time to talk with us and made us feel welcome in their schools; we are very grateful for their support. We are also grateful to all those who took part in pilot interviews, as well as the thousands of teachers who took the time to complete the survey.

This research was commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (NUT). However, the analysis presented here is the author's and does not necessarily reflect the views of the NUT.

# **Executive summary and Recommendations**

## Executive summary

### BACKGROUND

This report presents the findings of research commissioned by the NUT which aimed to explore the impact on children and young people in England of the current range of accountability measures in schools, including Ofsted inspections, floor standards, and the whole range of measures published in the school performance tables (attainment, pupil progress, attainment gaps, etc.).

It draws together findings from previous research together with new data from an online survey (completed by 7,922 NUT teachers across all phases of education and types of school), and interviews with staff and pupils in seven case study schools across the country.

### FINDINGS

1. The accountability measure arousing the greatest concern among school leaders and teachers is Ofsted.<sup>1</sup> Ofsted was described as ‘punitive’, reflecting both the potential consequences of ‘failure’ (academisation, loss of jobs, public disgrace)<sup>2</sup> and some inspectors’ combative attitudes. Ofsted was also described as ‘random’ reflecting the variation between teams of inspectors and the way they use the very wide range of school attainment data.
2. The strategies that schools adopt in relation to accountability measures include: scrutiny of all aspects of teachers’ work; requirements for greater uniformity of practice; collection and use of data to target individual pupils; an increased focus on maths/numeracy and English/literacy (and in secondary schools, on other academic subjects e.g. history, geography, science, languages); and additional teaching of targeted pupils. Many of these strategies were more frequently reported in schools with poor Ofsted grades, below average attainment and high proportions of disadvantaged pupils.
3. One aim of accountability measures is to improve attainment. There is evidence that high stakes testing<sup>3</sup> results in an improvement in test scores because teachers focus their teaching very closely on the test. Test scores do not necessarily represent pupils’ overall level of understanding and knowledge, but rather, the fact that teachers are focusing their teaching very strongly on preparing pupils for the test.
4. There is no evidence as yet that accountability measures can reduce the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. There is evidence that disadvantaged children, who on average have lower attainment than their peers and are therefore under greater pressure to meet targets, can become disaffected as a result of experiencing ‘failure’, and this is being exacerbated by recent changes to the curriculum to make it more demanding and challenging. Research has shown that schools are responsible for only a small proportion of the variance in attainment between pupils – their lives outside school are the main influence. It is therefore unreasonable to expect schools alone to close the gap.
5. Pupil Premium funding, allocated to schools to support disadvantaged children, is effective in highlighting the needs of this group, but has also had perverse effects. In some schools it has resulted in less attention being paid to the needs of other individuals or groups; in particular, in some schools, support for those children with special educational needs has been reduced. The need to evidence the way the Pupil Premium has been used has in some cases resulted in explicit labelling of pupils.

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<sup>1</sup> Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills; Ofsted inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages.

<sup>2</sup> Since completing the fieldwork the Government has proposed to further raise the stakes through the Education and Adoption Bill.

<sup>3</sup> High stakes testing refers to tests which have outcomes that will have real impacts on pupils, teachers or schools, and specifically those where test results are used to judge the quality of schools, and sanctions when targets are not met.

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## Executive summary and Recommendations

6. Accountability measures have previously had the perverse effect of encouraging schools to enter pupils for vocational examinations. This has now been reversed, and schools are encouraged to enter pupils for academic examinations, regardless of their needs, aptitudes or interests. This is contributing to disaffection and poor behaviour among some pupils. These effects have been exacerbated by changes to the curriculum, making it more demanding; and by changes to the exam system, including the scrapping of coursework and the switch to linear exams.
7. Accountability measures have achieved government aims of bringing about an increased focus on English/literacy and mathematics/numeracy and (in secondary schools) academic subjects; however, this has been achieved at the cost of narrowing the curriculum that pupils experience. The narrowing of the curriculum is greater for year groups taking tests/exams, pupils with low attainment, disadvantaged pupils and those with special needs.
8. The current pattern of testing very young children is inappropriate to their developmental level and needs, and creates unnecessary stress and anxiety for pupils and parents. Pupils of every age are increasingly being required to learn things for which they are not ready, and this leads to shallow learning for the test, rather than in-depth understanding which could form a sound basis for future learning.
9. The amount of time spent on creative teaching, investigation, play, practical work etc. has reduced considerably, and lessons more often have a standard format. This results from pressure to prepare pupils for tests and to cover the curriculum; teachers' perceptions of what Ofsted want to see (both in lessons, and in terms of written evidence in pupils' books); and teachers' excessive work levels. Both primary and secondary pupils said that they learned more effectively in active and creative lessons, because they were memorable.
10. The use of Key Stage 2 test scores to determine target grades at GCSE is deeply problematic, both because, in secondary teachers' experience, the test results do not give a realistic picture of children's levels of knowledge and understanding; and because they are based on test scores in English and maths, which do not represent potential in subjects such as foreign languages, art or music.
11. Accountability measures have a substantial impact on teachers. In all types of school, their workload is excessive and many suffer considerable stress as a result of the accountability strategies used in their schools. Some teachers are under unreasonable pressure to meet targets related to pupil attainment. The impact of accountability measures on teachers is not the main focus of this research, but is included because it inevitably impacts on pupils.
12. The current emphasis in inspections on pupils' books and written feedback to pupils is adding considerably to teachers' workloads and stress, and is not providing proportionate benefits for pupils.
13. Some teachers reported that the combination of pressure to improve test/exam outcomes, and their own increased workload and stress, had reduced the quality of their relationships with their pupils.
14. Children and young people are suffering from increasingly high levels of school-related anxiety and stress, disaffection and mental health problems. This is caused by increased pressure from tests/exams; greater awareness at younger ages of their own 'failure'; and the increased rigour and academic demands of the curriculum. The increase in diagnosis of ADHD has been shown to be linked to the increase in high stakes testing. Thus it appears that some children are being diagnosed and medicated because the school environment has become less suitable for them, allowing less movement and practical work, and requiring them to sit still for long periods.
15. Increasingly, children and young people see the main purpose of schooling as gaining qualifications, because this is what schools focus on. This trend has been widely deplored, including by universities and employers, who have argued that the current exam system does not prepare children for life beyond school. They have highlighted a range of other desirable outcomes of schooling, such as independent, creative and divergent thinking; ability to collaborate; and so on.

16. While accountability measures have a negative impact on all pupils, many of them disproportionately affect disadvantaged and SEND pupils. One reason for this is that many of them struggle to reach age-related expectations, and therefore often spend more time being taught maths and English (and consequently miss out on some other subjects). Some special school teachers argued that their pupils need to develop life skills rather than focus on literacy and numeracy.
17. A second reason for the disproportionate impact on disadvantaged pupils is that Ofsted grades are strongly related to the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in a school (schools with high proportions of disadvantaged children are more likely to have poor Ofsted grades). This research has shown that schools with low Ofsted grades are more likely to use strategies such as scrutiny of teachers' work, which increases pressure on teachers, and which is often passed on to pupils.
18. Current accountability measures also militate against inclusion. Findings reflected previous research in showing that Ofsted's approach is making some schools reluctant to take on pupils who are likely to lower the school attainment figures. The effective work that some schools do in relation to inclusion (particularly work to support pupils socially and emotionally) is also disregarded by Ofsted if it has not resulted in satisfactory attainment figures.



## Recommendations

1. It is crucial that it is recognised that the current system of measuring pupils' attainment and using this to judge schools and teachers is deeply damaging to children and young people, and does not foster the skills and talents that are needed in higher education or in employment, or the attributes that will be valued in future citizens. An urgent review of current accountability measures should take place, with a view to substantially changing them.
2. The different purposes of testing should be separated out so that tests intended to measure pupils' progress and attainment are not used for school accountability.
3. If tests are used as accountability measures, they should be similar to the PISA international tests in that only a sample of schools should take them on any occasion. The results of these tests would not be communicated to parents, and should not be used for judging individual schools; rather, they would give a picture of the national pattern of attainment, and the variability of attainment across groups of pupils. This would therefore inform practice in all schools.
4. Headteachers working in teams should be responsible for holding each other to account through a system of peer group visits and advice. All headteachers should have the opportunity to take part in these teams, as this would also be a form of professional development. The purpose of a visit should be to explore all aspects of practice, to raise questions, and where appropriate to challenge and to support the school in forming an effective action plan.
5. In cases where there are serious concerns about a particular school, a team of advisors should be available to call in to support that school (along similar lines to the London Challenge advisors). They would be educational professionals with substantial experience of leading schools and of school improvement, who could provide on-going advice and support.
6. Schools should be expected to foster the talents and skills of all pupils, wherever these lie. The importance of encouraging and enabling all children should be paramount.
7. A key measure of a school's success ought to be whether pupils are engaged in learning creatively and happily, and whether at the end of their period in that school they move successfully on to other educational establishments or to work (if it is available), and contribute effectively as members of society.
8. There should be a renewed focus on a broadly based curriculum which fosters creativity, curiosity, and enthusiasm to learn. Collaboration should be encouraged, rather than competition.
9. In particular, the curriculum for young children should be reviewed and revised to take into account all that research has shown about the developmental needs of this age group.
10. Perverse incentives relating to secondary subject choice (which are inevitable in any form of school league tables) should be removed. Schools should consult with students and parents to ensure that each student follows a curriculum which suits their particular needs and interests, and in which they have some reasonable chance of success.
11. Any review of accountability measures should include consideration of the potential impact of proposed changes on the quality of school experience of pupils with SEND and disadvantaged pupils, and on inclusion.
12. The social and emotional health and development of children and young people should be a key priority for all those involved in education, and schools should be encouraged to take the time to focus on these where appropriate. In particular, schools should have a duty to avoid any practices which are found to be worsening children's emotional and mental health.
13. The government should prioritise measures to reduce societal inequality and should recognise that schools can only make a small contribution to this.

## Abbreviations and Glossary

See also Appendix: Structure of years, levels and tests/exams: England

Disadvantaged	Disadvantaged pupils are defined as those who have been eligible for Free School Meals at any point during the last six years and looked after children.
EAL	English as an additional language
ESL	English as a second language
Foundation stage	For children aged 3-5
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	Examinations taken by 16-year-olds
I	Interview – used to denote quotes from case study interviews
KS1	Key Stage 1: Years 1-2 for children aged 5-7
KS2	Key Stage 2: Years 3-6 for children aged 7-11
KS3	Key Stage 3: Years 7-9 for children aged 11-14
KS4	Key Stage 4: Years 10-11 for children aged 14-16
PE	Physical Education
Pupil Premium	Funding allocated to schools to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils
RAISEonline	A secure web-based system that provides a range of analyses including attainment; progress; absence and exclusions; and pupil characteristics
RI	Requires Improvement (Ofsted judgement)
SATs	Standard Assessment Tests – the common term for the National Curriculum tests taken by 7-year-olds (Key Stage 1 SATs) and 11-year-olds (Key Stage 2 SATs)
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator. A SENCO is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy.
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
SIMS	School Information Management System
TA	Teaching Assistant
VA	Voluntary Aided
W	Written comment on survey

# Section 1

## Introduction

*“Everything is about test results; if it isn’t relevant to a test then it’s not seen as a priority.” (Primary teacher)*

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Accountability in schools

*Everything is about test results; if it isn't relevant to a test then it is not seen as a priority. This puts too much pressure on pupils, puts too much emphasis on academic subjects and creates a dull, repetitive curriculum that has no creativity. It is like a factory production line chugging out identical little robots with no imagination, already labelled as failures if they haven't achieved the right level on a test. (Primary teacher)*

The title of this report is *Exam factories?*, drawing attention to perceptions that this is the direction in which many schools are moving. A number of teachers in this research used similar metaphors to describe what is happening in their schools: for example “a factory producing exam ready beings”; “the ‘factory farm’ version of education”; “a business model of education where we are merely numbers in the machine”; “an input output model – we’ll put this amount in and that amount will come out.” These metaphors encapsulate the pressure to ‘deliver’ (in this case, both the curriculum, and high scores in tests/exams); a loss of creativity; an emphasis on uniformity; a decline in the quality of personal relationships; and a management style involving target-setting and close oversight of practice. All these things are increasingly experienced in schools today, and have been explored in this research.

The research was commissioned by the NUT to investigate the impact on children and young people in England of the various measures used to hold schools accountable. These include inspections, floor standards, and the whole range of measures published in the school performance tables (attainment, pupil progress, attainment gaps, etc.).

The current English accountability structures were introduced following the Education Reform Act (DES 1988), which led to the creation of Ofsted<sup>4</sup>, national testing<sup>5</sup> and published league tables. The initial aim was to improve attainment. By supplying information about attainment to parents (through published league tables) and enabling them to choose their children’s schools, an educational market was created, and it was assumed that schools would respond by raising standards. The structures that were introduced also gave the government more power to control what was taught, and to hold schools to account directly; this is now the dominant form of accountability.

Accountability measures have been strengthened over the years by:

- Collection and publication of a wider range of data about each school, including:
  - o pupil progress
  - o attainment of particular groups of pupils, and attainment gaps between those in each group and their peers
- Introducing floor standards (formerly ‘targets’) for schools in 2004. Floor standards were initially expressed as the percentage of pupils in a school who must achieve the expected level in national tests/examinations at age 11 and 16, and now include measures of pupil progress. The floor standards for both primary and secondary schools have increased over the last decade, and further increases have been announced;
- Increasing specification of which subjects ‘count’ in the secondary school league tables;<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills; Ofsted inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages.

<sup>5</sup> Tests on nationally regulated educational standards. The Appendix shows the current pattern of testing.

<sup>6</sup> For details see DfE website [www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/reform.html](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/reform.html)

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## SECTION 1: Introduction

- Increasing the rigour and level of challenge of primary and secondary tests/exams; and
- Introducing a phonics test for six-year-olds, and thereby specifying what method should be used to teach reading.

Thus the initial aims of accountability measures (to inform parents and to improve attainment) have been expanded to include narrowing attainment gaps, and steering schools towards particular forms of curriculum and pedagogy. The sanctions attached to 'failure' have also increased: teachers now have performance-related pay; and schools that are identified as 'failing' face challenges or interventions such as a written warning from the government, an Ofsted inspection, removal of the headteacher or the school being closed and replaced by an academy.<sup>7</sup>

There is a global trend towards increasing the use of data to hold public services to account, but the stakes in the English education system are particularly high, and thus the impact on schools, school staff and pupils is greater than in most countries. However, high stakes testing (i.e. testing children, then using the results to judge the quality of schools and/or teachers, and applying sanctions where targets are not met) is also used in the USA, and is the central strand of the No Child Left Behind policy, adopted in 2002. Thus research conducted in the USA provides useful evidence of the impacts of such tests.

There is a considerable body of evidence to show that accountability measures have a range of negative impacts on pupils. Much of this evidence relates to high stakes testing. As long ago as 1888, Emerson White discussed "the propriety of making the results of examinations the basis for ... determining the comparative standing or success of schools." His conclusions are still relevant:

They have perverted the best efforts of teachers, and narrowed and grooved their instruction; they have occasioned and made well-nigh imperative the use of mechanical and rote methods of teaching; they have occasioned cramming and the most vicious habits of study; they have caused much of the overpressure charged upon the schools, some of which is real; they have tempted both teachers and pupils to dishonesty; and, last but not least, they have permitted a mechanical method of school supervision. (White 1888, p.199-200)

A wide range of research in the US has shown that:

- high stakes testing undoubtedly increases the scores that pupils achieve in tests/exams (Hanushek and Raymond 2005);
- high stakes testing does not improve children's overall knowledge and understanding because teaching is focused very closely on the demands of the test (e.g. Amrein and Berliner 2002; Koretz 2008); and
- high stakes testing has a wide range of negative effects on teachers and pupils. For example, it results in less creative teaching; a narrowing of the curriculum; a focus on borderline students at the expense of others; pupil anxiety and stress; and temptation to both pupils and teachers to 'game the system' (e.g. Clarke et al. 2003; Pedulla et al 2003; Jones and Egley 2004; Rothstein et al 2008; Ravitch 2010).

A common theme across much of the research is that the schools catering for the poorest children are the most likely to struggle to achieve the desired levels, and therefore the most likely to experience sanctions.

In England, similar conclusions have been reached. In 2008, the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee concluded that "a variety of classroom practices aimed at improving test results has distorted the education of some children, which may leave them unprepared for higher education

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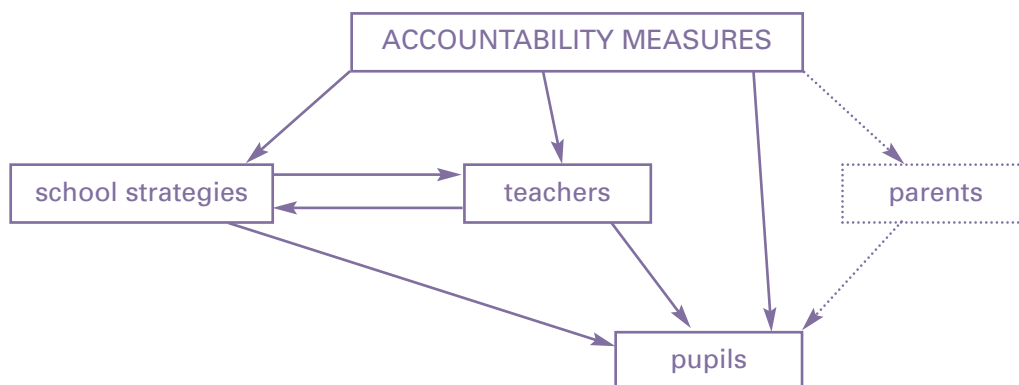
<sup>7</sup> The Education and Adoption Bill put forward in June 2015 by the Conservative government will force councils and governing bodies to actively progress the conversion of 'failing schools' into academies, and makes it clear that all schools rated 'Inadequate' by Ofsted will become academies. The Bill also includes plans to tackle 'coasting schools' by putting them on a notice to improve.

and employment.” It stated that the curriculum had narrowed, and “a focus on test results compromises teachers’ creativity in the classroom and children’s access to a balanced curriculum” (2008, p.3). The Committee argued that other consequences of high stakes testing were shallow learning, pupil stress and demotivation, and a disproportionate focus of resources on the borderline of targets. Their recommendations included reform of the current system of national tests to separate out the various purposes of assessment. The Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2010) came to very similar conclusions.

The research described in this report was designed to take into account the various ways in which accountability measures might impact on pupils:

- Directly: for example, tests or exams have a direct impact on pupils in terms of the lessons leading up to the test, and their experience of the test and its results; and
- Indirectly, for example:
  - o the strategies that each school adopts in relation to accountability measures may impact on pupils (e.g. holding booster classes after school)
  - o the additional work that teachers do in relation to school strategies may make them tired and stressed, and this may impact on pupils. A secondary teacher explained *“there’s a trickle down in pressure from Ofsted to the senior leadership team to the middle managers to the staff below and ... that must impact on the students”*
  - o parents may put pressure on their children to do well in the tests (including those that are mainly for accountability purposes such as SATs<sup>8</sup> taken by 11-year-olds). This was not the main focus of the research but is discussed briefly in this report

These interactions are represented diagrammatically below.



Taking this model into account, following an outline of the research design, discussion of the findings starts by considering school leaders’ and teachers’ views of accountability structures. The next section discusses the strategies that schools use in relation to accountability measures. Following this, the impact of accountability measures on school leaders and teachers is discussed briefly. The rest of the report then focuses on the impact of accountability measures on children and young people.

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<sup>8</sup> SATs – Standard Assessment Tests – the common term for the National Curriculum tests taken by seven and 11-year-olds.

## 1.2 Research design

The report draws together findings of relevant research and new data from an on-line survey of teachers and case study visits to seven schools across the country.

### 1.2.1 On-line survey of teachers

The survey was carried out in November-December 2014; it was completed by 7,922 NUT members. Respondents came from all phases of school (early years, primary, secondary, sixth form). They included a range of roles (e.g. headteachers, leadership posts, classroom teachers, supply teachers) and type of school (including academies, other maintained schools, and special schools). In comparison with all teachers nationally, it was representative by phase and type of school but under-represented headteachers (who make up five per cent of all teachers nationally but only one per cent of respondents).

Questions using Likert scales<sup>9</sup> focused on the strategies schools use in relation to accountability structures, and the impact of accountability measures on pupils. The draft survey questions were trialled with two headteachers (primary and secondary) and three teachers including a special needs coordinator and an early years specialist, and their suggestions were incorporated. Responses were analysed using SPSS.<sup>10</sup> There were also spaces for respondents to write comments, and over 3,300 respondents did so. Where these have been quoted in the report, the school phase (Foundation, Primary, Secondary, sixth form, or where relevant, the Key Stage – KS1, KS2 etc.) and the most recent overall Ofsted grade of the school is given.<sup>11</sup> These comments are identified in the report as 'W' (written).

### 1.2.2 Case study interviews

These took place in February and March 2015 in seven schools across the country where the headteacher had volunteered to take part.

**Table 1: Case study schools**

School	Type	Most recent overall Ofsted grade	Location
Primary	Community	Good	North
Primary	Converter academy	Good	North
Primary	Community	Requires Improvement	Midlands
Primary	VA Church of England	Requires Improvement	South East
Secondary	Sponsored academy	Good	London
Secondary	VA Catholic	Requires Improvement	East
Special (moderate & severe learning difficulties)	Community special	Good	London

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<sup>9</sup> For example, agree a lot, agree a little, disagree a little, disagree a lot.

<sup>10</sup> SPSS is a software package used for statistical analysis.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix for details of structure of key stages and testing.

In each school three or four members of staff and one or two groups of pupils were interviewed. In addition, pilot interviews were carried out with two headteachers (primary and secondary); a secondary head of department; and one group of Year 5 and 6 pupils. Since the interview schedules were not substantially changed, data from these interviews has been used in this report. In total interviews were conducted with nine headteachers, 16 teachers and 13 groups of pupils (normally six pupils per group). Adult interviewees (including headteachers) were not all NUT members. All interviews have been transcribed, and quotes used in the report are identified as 'I' (interview).

The case study schools have not been identified in any way in the report (e.g. by pseudonyms or location) because such identification could enable those who were interviewed to find out what other interviewees in their school said; this would be contrary to our commitment to confidentiality.



## Section 2

### School leaders', teachers' and pupils' views of accountability structures

*"They said the school wasn't that good... I don't think that that was fair."*  
(Year 5 pupil)

## 2 School leaders', teachers' and pupils' views of accountability structures

### 2.1 School leaders' and teachers' views

Case study interviewees said that teachers<sup>12</sup> should be accountable to children, and most said they should be accountable to parents. Some supported other forms of accountability, but all identified major concerns about current accountability measures. Interviewees were asked which forms of accountability concerned them the most. The vast majority of interviewees pointed to Ofsted. Ofsted was described as both “punitive” and “random”, “a spectre” and “the thing that keeps me awake at night”. Interviewees talked of “fear of them coming in and saying that you are no good”. Coffield and Williamson (2011) argued that fear related to accountability measures has become the key force for educational change in England.

The notion that Ofsted is punitive referred partly to the potential consequences of doing badly; a primary head (I) explained:

*Ofsted can destroy a school. ... If you're put into an 'RI' [Requires Improvement] category then all sorts of things can happen. It dissolves the schools. The morale goes, the parent body morale drops, anything that you've tried to achieve. ... If Ofsted say no, then a school can fall apart. Then you've got academies coming in.*

The perception that Ofsted is ‘punitive’ also related partly to the attitudes of some inspectors; another primary head said

*I think my overwhelming experience of Ofsted has been that it is a punitive and combative approach with a deficit model and in that respect we found it very destructive.*

‘Punitive’ was also used to describe advice given in Section 8 monitoring visits; interviewees in two schools reported there had been an insistence that specific individuals must be responsible for the school’s perceived weaknesses, and that they should be identified and punished (through the pay structures or capability procedures). Some interviewees used ‘punitive’ in contrast to ‘supportive’: they argued that it would be more constructive and effective to have supportive rather than punitive inspections.

The perception that Ofsted is ‘random’ related partly to the variation across inspection teams; two primary heads commented on this in interview:

*There is no consistency, so what one Ofsted inspector looks for in one school is not what they'll be looking for in another ... Their reporting appears to be consistent, but actually how they go about getting their evidence is not in any way consistent, it's very variable.*

*I think you are at the whim of an inspection team; it's whoever walks in the door; whatever their particular issues are and whatever they've got a bit of a beef about.*

This concern has frequently been raised, and Sean Harford, National Director for Schools, Ofsted, has acknowledged that a different team of inspectors visiting the same school on the same day would not necessarily arrive at the same judgement (Harford 2014).

The concern about randomness also related to the way Ofsted uses RAISEonline<sup>13</sup>. A secondary head argued (I):

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<sup>12</sup> Throughout the report references to ‘teachers’ should be taken to include both classroom teachers and school leaders, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>13</sup> RAISEonline is a secure web-based system that provides a range of analyses including attainment; progress; absence and exclusions; and pupil characteristics. For each type of analysis, a school is compared to national averages. Tests of statistical significance highlight results that are atypical.

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## SECTION 2: School leaders', teachers' and pupils' views of accountability structures

*RAISEonline has got so much data in it that to try and get a clean bill of health on all the 59 pages is pretty tricky. ... Ours has got virtually no blue, and even on the gaps page, all our indicators are yellow because, you know, two children did better than the average by enough to get a yellow stripe. I think we didn't get any red at all on that. Nevertheless the HMI<sup>14</sup> would see on page 56 that the gap there is sufficient to say that we weren't working with all students therefore we couldn't be given 'Good'.<sup>15</sup>*

Ten years ago, what mattered most for schools was to be above the floor target. Now such a wide range of data is available that interviewees expected that they could be criticised for any aspect of data that was below the national figure, not showing year-on-year improvement, or perceived to be too variable. It was argued that these expectations are unrealistic, and do not take into account the differences between cohorts of pupils. Moreover, interviewees argued that the focus on attainment gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is unhelpful because it does not indicate the actual level of attainment of either group; schools have been inspected by Ofsted because their attainment gap was significantly greater than the national figure, although each group had performed well above the national figure for that group.

This perception that any data may be used to criticise is borne out by Ofsted reports, which often highlight such shortcomings in the section specifying why the school is not yet 'Good' (or 'Outstanding'). The comments below are taken from Ofsted reports published in March 2015.

The proportion of pupils meeting national expectations in the phonic screening test is below average.

There is too much variation in pupils' achievement right across the school. Consequently while significant numbers do well, some are lagging behind.

Gaps in achievement between disadvantaged students and others have not closed as well in Year 10 as in other year groups.

Students, including disabled students and those with special educational needs, do not make good enough progress across a range of subjects.

Again Harford (2014) acknowledged shortcomings in some Ofsted inspections:

[the weakest inspectors] have been guilty of using the published data as a safety net for not making fully-rounded, professional judgements... Published data should only ever be a 'signpost' for the school/inspectors to consider what they may be telling us, not the pre-determined 'destination'.

Sir Mike Tomlinson, former Chief Inspector of Schools, has argued that with reduced inspection time and the ever-expanding set of data about school performance, data has become the dominant input into Ofsted inspection judgements about a school; he concluded that "inspection should rely less on data and more on direct observation of the work of a school" (2013, p.15).

A secondary headteacher (I) highlighted the number and complexity of performance databases:

*The RAISE measures change every year ... Basically, we do our own analysis after the summer exams, then RAISE invalidated comes out followed by the validated version (which I summarise); months later the Ofsted Data Dashboard for governors comes out (but far too late in the year to take any meaningful action). RAISE and the Dashboard don't quite cohere with each other, which makes things awkward. Then of course there is ALPs, ALIS and the ever elusive PANDA<sup>16</sup>... The series of data reports are basically a minefield laid down by Ofsted to make me sleep very badly!*

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<sup>14</sup> Her Majesty's Inspector. Currently Ofsted employs both HMIs and Additional Inspectors.

<sup>15</sup> The colours are used to highlight statistically significant differences between school data and the national average figures. In this case the head was explaining that hardly any of the school data was significantly worse than the national figures, and some of it was significantly better.

<sup>16</sup> ALPs, ALIS and PANDA are data reports relating to post-16 pupils' targets and attainment.

Ofsted's use of RAISEonline was a particular concern in a special school; the head said (I):

*It's absolutely meaningless because we're being compared against national standards and we're absolutely nowhere near those ... when Ofsted come into the school they will have looked at RAISEonline and made some judgements based on that, which is a joke.*

A number of interviewees argued that the focus on published data meant that many other things going on in schools are overlooked. A secondary head (I) argued that this was an inevitable, and deplorable, outcome of any accountability system:

*Ultimately, if you are going to put in an accountability system ... you're going to have other aspects that are not accounted for, and I'm talking holistic development of a child. Things that you can't actually measure in a table but actually are invaluable.*

All the case study schools with an overall Ofsted judgement of 'Requires Improvement' (RI) had changed their practice specifically to please Ofsted. One head said, *"there are things that we do because we know that Ofsted are going to criticise us if it's not there; not because it's the best thing for the kids"* (Primary, I).

## **2.2 Pupils' views of Ofsted**

Several of the case study schools had experienced recent Ofsted inspections. While pupils did not share their teachers' anxiety about inspection, some of them expressed criticisms of the timing and outcomes of these inspections.

In one school, pupils commented that visiting in early September was unfair because some pupils and teachers were new and schools should be given time to settle down after the holiday. Pupils in a primary school thought that it was inappropriate to inspect on Red Nose Day:

*I think it was a bit unfair that Ofsted came in on Red Nose Day, because we were all in our pyjamas and we were all a bit crazy. In the playground we were all happy and I don't think they were, like, oh, they didn't see that it was the funny side. (Year 6 pupil)*

Some argued that Ofsted had not identified some of the good aspects of their school:

*I think it should ... add more things to it, like the fact that there's a good student and teacher relationship and those sort of things rather than just all academic levels. (Year 9 pupil)*

*Especially at our school I think teachers really go out their way to try and help but because maybe they haven't ticked this box or ticked that box – it makes people like attack on teachers, and it's just not helpful at all. (Year 12 pupil)*

Pupils in two case study schools that had been judged to 'Require Improvement' argued that this was not a fair reflection of their school:

*They said the school wasn't that good. ... I don't think that that was fair. (Year 5)*

*We've got amazing results. We all work hard and ... from actually being in the school I already know that the teaching is amazing, all our books are marked. We want to do well, and it's just a nice environment. (Year 7 pupil)*

*I feel the school's great, a great school and there's nothing wrong with it to be honest. There's no flaws that I can point out. (Year 9 pupil)*

*We were all shocked because ... we think on an academic level everything is great because the teachers are just so approachable and they genuinely want to help you. (Year 13 pupil)*

*I don't understand either because at GCSE levels we've gone up and I think A levels have gone up as well. (Year 12 pupil)*

Secondary pupils had noted that their schools had put some strategies into place following their Ofsted inspection:

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## SECTION 2: School leaders', teachers' and pupils' views of accountability structures

*We've noticed new presentation systems have been put in place. There are four different colours of pens and everything. (Year 9 pupil)*

Sixth form students argued that their school had to respond to Ofsted requirements even though they argued that the Ofsted inspectors "don't really care":

*With Ofsted, there's a lot of box ticking and sometimes you feel they don't really care – not the school, but like Ofsted. The way a school acts is based around that, but that's not the school's fault. It's something they have to do, with things like targets. (Year 12 pupil)*

However, they argued that when schools respond to Ofsted requirements, this does not necessarily benefit pupils:

*There must be a level of frustration [among teachers] like the whole increased red tape and stuff, it's inhibiting their ability to teach, I believe, rather than improving it. (Year 13 pupil)*

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**Exam factories?** The impact of accountability measures on children and young people

# Section 3

## School strategies for accountability

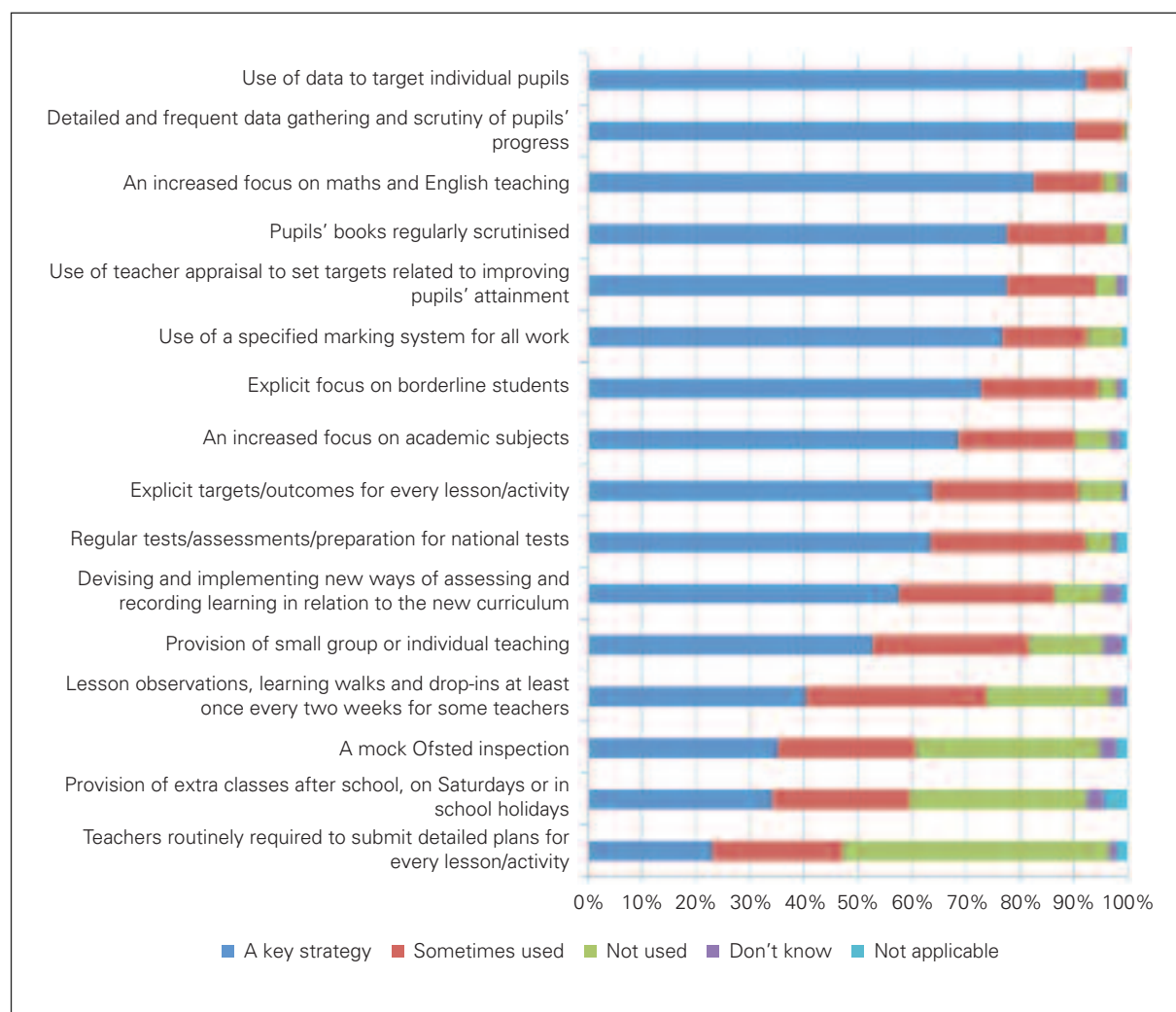
*“I have to keep a record of everything I do – key person sessions, children’s interests, outdoor learning provision, planning annotations. The list goes on and on.” (Foundation stage teacher)*

### 3 School strategies for accountability

This section explores the strategies that schools use to try and ensure that their attainment data achieves national targets and that they are prepared for inspection. These strategies impact on both teachers and pupils; impacts on teachers are explored in Section 4, and on pupils in Sections 5 and 6. This section is concerned with the strategies schools use; how widespread they are; and how this varies across different types of school.

The teacher survey included a list of strategies used in relation to accountability measures. This was compiled from previous research and the pilot interviews. Respondents were asked to indicate whether each strategy listed was 'key', 'used occasionally' or 'not used' in their school (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: All respondents: percentage indicating whether listed strategies were used in their schools (N = 7922)**



The pattern shown in Figure 1 reflects changes to the Ofsted inspection framework. The vast majority of respondents reported strategies related to marking and pupils' books (which recent Ofsted inspections had given more attention to – see section 5.5.5), whereas fewer than half reported scrutiny of lesson plans (which Ofsted has explicitly stated are not required) or frequent observation of lessons (which are now not individually graded by Ofsted). Listed strategies have been grouped into broader underlying approaches, discussed below.



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## SECTION 3: School strategies for accountability

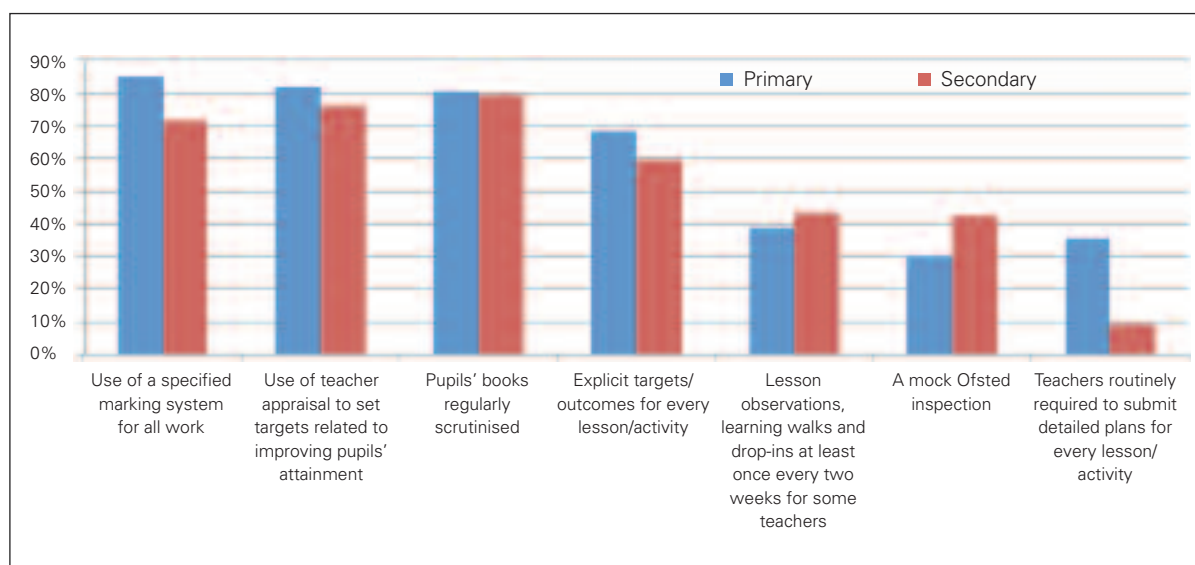
### 3.1 Scrutiny and greater uniformity of practice

This group included a range of strategies used by school leadership to check up on what teachers are doing, and to impose greater uniformity of practice.

- Use of a specified marking system for all work;
- Use of teacher appraisal to set targets related to improving pupils' attainment (written comments emphasised that this is now linked to performance-rated pay in many schools);
- Pupils' books regularly scrutinised;
- Explicit targets/outcomes for every lesson/activity;
- Lesson observations, learning walks and drop-ins at least once every two weeks for some teachers;
- A mock Ofsted inspection; and
- Teachers routinely required to submit detailed plans for every lesson/activity.

Most of the strategies in this group were significantly<sup>17</sup> more often reported in primary schools (including early years centres) than in secondary (including sixth forms) (Figure 2). In particular, routine submission of lesson plans was reported very much more by primary teachers.

**Figure 2: Percentage of respondents in mainstream schools reporting that listed strategies were key: primary (including early years) and secondary (including sixth form) (N = 6,617)**



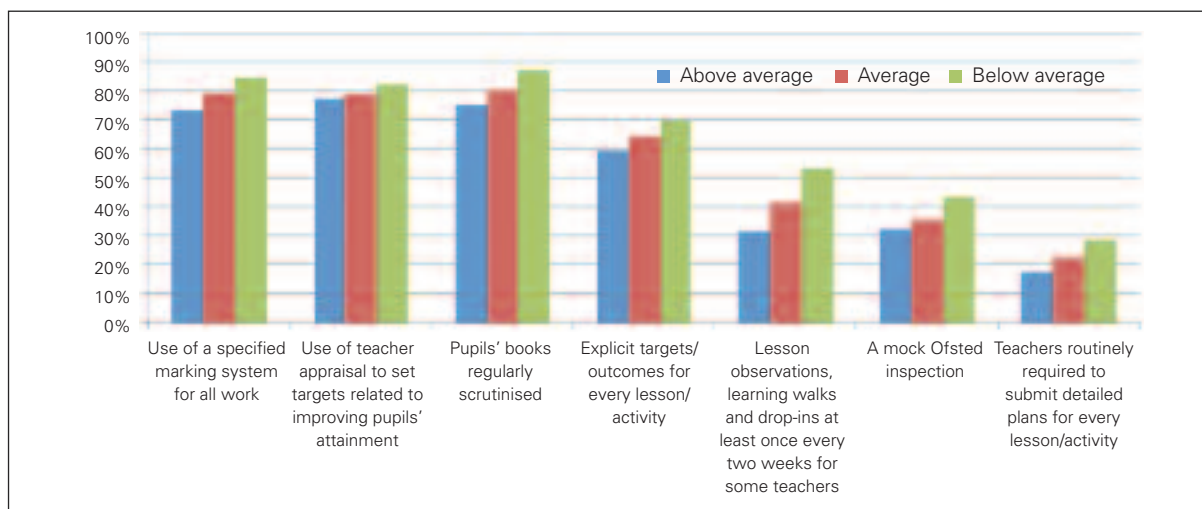
Furthermore, all the strategies in this group were significantly more often reported in schools with lower attainment and pupil progress, less good Ofsted overall judgements, and/or a higher percentage of disadvantaged pupils<sup>18</sup> (as indicated by eligibility for Free School Meals) (Figure 3).

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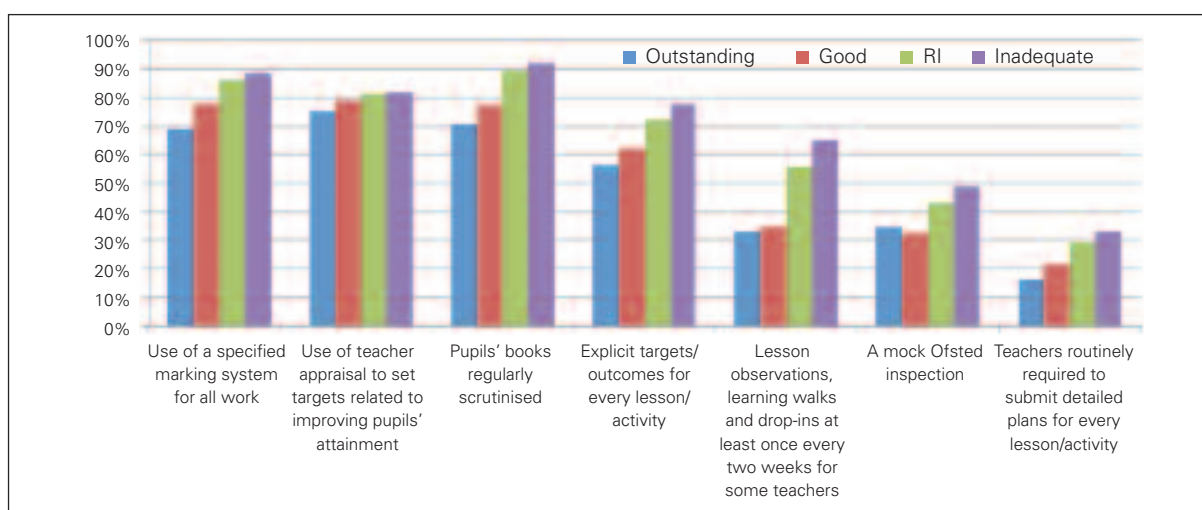
<sup>17</sup> Significant differences are reported using the chi-squared test,  $p < 0.05$

<sup>18</sup> Survey respondents were asked to indicate their school's most recent Ofsted grade, and whether attainment, progress and proportions of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), pupils with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) or with English as an additional language (EAL) were above average, about average or below average in comparison with national figures (which were supplied).

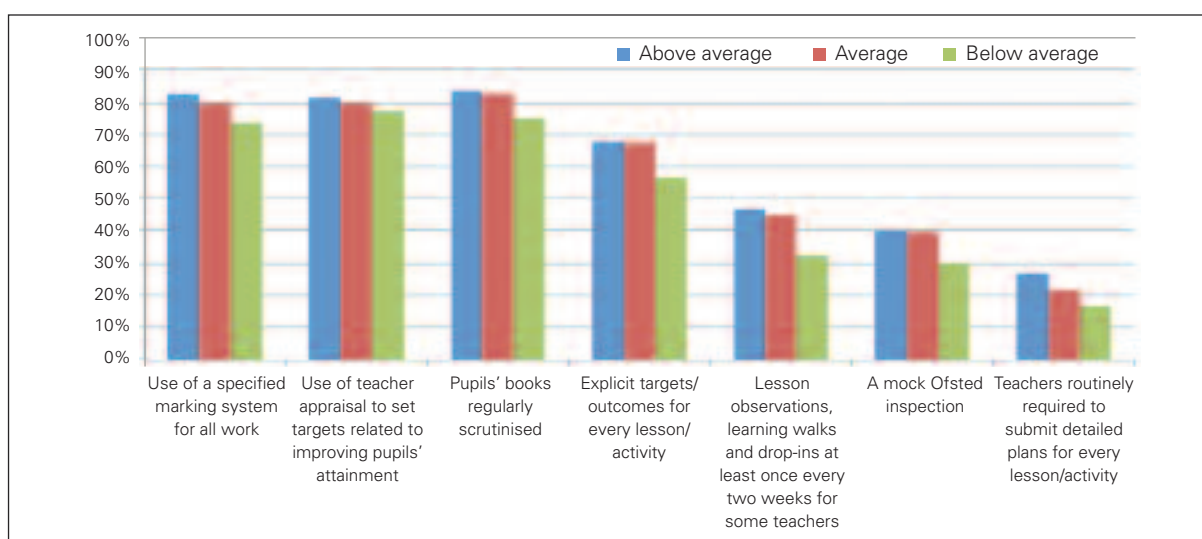
**Figure 3: Percentage of respondents in mainstream schools reporting that listed strategies were 'key' in their schools, a) By pupil attainment (N = 6,303)**



**b) By Ofsted overall judgement (N = 6,779)**



**c) By percentage of disadvantaged pupils (N = 5,865 )**



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## SECTION 3: School strategies for accountability

The exception was the use of teacher appraisal, which showed the same pattern, but not at a significant level. Each strategy was also more often reported in sponsored academies but this difference disappears when Ofsted grade, attainment or disadvantage are taken into account.

Respondents' written comments indicated a variety of other forms of scrutiny – for example:

*Walls are checked that they are being changed. Writing walls, handwriting walls and general learning wall near headteacher's room must be changed every half term complete with level or new banding descriptors. (Primary, 'Good', W)*

*Homework tasks have to be submitted for the half term ahead by the penultimate week of the half term before – for all key stages ... No scope for responding to the specific needs of the class – or indeed the direction the work might take. (Secondary, 'Good', W)*

*Detailed seating plans required for all classes in all subjects including form groups, with information on each student showing SEN, FSM, Pupil Premium, cared for, ESL, Maths/English ability, and general notes on aptitude and attitude. (Secondary, 'Inadequate', W)*

A number of respondents noted the use of pupil voice as a way of monitoring teacher performance:

*Pupil voice, where they are asked their opinion of us, but we never receive any feedback. (Secondary, 'RI', W)*

Comments also emphasised demands for uniformity of practice, such as:

*Requiring nursery and F2 children [children aged 3-5] to produce at least two pieces of written/numeracy work which has to be fully marked and "stars and wishes added" and follow up evidence that these have been acted upon. ... Each child to have a written displayed target within the setting. (Foundation, 'Inadequate', W)*

*Pupils seated boy/girl and not seated next to each other if they are of the same ethnic background. (Secondary, 'Inadequate', W)*

*Specific start of lesson procedures, and checks to ensure these are performed. Policy of ten minute silent working periods during every lesson, which is checked. (Secondary, 'Outstanding', W)*

This section has shown that scrutiny of practice (particularly in relation to pupils' books and marking, and teacher appraisals) is widely used in relation to accountability measures, together with demands for uniformity of practice. Teachers in schools with the most disadvantaged pupils, those with below average attainment and those with the lowest Ofsted ratings reported use of these strategies significantly more than teachers in other schools.

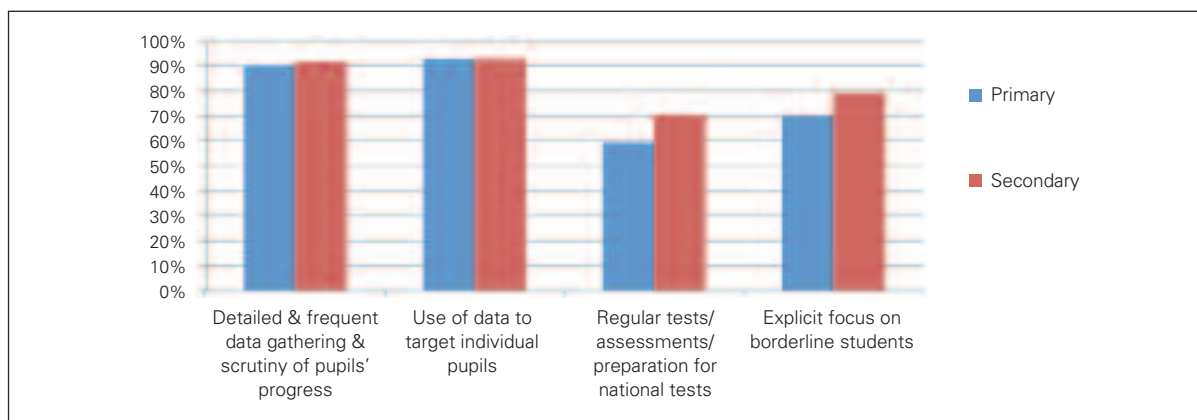
### 3.2 Collection and use of data

This group of strategies relates to the production, scrutiny and use of data to target teaching. It included:

- Detailed and frequent data gathering and scrutiny of pupils' progress;
- Use of data to target individual pupils;
- Regular tests/assessments/preparation for national tests; and
- Explicit focus on borderline students.

While the first two of these strategies were equally common in both primary and secondary phases, the last two were more frequent in secondary than in primary schools (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Percentage of respondents in mainstream schools reporting that listed strategies were 'key' in their schools, by school phase (N = 6,617)**



Respondents in schools with lower Ofsted overall judgements were slightly (but significantly) more likely to indicate that each strategy was used, but in general, patterns were much less clear-cut than those relating to strategies discussed above (scrutiny and greater uniformity of practice).

Many teachers commented on the amount of time spent on collecting and analysing data. Some argued that in their schools, the time spent assessing pupils was out of proportion with the amount of time spent teaching, and was stressful for pupils:

*We have an EMB electronic mark book system, whereby we must assess students every two weeks ... The EMB week is extremely stressful for students as they will have about ten tests in that week! Students have started to ask 'is it an EMB?' ... and will be overly anxious if the answer is yes, and won't really bother trying too hard if the answer is no. (Secondary, 'Outstanding', W)*

Others noted the ways in which data was used:

*I am required to sub-level C/D borderline students<sup>19</sup> (and must attend a meeting after school once every two weeks to explain why these students are so categorised) and the majority of intervention is aimed at these students. (Secondary, 'Inadequate', W)*

Some argued that the focus on analysing outcomes for pupils in specific groups did not provide any useful information:

*Every six weeks we 'assess' children and analyse the data. We analyse each sub-group of children (e.g. SEN, Pakistani boys, EAL etc.) and form targets for each category based on the analysis. The individual learner is completely lost in this process. It's meaningless, statistically insignificant data which wastes time and means we are losing sight of the reason for assessing in the first place. (KS1, 'Good', W)*

Teachers' concerns about the strong focus on data were that it added to their workload, and the data was not necessarily useful:

*I have to keep a record of everything I do – key person sessions, children's interests, outdoor learning provision, planning annotations. The list goes on and on. All of these things I already know but have to keep on a piece of paper to 'prove' I know it. (Foundation, 'Good', W)*

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<sup>19</sup> The original National Curriculum was divided into levels (see Appendix) and sub-levels, and these are used to chart progress. The C/D borderline at GCSE is important to schools because only grades of C and above can be included in the league tables.

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## SECTION 3: School strategies for accountability

Some said school leaders had claimed that the data would be required by Ofsted, but when they had had an inspection, Ofsted inspectors had not looked at it:

*Teaching assistants are required by the deputy head to create folders with observations/notes relating to their key children. This is a useless exercise as all of these observations are in the children's learning journeys. [This is done] 'because Ofsted will ask for it'. We've recently had Ofsted and they didn't ask. (Foundation, 'Good', W)*

Some felt they were being asked to record every detail of their work in a completely meaningless way:

*We are now being asked to record details on SIMS [school management information system] such as why children receive a sticker and who has forgotten PE kit. (Primary, 'Inadequate', W)*

Strategies involving collection and use of data clearly impact substantially on teachers' workload, but they also impact on pupils in a variety of ways which vary across schools; these include more frequent testing, being given targets, and being identified or not identified as needing extra tuition or support. These impacts are further discussed in Section 5.

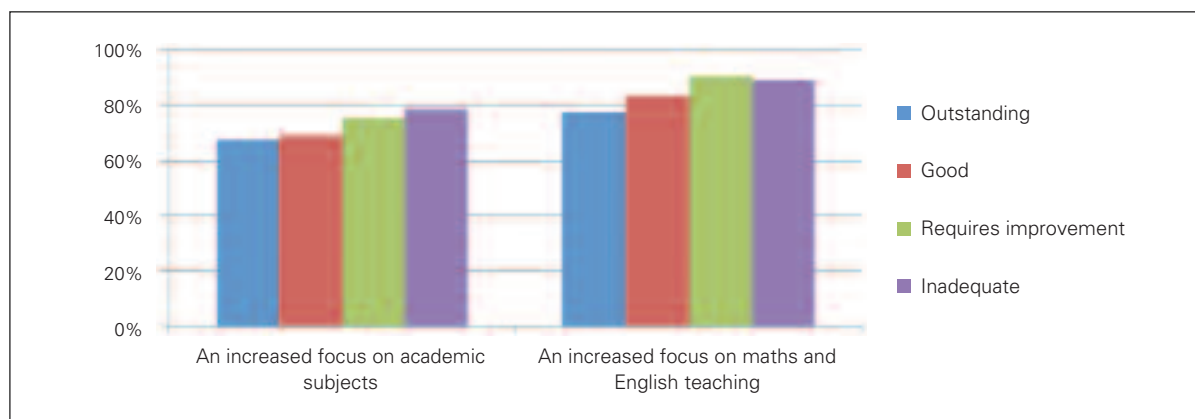
### 3.3 Curriculum strategies

The third group of strategies relates to the curriculum. It included:

- An increased focus on academic subjects; and
- An increased focus on maths and English teaching.

There were no significant differences related to phase of education, but both these strategies were more often reported in schools with lower Ofsted overall judgements (Figure 5), with lower attainment, and with more disadvantaged pupils.

**Figure 5: Percentage of respondents in mainstream schools identifying 'An increased focus on academic subjects' as a 'key' strategy, by Ofsted category (N = 6,779)**



Many additional comments related to these strategies, for example: *"Timetable dominated by maths and English lessons plus daily spelling/reading/mental maths means little space for any foundation subject."*<sup>20</sup> (KS2, 'Good', W)

Some teachers pointed out that those approaching national tests (which take place in the summer term) spent even more time on these subjects: *"Year 6 pupils do no other subjects than literacy and maths from September until SATs"* (KS2, 'RI', W). The same applied to those with lower attainment:

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<sup>20</sup> When the National Curriculum was first introduced, a distinction was made between core subjects (maths, English and science) and foundation subjects (history, geography, technology, music, art and physical education, modern foreign languages).

*Core subject<sup>21</sup> day-long booster sessions which remove them from non-core subjects and they are expected to simply catch up, even though they might be in the middle of controlled assessments. This places additional stress on the pupils. (Secondary, 'Good', W)*

Spending more time on certain subjects inevitably results in spending less time on other subjects; this is discussed in Section 5.4.

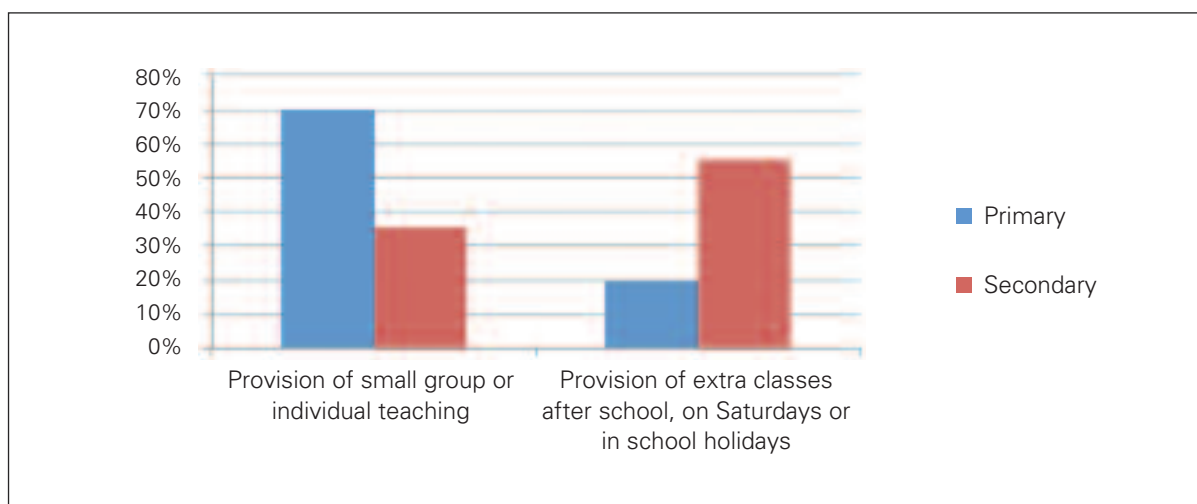
### 3.4 Additional teaching

The list of strategies used by schools included two focusing on the provision of additional teaching. These were:

- Provision of small group or individual teaching; and
- Provision of extra classes after school, on Saturdays or in school holidays.

Practice varied between primary and secondary respondents (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Percentage of respondents in mainstream schools reporting that listed strategies were 'key' in their schools, by school phase (N = 6,617)**



While Figure 6 shows the number of respondents indicating these were 'key' strategies in their schools, it is worth noting that in this case many other respondents indicated that they were sometimes used.

These strategies were not significantly related to Ofsted grades, but were reported significantly more frequently by those in schools with lower attainment and higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils.

Some additional teaching is open to all pupils (for example, lunch-time or after-school revision sessions for students taking GCSEs) but many sessions are for pupils who are targeted either on the basis of their attainment level and target grades, or because they belong to a particular group. In particular, disadvantaged pupils may receive extra tuition because the school has received specific 'Pupil Premium' funding to raise their attainment.

Additional teaching has a number of potential impacts: the intention is to support pupils and enable them to achieve better results, but there are other possible impacts on teachers' workload and the curriculum experienced by pupils.

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<sup>21</sup> See footnote 21.

### **3.5 Strategies used in special schools**

Teachers and school leaders in special schools were significantly less likely to identify many of the strategies described above as being 'key' in their schools, particularly those strategies related to tests/examinations and pupils' written work. This may reflect the fact that some pupils in special schools are not able to take examinations or undertake written work. Similarly the very much lower percentage indicating that extra classes take place outside school hours probably reflects special school transport arrangements. However, for those strategies that are equally relevant in all types of school, the responses of teachers in special schools were similar to their mainstream counterparts (e.g. explicit targets for every lesson; use of teacher appraisal to set targets related to pupils' attainment; teachers routinely required to submit lesson plans; provision of small groups or individual teaching). Like their mainstream counterparts, those in special schools commented on the onerous amount of data they had to record.

### **3.6 Strategies for accountability: Summary**

The strategies that schools adopt in relation to accountability measures include:

- Scrutiny and requirements for greater uniformity of practice;
- Collection and use of data to target individual pupils;
- An increased focus on maths and English (and in secondary schools, other academic subjects e.g. history, geography, science, languages); and
- Additional teaching.

Many of these strategies were more frequently reported in schools with lower Ofsted grades, below average attainment and high proportions of disadvantaged pupils. The vast majority of comments written on the survey indicated a direct link between the strategies used and accountability measures. Just one comment argued that while most of the listed strategies had been adopted, they were nothing to do with accountability.

The strategies discussed in this section impact on pupils directly and indirectly. These impacts are explored in the sections that follow.

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**Exam factories?** The impact of accountability measures on children and young people



# Section 4

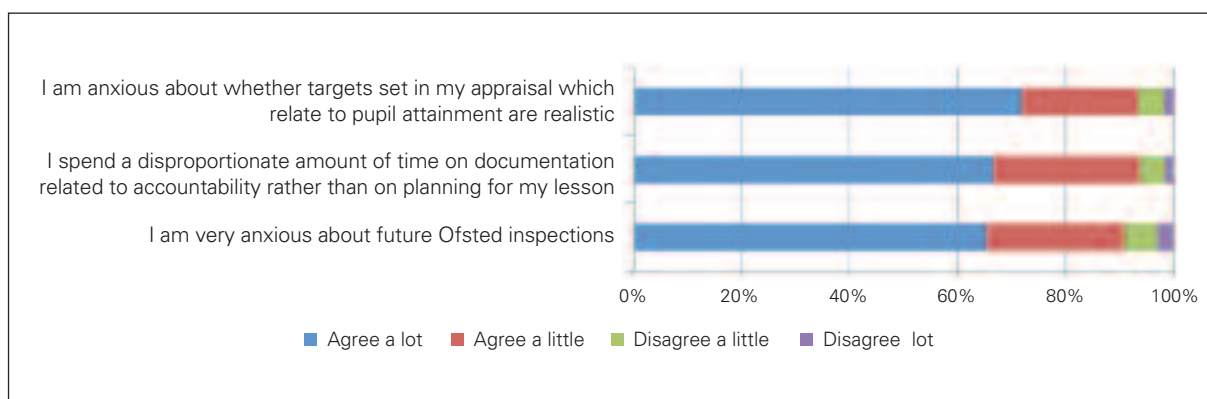
## The impact of accountability measures on school leaders and teachers

*“The pressure put upon teachers to provide accountability for so many factors is unmanageable and seemingly pointless.” (Primary teacher)*

## 4 The impact of accountability measures on school leaders and teachers

While the aim of this research was to explore the impact that accountability measures are having on children and young people, inevitably it also shed light on how they are affecting teachers. Teachers' excessive workload and stress levels have been well-documented elsewhere e.g. NUT (2014), TNS BMRB (2014), and Gibson et al (2015) reporting teachers' responses to the DfE Workload Challenge. Our survey included a few questions specifically about the impact of accountability measures on teachers (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: The impact of accountability measures on teachers: Percentage of all respondents giving each response (N = 7,466)**



The overwork and anxiety that teachers experience inevitably impacts on pupils. Teachers' stress levels are often high. In our survey, many reported enjoying their work less than they had in the past, and some said they were planning to leave the profession:

*I am totally exhausted all the time. I work 60–70 hours a week just to keep up with what I am expected to do.... The pressure put upon teachers to provide accountability for so many factors is unmanageable and seemingly pointless. Many teachers in my workplace are feeling permanently stressed and demoralised. More of us are looking to leave as more and more workload is being given with no regard to its impact on teachers or the children. (KS2, 'Outstanding', W)*

Section 2 focused on perceptions of accountability structures, and reported that teachers and headteachers felt anxious and fearful about Ofsted. The pressure felt by school leaders is in some (but not all) schools, passed down to teachers. Many comments referred to the pressure that they were experiencing from school leaders:

*There is a real sense of fear and we are driven by SLT [the Senior Leadership Team] to work harder and harder and push the pupils harder and harder. (Secondary, 'Outstanding', W)*

*Teachers are suffering/off on long-term sick leave because of their fear of the performance management system. (Secondary, 'RI', W)*

*When holding someone accountable, senior teachers or Ofsted will not accept the obvious reasons: social background of the pupils, recent history of the department in terms of absences and leadership etc. This leads to a sort of witch hunt where you may be singled out even if you have done everything that you reasonably could. (Secondary, 'Good', W)*

This is, of course, a consequence of the pressure that school leaders themselves are experiencing.

When teachers are tired, over-worked and stressed, this inevitably impacts on pupils' experience (see Section 6.2). The pressure put on teachers to achieve results may also be passed on to pupils.

# Section 5

## The impacts of accountability measures on choice of schools, attainment, curriculum and teaching and learning

*“They are six years old, and all their school experience tells them is that they are failures (already) and have to be pulled out constantly to work on things their peers can already do, and miss out on the fun bits of learning.” (Primary teacher)*

## 5 The impacts of accountability measures on choice of schools, attainment, curriculum and teaching and learning

### 5.1 Introduction

This section and the section that follows contains the main findings of this research: it explores both intended and unintended impacts of accountability measures on children and young people. As Donaldson (2015, p.112) commented in his recent review of the curriculum in Wales, “The unintended effects of over-exuberant accountability can unintentionally compromise good intentions.”

This section starts by considering how accountability measures impact on parents’ choice of schools. It then discusses the impacts on pupils’ attainment; the curriculum and teaching and learning.

### 5.2 Impact on choice of schools

One aim of the accountability measures introduced as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act was to improve information to parents so that they could make informed choices of schools. It was assumed that this would create a market in education which would have the effect of expanding ‘successful’ schools and forcing those that were not successful to close. Competition between schools would therefore raise standards (Bell and Stevenson 2006). However, international research has shown that markets have had very little effect. Among the reasons for this are that parents consider school reputation and the characteristics of the pupils more important than performance data, and that they do not respond strongly to underperforming schools (e.g. by removing their children) (Waslander et al 2010). In England, fewer than half of all parents reported in a YouGov survey that they used school performance data or Ofsted reports in choosing their children’s schools (Francis and Hutchings 2012). Recent research by NFER showed that the factors parents considered the most important in school choice are the ‘school that most suits my child/children’ and ‘location’. ‘Ofsted rating’ and ‘examination results’ were ranked 4th and 6th respectively, and were identified in the top three factors by fewer than 40 per cent of parents (Wespieser et al 2015).

Three of the case study schools in this research had been judged by Ofsted to ‘Require Improvement’ (‘RI’). None of these schools reported that parents had removed children as a result of this. Coverage in local newspapers was generally supportive of the schools and critical of Ofsted. Thus there appears to be some scepticism about the validity of Ofsted judgements, which reduces their value as market information. An 11-year-old in a case study school judged ‘RI’ said: *“I told my mum about it, and she was like, I don’t think that was fair, if [the Ofsted judgement was correct] you wouldn’t be in this school right now.”* While such scepticism exists, there is also undoubtedly a tipping point at which a school’s reputation suffers, with a consequent negative impact on the morale of teachers and pupils. Whether this results mainly from Ofsted judgements, league tables or simply local people’s own observations and experience is unclear; probably all three contribute.

### 5.3 Impact on attainment

#### 5.3.1 Test attainment versus knowledge and understanding

There is evidence that external accountability has a positive impact on pupils’ attainment in tests (e.g. Carnoy and Loeb 2002; Hanushek and Raymond 2005).<sup>22</sup> However, other research (e.g. Wiliam 2010) demonstrates that this does not necessarily indicate any greater understanding or knowledge, but simply

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<sup>22</sup> There is also evidence that it is possible for attainment to be high without having any high stakes accountability measures; Finland is an obvious example (Sahlberg 2011).

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## SECTION 5: Impacts of accountability measures on choice of schools, attainment, curriculum and teaching and learning

that pupils have been prepared for that particular test. Amrein and Berliner (2002), in a study of the impact of the introduction of high stakes testing in 18 US states, showed that while there was clear evidence that linking high stakes consequences to test outcomes had increased scores on those tests, use of a range of other tests showed no evidence of increased student learning. Similarly, in this country, the percentage of pupils achieving five A\*-C GCSEs including English and mathematics (the high stakes test that teachers focus on) increased by 15 percentage points between 2006 and 2012 (DfE 2013), but in the same time period PISA scores (a low-stakes international test taken only by a sample of schools) did not increase (Wheater et al. 2014).<sup>23</sup>

When a test is high stakes (resulting in judgements about the teachers and the school as well as the child), teachers feel under considerable pressure to focus their teaching on the material children will be tested on. This was reported in our survey and case studies:

*All our planning [in Year 6] is based on what we think the children need to do, where their gaps are, to try and get them to that level ... It is teaching them to take a test which I know every school does ... The children know it's for the test when you ask them. (Primary, I)*

Another interviewee argued that “part of the job of a Year 6 teacher seems to be question-spotting, and you can pull out trends from past papers.” Teachers did not think this was the best way to teach:

*We jump through those hoops to do it because we know that's what every school has to do because we want to get those levels. It's not really the best teaching. If you were asked how you would teach, you wouldn't do it like that. ... You have to do it because other schools do it, and otherwise you're giving the children a disadvantage. (Primary, I)*

Teachers distinguished between test outcomes and pupils' overall level of knowledge and understanding. They argued that high test scores can be brought about by preparing pupils for a specific test, but that the scores they achieve do not necessarily imply having the level of skills and understanding that is needed as a foundation for future learning:

*The danger is that you might see children getting better and better able to perform in a particular test, but you don't see that in terms of their wider learning actually being stronger and stronger, it's just more focused on exactly what is going to come up on the test. (Primary, I)*

Moreover, Key Stage 2 SATs only test a small part of the curriculum. Only maths and English are tested, and even within these subjects, a primary teacher pointed out that only certain aspects of the curriculum which lend themselves to short test questions can be included. A primary head (I) argued: “[SATs] only test such a narrow range of children's knowledge and understanding. It's not anywhere near the whole picture of what youngsters can do.”

Secondary teachers argued that the Key Stage 2 SATs scores are not useful because they result from being coached for a particular test rather than representing the child's overall level of knowledge, skills and understanding. Most secondary schools therefore use other tests with their Year 7 intake. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that test results are used as the baseline to set future targets for pupils, and measure their progress over the next stage; a secondary teacher noted:

*Some pupils' targets are totally unrealistic. ... When they arrive in Year 7 we test them, and in some cases, the gap between their SAT result and our mock SAT result can be up to two whole levels. Meaning that some students are given a target of an A grade for Year 11, when in Year 9 they were still working at Level 3 or 4<sup>24</sup>, which makes those targets completely unreasonable and puts a great pressure on pupils and teachers, especially because our salaries depend on meeting our targets. (Secondary, 'Outstanding', W)*

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<sup>23</sup> The issue here is not whether GCSE or PISA is a more effective test but that there is a difference in scores between tests for which pupils have or have not undergone intensive preparation. PISA has many critics, particularly in relation to its claim to make international comparisons (see, for example, Chalabi 2013).

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix for details of levels.

### ***5.3.2 'Gaming the system'***

The pressure to help pupils succeed in high stakes tests leads teachers to engage in a variety of practices which American research has referred to as 'gaming the system'. This includes a wide spectrum ranging from legitimate practices such as question spotting and teaching the topics you expect to come up in the exam, to practices that are clearly cheating, such as giving students hints during a test. The difficulty is that many practices are perfectly legitimate, but ethically questionable. For example, it is obvious that students should be given some preparation for a test, but at what point does test preparation become problematic? In the USA, the National Research Council's Committee on Appropriate Test Use expressed concern about "teaching so narrowly to the objectives of a particular test that scores are raised without actually improving the broader set of academic skills that the test is intended to measure" (quoted in Ravitch 2010 p.159). Offering more coaching to students on the pass/fail borderline could also be seen as a dubious practice since other students will then be comparatively neglected.

In England, an Ofqual survey (Meadows 2015) of 548 secondary teachers investigated teachers' views on such issues. The teachers were asked to rate listed strategies to improve exam marks in terms of their acceptability (Table 2). Those shaded green are at the most acceptable end of the spectrum, while those shaded pink were generally considered not acceptable. However, when teachers are under pressure to achieve good results, strategies in the grey area of the list are used, and even some from the pink area. The Ofqual survey asked teachers to indicate whether they had experienced each of the listed strategies, and showed that some of those in the grey area were widely experienced. For example, 80 per cent of secondary teachers had experienced a focus on borderline C students. Similarly, in the teacher survey conducted for this research, 79 per cent of the secondary teachers reported that a focus on C/D borderline students was an explicit strategy in their school (as shown on Figure 4).

**Table 2: Secondary teachers: Selected strategies to improve exam results ordered by their perceived acceptability, adapted from Meadows (2015).**

<b>MOST ACCEPTABLE</b>
Becoming markers to gain insight into the examination system
'Question spotting' what might come up on an exam and tailoring teaching accordingly
Targeting enquiries about results to pupils just below key grade boundaries
Not covering all the specification content so as to focus on those areas most likely to be examined
Switching to what they believe to be 'easier' exam boards
Focusing efforts on borderline 'C' students
Giving students the benefit of the doubt in awarding marks when assessing coursework
Considering school league table performance in deciding which subjects to offer
Having students use revision guides as opposed to text books
Encouraging students to memorise mark schemes
Encouraging students to rote learn answers to likely exam questions
Giving students writing frames to use in their controlled assessment
Teachers giving students hints during controlled assessment
Providing wording of sections of coursework to students
Opening exam papers before the specified time
<b>LEAST ACCEPTABLE</b>



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Teachers in our survey reported a number of instances of dubious practice and malpractice:

*[In my previous school] there was an inordinate amount of pressure put on teachers to ensure that students achieved their target grades. ... Teachers whose students did not achieve a C grade or better in the controlled assessments were told to redo and redo and redo the assessment until those grades were hit. One colleague conducted the same speaking assessment with students up to 12 times! (Secondary, W)*

*I have heard and reported to management a Year 6 teacher and readers (mostly TAs) for boasting in the corridor about how they helped the children answer the SATs questions! The headteacher hushed it all up by telling the staff concerned to be careful, because if it got out, the school would be known as a school of cheats! (KS2, 'Good', W)*

In relation to the last example, Ballou and Springer (2015) showed that pupils do significantly better when teachers invigilate tests for their own pupils. For example, teachers may stare pointedly at a question the pupil has left unanswered, or simply give the child an encouraging look.

The Standards and Testing Agency in England reported a rise in 'maladministration' cases at Key Stage 1 and 2 from 168 cases in 2010 to 511 cases in 2013 (STA 2013, 2014). The most common causes for reports of maladministration were wrongly opened test packs, over-aiding pupils and change of marked scripts before review. While reported cases represent only a small number of schools, they provide evidence of the increasing pressure on school staff to achieve better results.<sup>25</sup> A primary headteacher said in interview:

*There is this ever-increasing pressure on schools ... The number of schools that have been investigated last year around falsifying SATs is evidence of that. I don't think it's right that people did that, but I can understand why people end up doing things which leave them in a vulnerable situation, because there is such a huge amount of pressure on schools and people are so scared of what Ofsted is going to do to them if they haven't got to the floor targets or to the required level at the end of Year 6.*

'Gaming the system' also includes school strategies concerning, for example, admissions. The headteacher of Burlington Danes academy recently spoke out on the covert selection strategies that some secondary school heads use to ensure an intake of high attaining, and in some cases, affluent, pupils, and thus avoid the potential negative impact on attainment of disadvantaged pupils (*The Independent*, 24 March 2015). Other school strategies involve removing some pupils from the roll before exams, and trying to get exemption from the tests for pupils who are least likely to succeed, or trying to get them extra time. All of these may be legitimate, but there are grey areas, and obvious potential for dubious practice. One primary teacher (KS2, 'Good', W) reported:

*I have been asked, along with another member of staff, to change NASSEA steps assessments<sup>26</sup> in order to get extra time in the SATs for our pupils. We are told to fill them in in pencil. It also means the teachers' assessments are 'doctored' by management so that they show the right picture for Ofsted.*

There is then, evidence that teachers in England are 'gaming the system', because they are under pressure to achieve good results. In some cases they are being told to cheat. Such practices are increasing in response to the intense pressure on school leaders and teachers to raise attainment as measured by tests and examinations.

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<sup>25</sup> American research has shown that high stakes tests lead teachers to cheat e.g. Nichols and Berliner (2005), Ravitch (2010).

<sup>26</sup> NASSEA steps assessment can be used to assess whether learners for whom English is an additional language also have special educational needs, which might entitle them to extra time in the KS2 SATs.

### **5.3.3 Formative feedback**

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When national testing was first introduced, the TGAT report (DES 1987) presented a strong case for formative assessment. As a result the current pattern of statutory tests and examinations is intended both to measure the effectiveness of schools and to give useful formative feedback to learners. The Children, Schools and Families Committee (2008) argued that these purposes are incompatible. One of the reasons that national tests are of little formative value is that both SATs and GCSEs come at the end of a child's time in their primary or secondary school, so it is inevitable that they provide little information that can be used by teachers, and as Section 5.3.1 showed, secondary schools prefer to use different tests to assess their new intake.

In the teacher survey conducted for this research, only six per cent of teachers agreed 'a lot', and a further 40 per cent agreed 'a little', that: *"Testing pupils helps them focus on what they do not understand/know"*. There was a similar pattern in the responses to: *"In this school testing and targets have helped raise attainment"*; six per cent agreed 'a lot' and 50 per cent agreed 'a little'.

### **5.3.4 Accountability and attainment gaps**

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The policy of successive governments has emphasised the importance of increasing social mobility by reducing the gap between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and their peers, and ensuring that both groups progress at the same rate. The coalition government introduced Pupil Premium funding to support this. Ofsted holds schools to account for how this funding is used, as well as for attainment gaps.

This focus has resulted in schools identifying, monitoring and tracking different groups of pupils. Teachers expressed concern that in some schools pupils are visibly labelled, for example, by putting *"small coloured dots on all pupils' books to show whether they are high, middle or low ability and another dot to show SEN or Pupil Premium"* (Primary, 'RI', W). There was also concern that while on average, children from economically disadvantaged families do less well, this is not necessarily the case within a specific class, and so it seems inappropriate that the funding be used to benefit only those pupils:

*Pupil Premium pupils seem to have taken the centre stand in our school, which is ridiculous considering that our Pupil Premium pupils regularly outperform their counterparts. I teach in an area of high deprivation. ... Any pupil who is falling below expected progression should be targeted rather than a select group. (Primary, 'Good', W)*

Some teachers were concerned that those not eligible for the Pupil Premium are explicitly excluded from some support activities. A secondary teacher noted ('RI', W):

*The Pupil Premium has distorted the focus so that non-Pupil Premium students are excluded from targeted support if Pupil Premium money was used to pay for the intervention. This includes offering enrichment or intervention after school and in holidays. Even if a child wants to join in they are not allowed if they are not Pupil Premium. It is hard to explain this to students in a sensitive way.*

Moreover, teachers commented that the needs of those not eligible for the Pupil Premium tended to be overlooked: *"The focus and expectations of the attainment of Pupil Premium targeted children adversely affects the progress of the rest of the class"* (Primary, 'Outstanding', W). This resulted in some resentment and disaffection among those not eligible for Pupil Premium funding:

*The so-called average and less able are often disillusioned and some become 'anti-school' because they feel they do not matter. The excessive focus on ... the Pupil Premium students is unfair and perceived as such by other students. (Secondary, 'Good', W)*

Some teachers commented that Pupil Premium pupils were missing out on 'fun' school activities and this was upsetting for them:

*I work with Pupil Premium children and often have to take them out of class when others are doing activities that they would like to do. They also miss assemblies, and I can see*



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*their agitation when they can hear laughter and singing while they are having to do extra work with me. (Primary, 'RI', W)*

There was particular concern that the focus on Pupil Premium pupils was at the expense of those with special educational needs (SEN):

*I am very concerned about the SEN children. Pupil Premium has become the priority – SEN child: no Pupil Premium – then no support. (Primary, 'Inadequate', W)*

*I have been told to forget the progress of SEN children and to focus on Pupil Premium as with the limited resources we have only one group can get extra support! SEN children without a statement are really suffering! (Primary, 'RI', W)*

Despite making schools accountable for attainment gaps and the provision of funding, the attainment gap at GCSE level between pupils eligible for Free School Meals and those who are not has remained at about 27 percentage points throughout the last decade, though there has been some reduction in the gap in primary schools. Measuring gaps between groups by reviewing the percentage of pupils reaching the expected level ignores the fact that some groups of pupils are already 'behind' when they enter school. There has therefore been a shift in emphasis to considering progress made while at a school. However this still ignores the vast differences in children's experiences outside school. Our interviewees highlighted the variation in the home environment and parental support for children's learning, which means that disadvantaged pupils are unlikely to progress at the same rate as their more affluent peers, and are extremely unlikely to progress faster.

*How is it in any way sensible to ask for an extra level of progress in education for Pupil Premium kids who are the least likely to be in a position to progress to that degree? How can we ask that the most disadvantaged kids make the most and the best progress, over and above kids from a more stable, more secure background? How mad is that? (Secondary, 'Good', W)*

While Ofsted are aware that "differences in educational attainment between individuals will always exist" and that "family backgrounds have a strong influence on attainment", they assert that, "factors such as material poverty ... are not by themselves insurmountable barriers to success," and, "the very best early years providers, schools and colleges make an enormous difference to the life-chances of children and young people" (Ofsted 2013, p.18). Thus their argument is that all schools should be able to achieve as well as the best. This assumes, of course, that the social and economic conditions of all pupils eligible for Free School Meals are the same, which is clearly not the case.

There is no evidence that holding schools accountable will substantially reduce attainment gaps, particularly in a context in which the economic gap between the richest and the poorest in society is increasing. Gorard (2010) drew on a range of statistical evidence about attainment, and concluded that, "to a very large extent, schools simply reflect the local population of their intakes" (p.59), and schools cannot do much to change this. Research has shown that home background is a much larger influence than the school attended and thus attainment gaps are very difficult to reduce. Rasbash et al (2010) examined variation in pupils' progress at secondary school and concluded that only 20 per cent of this is attributable to school quality. Most of the variation related to family factors, the neighbourhood and so on. Other estimates of the 'school effect' are lower: Wiliam (2010) reported that OECD analysis showed that in the USA, only eight per cent of the variability in maths scores related to the quality of education provided by the school, and analysis of data in England showed that the school effect contributes only seven per cent of the variance in attainment between pupils. Some research has suggested that accountability measures have the opposite effect, tending to widen gaps because those with lower attainment may become discouraged following poor test results, and lose motivation (Harlen and Deakin Crick 2002).

A further concern is that when only a small number of children in a school are disadvantaged, the specific characteristics of the individuals and their circumstances assumes greater importance, and may easily be very different from the national average pattern. However, interviewees reported that the Ofsted inspectors in their schools had focused only on the group level data, and were not prepared to listen to

information about individual circumstances, or what pupils had achieved. A secondary SEN Coordinator (SENCO) reported (I):

[Ofsted inspectors] *asked me how the SEN students did. I said 'They did OK.' They shot me down and said 'No, they didn't. They were atrocious.' I said, 'Well, all of them were happy, fully involved in school life, got the grades they needed and every single one of them got to where they wanted to go after this school. I consider that success. We had people that weren't wanting to come to school, they were bullied ... but now they're a full member of the school.' The inspectors weren't interested in that. Didn't care. They just cared about the fact that they hadn't made so many levels of progress.*

### 5.4 Impact on curriculum

Governments have often used accountability measures to steer pupils toward particular subjects or aspects of subjects; there are many examples of this:

- Initially secondary league tables reported the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C and above; from 2006, English and mathematics had to be included;
- Since 2010 when the English Baccalaureate (E-Bacc) was introduced, league tables have recorded the percentage of students in a school who achieve A\*-C grades in English, mathematics, science, a foreign language and history or geography;
- Since 2014, certain vocational qualifications no longer 'count' in secondary league tables;
- From 2016, Progress 8 will be the main measure used for secondary schools; it will measure pupils' progress and attainment in eight subjects including the E-Bacc subjects;
- In primary schools, science testing was discontinued from 2010; and
- The phonics screening check for six-year-olds was introduced in 2012 to encourage schools to use phonics as the main method of teaching reading.

In addition to these changes to accountability measures, the Coalition Government introduced a new curriculum, which clearly impacts on what schools will be held to account for.

Teachers in this research raised serious concerns about the impact of such measures, arguing that pupils are now experiencing a narrower curriculum; that the increased academic demands are inappropriate for some pupils; and that some pupils are 'not ready' for what they are required to learn.

#### 5.4.1 Narrowing the curriculum

Previous research about the impact of high stakes testing has shown that an increased focus on the demands of the test means that children experience a narrower curriculum (e.g. Clarke et al. 2003; Jones and Egley 2004; Children, Schools and Families Committee 2008; Rothstein et al 2008; Alexander 2010). The data collected for this research shows that teachers consider that children in England today are experiencing a narrower curriculum than in the past, and that this affects pupils with low attainment, disadvantaged pupils and those with special needs to an even greater degree.

In our survey, 97 per cent of teachers agreed that there is *"an increased focus on maths and English teaching"* in their schools. This is because these are the only subjects tested in primary schools, while in secondary schools, passes in English and maths are crucial for the league tables. The inevitable consequence of having a greater focus on certain subjects is that others are allocated less teaching time and are seen as less important. Donaldson, in his recent review of the curriculum in Wales (2015, p.10) asserts that: "At its most extreme, the mission of primary schools can almost be reduced to the teaching of literacy and numeracy and of secondary schools to preparation for qualifications". Reports have highlighted the reduction in time spent on personal and social development (Harlen and Deakin Crick 2002), science in primary schools (CBI 2015) and the creative arts (Neelands et al 2015). Thus, while the government states that the curriculum should be "balanced and broadly based" (DfE 2013a), accountability measures tend to narrow the range of what is taught. The Children, Schools and Families

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Committee (2008) concluded that “any efforts by the government to introduce more breadth into the school curriculum are likely to be undermined by the enduring imperative for schools, created by the accountability measures, to ensure that their pupils perform well in national tests” (para 140).

In primary schools, many teachers reported that the amount of time spent on maths and English increases in Year 6 in order to prepare for the SATs, and that other curriculum areas (such as music, art, design and technology, topic work) are consequently taught less, or not at all. An interviewee explained:

*At the top of Key Stage 2, definitely in Year 6 and to some extent in Year 5, the curriculum is narrowed to reading, writing and maths because that's what we're held accountable for and we've got to get those children to a certain level. (Primary, I)*

In secondary schools the amount of time spent on maths and English has also increased at the expense of other subjects, which are also valuable:

*Non E-Bacc subjects, e.g. drama, are having reduced timetables to make more lesson time for English and Maths. Many students are losing out on subjects where they can succeed and gain confidence. Drama is a subject which is invaluable in gaining life skills, (teamwork/cooperation, presentation, speaking and listening) ... and which really helps build confidence and self-esteem. School should help to prepare students for life, not just academic achievement and exams. (Secondary, 'Good', W)*

One teacher reported that form time is now used for literacy and numeracy rather than pastoral issues:

*We are sent literacy and numeracy projects to do in form time instead of getting to know students better and dealing with pastoral issues. These tasks are not optional and take up all form times that are not assemblies. (Secondary, 'RI', W)*

Both primary and secondary teachers pointed out that the lower-attaining pupils are often removed from other lessons to do extra maths and English, and that they therefore spend more of their time on these subjects, and “miss out on the art and the PE and the history and the geography and the ICT” (Primary I). Such narrowing of the curriculum was reported for children as young as six who have been identified as having low attainment:

*These children are pulled out of broad curriculum subjects to try to close the gap. Their experience at school must be horrible – in assembly they've got to do phonics intervention, then a phonics lesson, a literacy lesson, a maths lesson, lunch, reading, extra reading intervention and then speech intervention. What else are they learning about the world? They are six years old, and all their school experience tells them is that they are failures (already) and have to be pulled out constantly to work on things their peers can already do, and miss out on the fun bits of learning. (KS1, 'Good', W)*

Such pupils are often those who are disadvantaged and may be less likely to have access to wider learning and cultural opportunities outside school. Moreover, as an interviewee explained: “some children never participate in learning that they actually enjoy and never experience any success.”

While some of the pupils interviewed in the case studies accepted the dominance of English and maths because, they said, these are the “two main subjects”, many others questioned that analysis, arguing that what they learned in maths and English would not all be useful to them in the future. Some argued strongly that they should be learning more things that were practically useful, and several primary pupil groups argued for more science.

The drive to focus on maths and English was a considerable concern identified in the comments of many of the special school teachers who completed the survey, as well as in the case study special school. They argued that their pupils' main need was to learn life skills; one teacher wrote:

*At post 16, I'm still expected to assess their maths and English despite the fact that they are 16 plus and still can't talk, toilet themselves or feed themselves. The life skills that I try to promote, and independence skills, don't show up on any official chart, but this is where I try to concentrate. The curriculum is totally unrealistic for most of my school. (Special, 'Good', W)*

### **5.4.2 Greater emphasis on academic subjects**

When league tables were first introduced, some secondary schools encouraged more pupils to take vocational subjects. This was because they counted as equivalent to GCSEs in league tables, but more pupils achieved good marks, resulting in higher attainment figures for the school. Thus, as Wolf explains, “the system of performance indicators ... used to measure schools’ performance at the end of Key Stage 4 ... resulted in an enormous rise in the number of ‘vocational’ awards taken by young people” (2011, p.80). This had a negative impact on some pupils who were taking qualifications that were accorded little value by employers and further and higher education institutions rather than taking academic GCSEs that might have been of greater value for their futures. Following the Wolf report (2011) the government has restricted the qualifications that can be included as equivalent GCSEs. While the trend to encourage pupils to take vocational subjects could be seen as a form of ‘gaming the system’, and arguably needed addressing, interviewees claimed that the strategies to address it have gone too far the other way, and students are now being encouraged or “forced”, to take academic subjects that are not suitable for them.

In our survey, 93 per cent of respondents said there is “an increased focus on academic subjects” in their schools, and 86 per cent of secondary teachers agreed that: “Pupils are encouraged to take subjects that will count in the league tables irrespective of their own interests/aptitudes.” Many commented on this, for example:

*Students are absolutely being directed towards option choices which meet needs of school first. (Secondary, ‘Inadequate’, W)*

*Some students in our schools are being forced to take subjects that they are a) not interested in b) not capable of achieving a good grade in i.e. computer science at GCSE. This is so that more students can be put through the E-Bacc. (Secondary, ‘Good’, W)*

As well as expressing concern about the suitability of the subjects students were “forced” to take, and their chances of success, teachers argued that this was affecting motivation and behaviour: “they’re some of the ones that are actually now causing us the most problems because they’re not engaged” (Secondary, I). This interviewee explained that the school had therefore had to make other arrangements for some students:

*A lot of them started the year doing history, geography and so on and we’ve had to revisit that and say, this isn’t working, and we’ve had to try and put in some kind of programme. ... We’ve seen that trying to do what the government says doesn’t work, at least with some of our students, and it’s not fair to keep trying to do that. (Secondary, I)*

This had led the school leadership team to question:

*Do we constantly try and just hit the targets of whatever the government is saying at the present time or do we do what we think is best for our students and face the consequences?*

In particular, teachers were concerned about the impact on some pupils with special needs, who were “forced” into taking subjects that teachers considered to be at too high a level. This was done entirely as a response to accountability measures:

*Students who are part of a special unit, who have never studied subjects such as history, geography and languages, are forced into doing them at GCSE so the school can fulfil the government’s Progress 8 measurement. (Secondary, ‘Good’, W)*

*In my school, pupils with SEND are not offered a suitable curriculum at GCSE e.g. entry level or a vocational subject as these do not ‘count’ in the league tables. They are forced through a curriculum at KS4 and KS3 at a pace that is far too fast and at too high a level. This is distressing for pupils, knocks their confidence and is waste of time. (Secondary SENCO, ‘Good’, W)*

The case study special school headteacher explained that, as a result of her concerns about Ofsted and their focus on RAISEonline, some of the pupils with learning difficulties were taking foundation tier GCSEs:

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*In order to get points [on RAISEonline] we've introduced GCSEs, even though we feel they're not a relevant exam for our children, and in the world if you've got a G in English or maths it doesn't count for anything. But we are telling our children it matters, it's important ... We're selling them an untruth you know in order for us to get points.*

### 5.4.3 More rigorous

The coalition government has recently introduced a new curriculum designed to be “challenging and ambitious”, and which includes “more demanding content” at earlier ages (Gove 2013a). This will be reflected in what is tested:

The draft primary national curriculum programmes of study for English, maths and science are more demanding than the existing national curriculum. They align England with those countries that have the highest-performing school systems. (DfE 2012)

The new GCSEs in English language and English literature set higher expectations; they demand more from all students and provide further challenges for those aiming to achieve top grades. (DfE 2013b)

The new mathematics GCSE will demand deeper and broader mathematical understanding ... and we anticipate that schools will want to increase the time spent teaching mathematics. (Gove 2013b)

In addition, changes have been made to exam structures, reducing or removing coursework options and modular structures, and in English, not counting marks achieved for speaking and listening, and removing the option to take a Foundation tier assessment (which enabled students to achieve only grades from C to G).

Among our survey respondents and case study interviewees, the main concerns about these changes related to the impact on pupils with lower attainment. A secondary SENCO noted in interview that the increasing challenge in mathematics was already proving to be a problem because some students could not cope:

*Maths is becoming a lot more difficult. ... You have students who start to work out, I can't do this and I'm never going to be able to do this. Every lesson is another lesson where I'm falling further and further behind in my understanding. ... We know what impact that's going to have.*

He argued that students became disaffected, anxious or depressed because they are not able to cope with the work they are asked to do. He went on:

*You can't cure that with counselling, learning mentoring and all the things that we do have in place ... You can't be counselling them for what you are putting them through at school. ... Our clientele [in student support] is going to increase and their problems are going to become – wider let's say – because of the academic pressures that are being placed on them.*

Similar concerns were expressed about the impact on pupils with special needs:

*There are pupils in Year 6 with SEN who should not have to take SATs. They would benefit from learning life skills, building their confidence and self-esteem. ... They are constantly comparing themselves with their more able peers. They struggle and regularly feel like they are failing in English and maths. They thrive in music and drama but only receive music once a week for 40 minutes and drama is a rare treat. (Primary, 'Outstanding', W)*

A secondary SENCO expressed anxiety about the long-term future for some children with specific learning difficulties; he described a boy with dyslexia who was already struggling, and for whom the additional rigour might prove too much:

*He's going to find it far more difficult now with this new curriculum offer, and I worry about the impact on somebody like that; what options does he have, and how is he going to manage, and what becomes of him at 16? (Secondary SENCO, I)*



In the case study special school, some pupils were taking Foundation tier GCSE English in 2014, but this option could not be offered to the next cohort because the changes to the exam (outlined above) made it too challenging for them. This was an issue of considerable concern for the pupils who were interviewed as they believed that having taken GCSEs might be important for their future options:

*It's a crisis really for Year 9s because they're not going to learn the stuff that we learned. They're not going to learn new things really and when they go on to colleges, unis and get jobs it's going to be hard for them because they haven't done the GCSEs. (Year 11 pupil)*

While their perception of the potential benefits of a low grade GCSE pass were perhaps over-optimistic, the key point here is that they felt less included as a result of changes to the exam system. When GCSEs were first introduced, one of the aims was to offer qualifications which could be accessed by all pupils; making them more rigorous can be seen as a divisive move.

#### **5.4.4 Pupils being asked to learn things for which they are not ready**

One consequence of the increased demands of the curriculum was that many teachers said that children were being asked to learn things that they are not ready to learn. Some 90 per cent of teachers agreed in our survey that this happens; this included 95 per cent of primary and 84 per cent of secondary teachers.

In the early years, teachers described having to make children sit down and tackle academic work in a way that was inappropriate to their level of emotional maturity. This was leading to 'silly' behaviour and lack of motivation, particularly among summer-born boys. The introduction of the phonics test has contributed to this pressure. The comment below is typical of many that were written on the survey:

*This term we have seen Year 1 pupils become anxious about not keeping up with the rest of the class. They feel they do not have enough time to finish work. Due to raised expectations of National Curriculum, teachers have felt the need to increase maths and spelling homework in Year 1. Parents have commented that they are concerned by the expectations and that their child is not ready. ... Teachers feel under pressure to make progress despite knowing that socially and physically the children need more time to learn through play. (KS1, 'Good', W)*

The concern here was not simply that children and parents were anxious, but also about the longer-term impacts on children's learning:

*Pushing them too soon, and exposing them to things they are not developmentally ready for, risks holes in their knowledge and understanding at a later date. (Foundation, 'Outstanding', W)*

*In being asked to learn things before they are ready, they are turned off education. (KS1, 'RI', W)*

Moving children on before they are ready is not confined to the early years; KS2 teachers also talked about readiness:

*Teachers tend to push the pupils, whether they are ready or not, because of the pressures they feel to get these children to make two sub-levels of progress or more. (KS2, 'Good', W)*

*I regularly have children in tears in my Year 6 class as I relentlessly push them towards some stupid target regardless of whether they are either academically or emotionally ready. Someone in government has determined that 'this is what an 11-year-old must be able to do.' (KS2, 'RI', W)*

And, as discussed above, accounts were given of the impact of encouraging pupils to take academic GCSEs for which they were not ready, and many teachers in special schools commented on the inappropriateness of trying to teach their students aspects of the academic curriculum for which they were not ready or which were not appropriate for their needs.

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## SECTION 5: Impacts of accountability measures on choice of schools, attainment, curriculum and teaching and learning

### 5.4.5 The impact of the phonics check

The introduction of a Phonics Screening Check (test) to be taken by six-year-olds was designed to influence how children are taught to read.<sup>27</sup> Bradbury (2014) wrote: "By creating another statutory test which schools can be judged on, the Coalition Government has managed to change what teachers teach, and in turn what is valued within Year 1 classrooms." Indeed, her research shows that "the pressure of the phonics test has spread down into Reception and even Nursery classes." This was certainly happening in the case study schools visited as part of this research. A Foundation stage teacher explained:

*Since they brought in the [phonics] testing in Year 1, that's put pressure on us. We make sure obviously that we get them as high as we can, so then Year 1 haven't got as much to do. It's hard because some children just aren't ready ... they're not mature enough. We've started streaming our phonics so we've got three groups now, lower ability, an average and an upper. (Primary, I)*

It was reported that some pupils found such strategies upsetting:

*It is heart-breaking to have a four-year-old approach me in tears because they 'are still in the bad group for reading' because they have already been streamed in phonics at age four! (Primary, 'Outstanding', W)*

Schools are required to report to parents their child's score, and whether or not they have met the standard. Many teachers expressed concern about the effect on both children and their parents of being told that they have 'failed' at age six.

*I find it very disheartening that in Year 1 we assess a child and then have to send home something to parents to say whether their child is good enough or not. So you're starting their career in education in a primary school by saying 'your child can or can't do something' when we know that phonics isn't the be all and end all of being able to read, there are children who just don't really engage with phonics, but actually are very good readers. (Primary head, I)*

While the pass rate on the phonics check has risen, research suggests that this is simply because children are being prepared effectively for the test (Bradbury 2014). Waugh (2014), an advocate of phonics teaching, has acknowledged that:

When the tests were introduced, many teachers complained that the use of pseudo or nonsense words was a problem for more able children, who tried to make sense of them and turn them into real words. I know many teachers who now devote a lot of time to teaching children how to read invented words to help them pass the test.

Bradbury questioned whether teaching children to read invented words is actually a useful activity. Staff in the case study schools said that the phonics check had not improved pupils' reading, or informed what teachers do; one headteacher explained in interview:

*We did pretty poorly the first year that the Phonics Check came out and then we practised for it the following year and our results were marvellous, but of course that took time from other elements of the curriculum. [And has that improved their reading?] We've always been a very strong reading school. ... It doesn't give our teachers any additional knowledge and it doesn't inform our planning.*

A Key Stage 1 teacher explained that some children learn to read without phonics: "it is clear that some children don't learn purely by phonics. I have had some children who have coped well on a reading SAT better than others, but failed the phonics test second time!" Moreover, the focus on phonics is reducing time spent on other aspects of learning, including reading strategies:

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<sup>27</sup> This discussion is included in this section on the assumption that there is a 'reading curriculum'; it could equally have been included in the next section which focuses on teaching and learning.

*I am now seeing gaps in learning where children are not making as much progress in other areas. They also have gaps within literacy, as all the focus is on phonics, so children are not learning other key reading strategies. Often they don't even realise it is a story they are reading! (Foundation, 'Outstanding', W)*

Teachers were particularly concerned about the impact on children's self-esteem and confidence of being told that they are failing at such a young age:

*Already I have had parents complain that their child is crying and not wanting to come to school because they 'can't do the reading'. (Foundation, 'Outstanding', W)*

## **5.5 Impact on teaching and learning**

Accountability measures have undoubtedly impacted on how children are taught, and what they learn. This section discusses test preparation; the reduction in opportunities to learn in practical creative and investigative ways; the lack of variety in lessons; the impact of targets; written feedback; and additional teaching during school hours or after school.

### **5.5.1 Time spent on test preparation**

Paralleling the narrowing of the curriculum resulting from the focus on maths and English and, in secondary schools, other 'academic' subjects, there has been a narrowing of pedagogy resulting from the focus on test preparation. This has led teachers to focus on short-term memorisation and 'test tactics' rather than deep learning and understanding (Children, Schools and Families Committee 2008).

This affects pupils in Year 6 and Year 11 more than the other years because these are the years in which Key Stage 2 SATs and GCSE examinations take place. Some lessons consist of test-related activities such as practice tests and "giving feedback on topics from the test paper that were not done correctly" (Secondary, 'Outstanding', W). One teacher wrote: "In Year 6 from Christmas onwards, we will be training them to pass SATs tests – with test after test after test. No fun at all for the children" (KS2, 'RI', W).

Sixth form pupils commented on the negative impact of focusing teaching on exam preparation:

*Particularly at GCSE, and like there are certain A levels, you find yourself spending a whole year worshipping a text book, like learning it inside out to regurgitate it for an hour and a half exam, and then you put it in the back of your mind forever. I feel it's not the best way to maximise people's potential.*

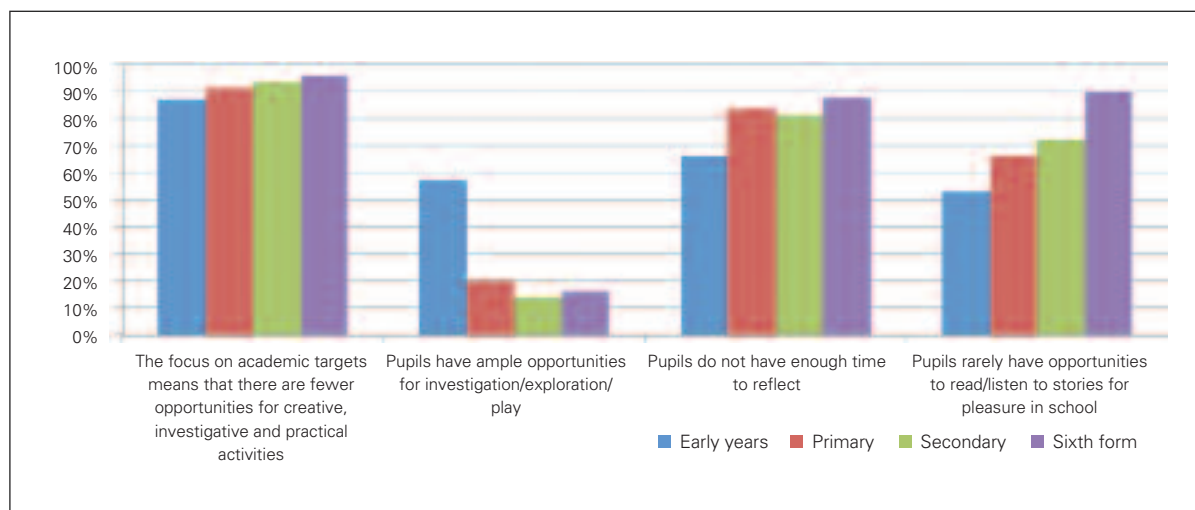
### **5.5.2 Less time for investigation, creative activity, play, reflection, stories**

There is great deal of research which shows that children do not all learn in the same ways: a range of different learning styles have been identified. While critics have argued that it is simplistic to assign individuals to specific styles, there seems no doubt that not everyone finds the same approach effective, and in particular, that some children learn effectively through doing things, rather than reading, writing or listening. It is clearly important, then, that teachers include a range of different learning opportunities to suit different children, including creative, investigative and practical activities as well as listening, reading, writing etc. Younger children in particular need such opportunities. It has been shown that young children learn most effectively through guided play (e.g. Weisberg et al 2013). But there is extensive international evidence, reviewed by Lobascher (2011), that high stakes testing and accountability measures discourage creative teaching.



## SECTION 5: Impacts of accountability measures on choice of schools, attainment, curriculum and teaching and learning

**Figure 8: Percentage of respondents in mainstream schools agreeing with statements about different learning activities, by phase (N = 6,756)**



In our survey, 93 per cent of teachers agreed that: *“The focus on academic targets means there are fewer opportunities for creative, investigative and practical activities”* while only 16 per cent agreed that: *“Pupils have ample opportunities for investigation/ exploration/ play.”* Responses indicated that even those in early years settings felt the impact of academic targets, though to a lesser extent than their primary and secondary counterparts (see Figure 8).

The survey also showed that stories play a much smaller role in schools than they used to, even in primary schools, two thirds of respondents agreed that: *“Pupils rarely have opportunities to read/listen to stories for pleasure in school.”* A large majority (83 per cent) agreed that *“Pupils do not have enough time to reflect.”*

A teacher commented on the survey that his/her own child’s behaviour had worsened since he had had fewer opportunities to learn through play:

*We have a Year 1 son and his opportunities for play and creative stuff have really fallen this year. ... Since seeing this curtailed, our lad has shown a real rise in anti-social behaviour. He loves the outside, the chance to move around.*

Many teachers said they would prefer to have more creative and investigative activities in their lessons, and gave various reasons why this was not happening. The most common was the pressure to cover the syllabus and prepare for tests or exams. For example, a secondary interviewee explained that impending exams meant she felt under pressure to cover the syllabus rather than to allow time for reflection and consolidation of learning. Similarly, a primary teacher wrote:

*I am unable to spend time on the more creative activities because the curriculum is too crammed and statistics are the driving force behind everything we do. (Primary, ‘Good’, W)*

A primary maths coordinator (I) explained that his school had introduced a maths curriculum based around investigation. Most teachers were very enthusiastic, but it had not been put into practice in two classes, Year 2 and Year 6. Both teachers had explained that this was a result of the pressure to prepare for the SATs: the maths coordinator said that *“rehearsing SATs papers”* was seen by teachers as *“a low risk strategy”* whereas spending time on investigation would be a risk. A teacher in another school commented that creative teaching had not paid off in terms of test results:

*Although as a school we have been encouraged to pursue a more creative curriculum this has led to ‘lower’ attainment in KS1. We are now being asked to keep the creativity but*

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## Exam factories? The impact of accountability measures on children and young people

*ensure national expectations are exceeded. This is impossible because national expectations cannot be met without lots of repetition and rote learning. (Primary, 'Outstanding', W)*

Another reason for a reduction in creative and investigative activities was the perceived need to produce evidence of learning in pupils' books which could be shown to Ofsted:

*During a recent science investigation involving a carousel of activities, I was so stressed trying to make sure each child did the 'written' activities at each table that they actually stopped enjoying it. I also missed so much of the talk for learning as I just wanted to get that 'evidence' to go into their books. (Primary, 'Good', W)*

An NQT felt unable to teach creatively because she was constrained by having to do the same as the other teachers in her year group:

*Any creativity or passion has been taken out of me by the need to deliver exactly the same lessons as my year group partners. (KS2, 'Good', W)*

Secondary teachers said they were limited by the need to cover the curriculum:

*The KS4 curriculum allows little time for teachers to be flexible with how we teach and be creative. I will end up teaching an idea in a way that you're just telling pupils what they need to know rather than them having the opportunity to discover answers for themselves because of the packed curriculum. (Secondary, 'Outstanding', W)*

### 5.5.3 Lack of variety in lessons

Many teachers in our survey and case studies described the tendency for all lessons to have similar structures. This was required by senior leaders in some schools. This was illustrated in many of the comments on the survey:

*Consistent use of PowerPoint presentations to be used at specific points during a lesson. Mandatory for all lessons. The PowerPoints will be uniform for each class. Only adaptations allowed would be adjusting certain frames to suit the lesson. Learning Intentions, Levelled Success Criteria and lesson specific vocabulary displayed and referred to regularly during every lesson. (Primary, 'Good', W)*

*Every lesson must have WALT<sup>28</sup>, success criteria, plus feedback to children and evidence they have read and responded to feedback. This must all be shown on books and planning. (Primary, 'Good', W)*

As Section 3.1 showed, such requirements were significantly more often made in vulnerable and challenging schools (those with low attainment or negative Ofsted judgements or with a higher number of disadvantaged pupils).

A senior leader in one of the case study 'RI' schools commented that the staff there had previously prided themselves on the imaginative and creative lessons they offered, but that in preparation for their next inspection they had moved to more uniform (and dull) lesson structures. A number of teachers commented that structuring all lessons in the same way, together with the focus on meeting targets and preparing for exams or tests, meant that children were bored.

*As a teacher you are not allowed to teach any more. You have to deliver a subject in a generic way just the same way as every other teacher.... This does not allow for any creativity or originality that pupils thrive on. As a result pupils are bored. They know the format of the lesson before you start and rather than see this routine as helpful and logical they see it as dull and boring. Imagine being a pupil and having these types of lesson every day, every week, every year. (Secondary, 'RI', W)*

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<sup>28</sup> WALT – We Are Learning To ...

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*Our greatest crime is that school is becoming essentially boring. Curiosity and wonder in the beautiful world around us is being stifled. (Special, 'RI', W)*

But even where uniformity was not explicitly required, many teachers commented that their teaching was less creative and varied than they would ideally have liked. They said that this was a result of the pressure of academic targets; the perceived need to cover the curriculum; and perceptions of what Ofsted inspectors are looking for. While it was acknowledged that Ofsted no longer set requirements about lesson structure, many teachers still use the structure they adopted some years ago when Ofsted focused on the three-part lesson, because this way of teaching has become “drilled in” (Secondary, I).

A primary teacher also talked about the pressure to cover the syllabus and said this had a negative impact on the way she was teaching:

*'That's what you've got to teach, and you've got to teach them that,' and that's too stifling. ... I don't want to be some robot stood in front of kids. And again the children don't like that. I think this is the hardest year I've felt being squeezed in creativity. .... you're feeling pressure that you've got to get that out of the way so you can make sure that they are making that progress. (Primary, I)*

This teacher used the term “robot” to describe the way she felt she was being forced to teach. Many other teachers across all phases and type of school used similar metaphors:

*It feels like we are in a factory at times, producing identikit children! It's hard to support creativity and my teaching feels highly constrained and dictated by Ofsted and accountability requirements. (KS2, 'Good', W)*

*If it isn't relevant to a test then it is not seen as a priority. This puts too much pressure on pupils; too much emphasis on academic subjects; and creates a dull, repetitive curriculum that has no creativity. It is like a factory production line chugging out identical little robots with no imagination, already labelled as failures if they haven't achieved the right level on a test. (KS1, 'Good', W)*

When pupils talked about lessons that were effective, they said they learned most in lessons that were “different” because they were memorable. They talked positively about lessons where they made models, engaged in role play, etc. A Year 12 pupil said:

*I learn by doing, and if I'm not doing something, I'll get distracted or I might lose focus. Like with sociology, we recently had a quiz with buzzers and stuff so then everyone got involved ... but we was all learning. And then with maths, we'd have like charts around the wall and you'd have to find the answers and so it was like you're actively learning.*

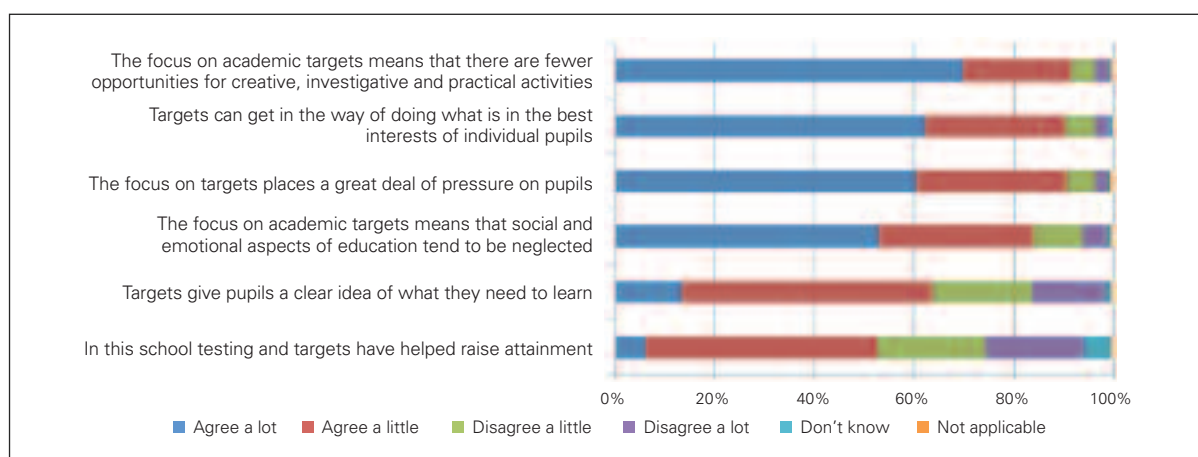
In another school, a Year 11 pupil commented:

*We get told in about Year 9 that kids learn differently, and when you get to revising they say try different revision methods, but that's not really being enforced in the way the teachers are told to teach. That's what they are saying; teach like this and this and I don't think it helps teachers. I don't think it helps the students either.*

### 5.5.4 Impact of targets on teaching and learning

Targets feature strongly in lesson planning and teaching. Figure 9 shows teachers' responses to statements about targets on the survey. While a substantial majority agreed that targets had negative impacts, far fewer agreed that targets were useful for teachers or pupils.

**Figure 9: Impact of targets: Percentage of all respondents giving each response (N = 7,506)**



The teachers and pupils we interviewed all talked about targets. However, the examples they gave showed that there were different types of target:

**Targets in terms of specific things a child needs to learn:** These were sometimes identified by written feedback on work. Primary pupils most often used targets in this sense:

*When we do a Big Write our targets are like, to write in full sentences, to write in paragraphs, full sentences with apostrophes, with commas, with full stops and once you complete one target you'll get a new one on what you need to work on, and it will keep going like that until the writing's 100 per cent perfect and then even then I think you still get targets. (Year 6 pupil)*

A primary headteacher said that in his school, "[pupils'] targets are always about next steps. They're always about what they need to do in order to get better at what they're doing." Pupils talking about targets of this sort said they were generally helpful, though the Year 6 pupil quoted above expressed some frustration that there was always yet another target to achieve.

**Targets in terms of a level to be reached:** (using National Curriculum or other levels or, GCSE grade targets). End of key stage targets are calculated on the basis of the child's results during the previous key stage and targets for intervening years set accordingly. Thus a Year 7 pupil reported that his target in maths was a 5B. A Year 6 pupil argued that having targets in term of levels was not helpful, "because you can't always improve unless they teach you what you need to do, like, how to improve."

Moreover, both teachers and pupils argued that such targets may be unrealistic, and this can have a negative impact. A pupil explained that one of her targets was surprisingly low:

*Like in psychology, they gave me a target grade from the government. Gave it to me and it was a C and I was like, 'No I want to get higher than a C.' ... Some people think, 'Oh that must be all I can get,' and sometimes that can put people down. (Year 12 pupil)*

But more often target grades were seen to be too high, because they were based on an over-inflated view of a pupil's prior attainment that had resulted from a great deal of test preparation. In one school, the Year 12 pupils interviewed explained why this was a problem:

*Sometimes I think the targets are quite unrealistic cos if you've been doing well since primary cos they always expect five levels of progress. It's like, what if you left primary with like the highest grades possible? Then you're expected to get A\*s by the time you're in Year 11 and then expecting As throughout A Levels. It's not realistic for everyone. (Year 12 pupil)*

Pupils argued that it was unreasonable to base grade predictions on what they had achieved at primary school, which felt to them to be past history: "I think secondary school is a fresh start so I don't think we should have based our target grades on what we got from primary school."

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## SECTION 5: Impacts of accountability measures on choice of schools, attainment, curriculum and teaching and learning

A number of secondary teachers explained that a particular difficulty was the use of primary school attainment in English and mathematics to set targets in completely different subjects such as modern foreign languages (MFL), art and music.

*The targets we are working towards [in MFL] are based on English KS2 grades. ... Now they have to be level 6 in KS3 and get a C at GCSE and that is decided before they walk into their very first secondary MFL lesson and before anyone has any idea what their aptitude for MFL is. Students have extra pressure on them to reach their target grade, even though their current grade is honestly the best they can do and they are doing their best. (Secondary, 'Good', W)*

*Targets for most subjects are based on SATs English score – this is irrelevant to my own subject (art) where a reading and writing ability does not translate into a practical or creative ability, making the targets a complete nonsense... And the bane of my teaching life! (Secondary, 'Good', W)*

*I teach music at secondary level. My students are set targets based on KS2 English ability. My students' ability in English is largely irrelevant. Therefore the targets they receive for my subject are often unattainable and I am unable to pass my pay progression. This situation is ridiculous! Demoralising for me and my students. (Secondary, 'Inadequate', W)*

These unrealistic targets create stress for both students and teachers. Teachers argued that while some pupils are motivated by target levels or grades, in other cases, the effect is the opposite:

*Target grades are unrealistically high in many cases, and actually demotivate pupils, making them feel they have failed even if they have progressed. (Secondary, 'Outstanding', W)*

*I see a lot of anxiety amongst youngsters especially boys, very anxious and it breaks out in frustration. They start to learn when they're eight, nine, ten and it's, 'they can do that and I can't.' 'I'm not meeting my target and those people are.' It's very sad to see. (Primary head, I)*

A group of sixth form students argued that a key problem with targets is that they are focused on academic attainment, and so other talents or qualities that young people have may be ignored:

*With targets, sometimes it flows over unique things, like there are certain things that can't really be examined but they're really good, like personal qualities that people have, but they get forgotten and it makes people lose a bit of faith in themselves and they doubt themselves and they can't really reach their potential, I don't think. (Year 12 pupil)*

A primary headteacher argued in interview that targets and tests result in shallow and superficial learning:

*If it's just 'this is your target and what you have to achieve', ... that's not going to help them in the long run, it's not that deep learning. It's superficial for the next test and I think it puts kids off.*

### 5.5.5 Written feedback

Section 3 showed that one of the most common strategies that schools have in relation to accountability is a marking policy and regular monitoring of pupils' books. This has been adopted because Ofsted inspect books and marking. Policies typically require the teacher to write developmental or 'next steps' comments in green ink, pupils to respond, and teachers to check the response. This vastly increases the workload of teachers.

In March 2015, while the fieldwork for this research was in progress, Ofsted issued further clarification on this:

*I recognise that marking and feedback to pupils, both written and oral, are important aspects of assessment. However, as inspectors we should not expect to see any specific frequency, type or volume of marking and feedback; these are for the school to decide through its assessment policy. Marking and feedback should be consistent with that policy, which may*



cater for different subjects and different age groups of pupils in different ways, in order to promote learning effectively. These activities need to be useful for pupils and sustainable for teachers. (Harford 2015)

However, the head of a secondary school which had recently been judged 'RI' commented (I):

*HMI put out a paper saying that ... all this obsession with pupils' response to marking is something that Ofsted do not require, but we're all doing it because Ofsted seemed to make it pretty clear when they came, if you weren't doing it, you were falling short of what they expected to see.*

Some teachers argued that the policy of consistently putting next steps discouraged some children:

*Pressure on marking giving feedback to improve can be detrimental – this is a great bit of work because you did this, this and this but it would have been better if you did this as well. Some children find it helpful, others find it crushing. (Primary, 'Outstanding' W)*

The pupil quoted in the previous section (see page 50) talking about Big Write targets seemed to share this view. While teachers all believed that it was important to give pupils feedback, they did not think it necessarily all had to be in writing. Many Key Stage One teachers commented that it was pointless writing feedback to children who could not yet read fluently:

*The children are expected to respond to my comments despite the fact that they are in Year 1 and most cannot read and write independently. I have to read most comments to the children and then scribe their responses. (KS1, 'RI', W)*

This activity was time-consuming, and could be a negative experience for the children, emphasising what they could not yet do (read and write fluently).

While pupils said that written feedback was helpful because you could re-read it, they also said feedback did not all need to be written:

*It's easy enough to ignore like, written feedback. If they tell you what you need to do, it will help you. You'll take them more seriously because they've taken time out of their day to make sure that message is loud and clear to you. (Year 11 pupil)*

Some pupils said they had some difficulty responding to teachers' comments (other than spelling corrections), and were not sure what they were supposed to write.

### **5.5.6 Interventions, booster groups, and additional classes**

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Section 3.4 showed that additional teaching is a common strategy. Interventions and groups of various kinds are provided for those preparing for tests, those who are underachieving, or for Pupil Premium pupils. Some pupils commented that they found after-school revision sessions very helpful in the time leading up to GCSEs:

*Especially from my class there were loads of people after school, and that's one of the subjects I really struggled in but I think I did get a lot of help in maths because the teachers ... pushed us to come back, revise after school, do this and do that. (Year 12 pupil)*

More concerns were expressed about the impact of interventions in school time, and the effects they had both in terms of narrowing the curriculum for certain pupils and in labelling them; these have been discussed earlier in the report. Some teachers reported that students could be resentful when they had to miss other enjoyable activities:

*You do get students who do get resentful of missing out on certain lessons to go and do other activities where they have been falling below target, and something has been put in place. So there is some resistance from that and some antagonistic response from some of the students because they don't want to miss certain lessons. Particularly if it's a lesson they particularly enjoy and only get once or twice a week. (Special, I)*

# Section 6

## The impacts of accountability measures on teacher-pupil relationships and pupils' emotional health and well-being

*“Some people [would] be crying for most of the exam, they were just so stressed out.”* (Year 12 pupil)

## 6 The impacts of accountability measures on teacher-pupil relationships and pupils' emotional health and well-being

### 6.1 Introduction

This section discusses teacher-pupil relationships, the emotional impact of accountability measures on pupils (anxiety, mental health, motivation etc.) and the impact on children and young people's perception of the purpose of education. Finally, the impacts on specific groups of pupils are discussed.

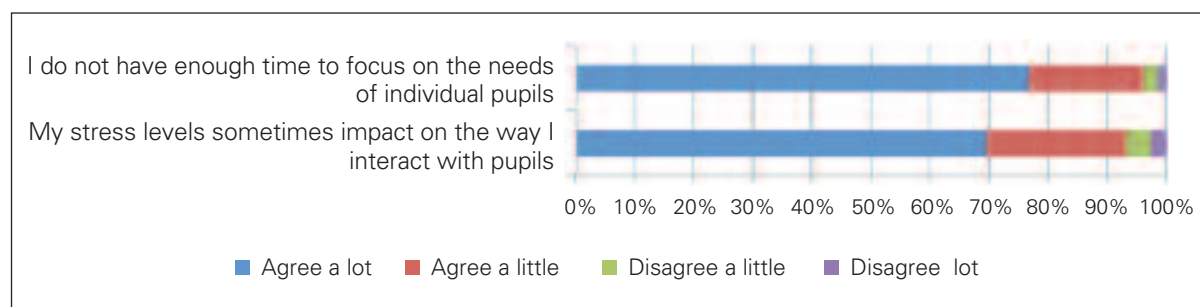
### 6.2 Impact on teacher-pupil relationships

Donaldson (2015 p.10), reviewing the curriculum and assessment in Wales, argued that one of the negative impacts of the high level of prescription and "increasingly powerful accountability mechanisms" is that the key task for many teachers has become "to implement external expectations faithfully, with a consequent diminution of ... responsiveness to the needs of children and young people." Many teachers in this research reported that the quality of their relationships with pupils had been reduced by:

- Pressure to cover the syllabus and maintain focus in lessons (and thus less time to deal with pupil distress, or to allow pupils to talk about their own experiences and the things that interest them);
- Lack of time as a consequence of their workload;
- Their stress levels; and
- The fact that they are 'pushing' pupils to achieve.

Figure 10 shows survey responses relating to this.

**Figure 10: Impact of teachers' stress on pupils: Percentage of all respondents giving each response (N = 7,466)**



Teachers were very clear that the quality of their relationships was less good than it had been. One teacher wrote on the survey, *"I have less time to get to know individual pupils and rarely have 'show and tell', which is a shame as I teach mixed Years 1 and 2"* (KS1, 'Good', W). Another argued that the pressure to identify and label different groups of pupils coloured her view of them quite literally:

*I am in danger of seeing them more in terms of what colour they are on my pupil list e.g. are they red (below expectation) or green (above expectation) or purple (Pupil Premium) – rather than as individuals. (KS2, 'Good', W)*

A third noted that pressures on her time meant that she was now less likely to be aware of *"things seriously wrong in pupils' lives"* and to refer them in relation to child protection. Workload was a key factor in this reduced quality of interaction:

*Being a stressed teacher working to a tight schedule allows no time to listen to children or show an interest in them as individuals, or understand them properly. (KS2, 'Good', W)*



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## SECTION 6: The impacts of accountability measures on teacher-pupil relationships and pupils' emotional health and well-being

While teachers tried not to let their own stress impact on their relationships with children, they acknowledged that it sometimes did:

*Teachers are stressed out trying to fit too much into a school day and rush, rush, rushing to document evidence .... We get tired and snappy, we're only human after all. The children pick up on this, if the adult is tense, they become stressed and fractious too. (KS1, 'Good', W)*

A teacher in a school judged 'RI' commented:

*Our students know that we are stressed and many comment on this. 'Why are the teachers so grumpy miss?' 'Teachers are not like they used to be, they get cross with us more.' (Secondary, W)*

While the pupils we interviewed were aware that their teachers had felt stressed during recent Ofsted inspections, they were less aware of ongoing stress among teachers (though said they were sometimes "grumpy"). Most said their teachers had time to offer them the support they needed. This suggests a high level of teacher professionalism, but may also reflect pupils' experience in schools; teachers have been stressed and overworked for many years.

### 6.3 Impact on pupils' emotional health and well-being

Perhaps the most obvious impact of the pressure on children and young people has been in emotional responses: it has been widely reported that children are showing increased levels of anxiety, disaffection and mental health problems. This section discusses these issues separately. Clearly they are not necessarily distinct categories: some of the accounts we collected described pupils who had become extremely anxious about tests, and the longer term outcome was that they became disaffected. Similarly, anxiety and mental health are related.

#### 6.3.1 Anxiety and stress

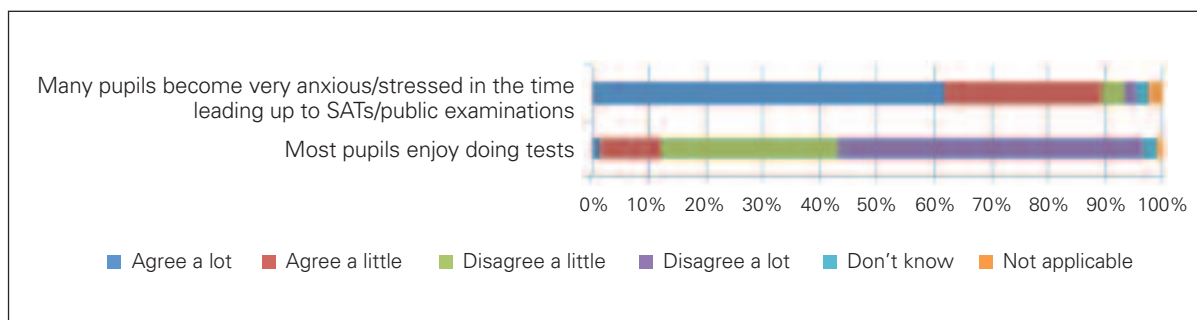
The Word Health Organisation (2012) found that 11 and 16-year-old pupils in England feel more pressured by their school work than is the case in the vast majority of other European countries. McCaleb-Kahan and Wenner (2009), drawing on research in the USA, report that, as the number and the importance of tests used in schools has increased, the number of students who experience test anxiety has also increased. They cite a range of research studies that show that "high levels of anxiety have been shown to have harmful influences upon students' achievement including lowered academic performance, poorer study skills, and greater academic avoidance behaviors" (p.3). There has been a similar increase in test anxiety in England. ChildLine (2014, 2015), the counselling service for children and young people, reported that:

- School and exam pressures were one of the biggest causes of feelings of stress and anxiety among children and young people;
- There was a 200 per cent increase in counselling sessions related to exam stress between 2012-13 and 2013-14; and
- There was a considerable increase in all age groups in counselling sessions related to school and education problems.

Similarly, in a survey of 1,000 children who had taken their SATs in the last year, 68 per cent said they had felt pressured at the time of the SATs, and 22 per cent had lost sleep (Kellogg's 2015).

Our survey showed that the most teachers agreed that: *"Many pupils become very anxious/stressed in the time leading up to SATs/public examinations."* In contrast, only a very small number considered that: *"Most pupils enjoy doing tests"* (Figure 11). These results were very similar across phases and Ofsted grades.

**Figure 11: Pupils' responses to tests: Percentage of all respondents giving each response (N = 7,390)**



Previous research suggests that girls suffer more from test anxiety; this was evident in Harlen and Deakin Crick's systematic review (2002). The Girl Guides Association (2008) conducted a survey of girls and reported that 74 per cent said that exams and tests made them worried and 19 per cent said they made them feel bad about themselves. The report added: "Even among the youngest girls academic pressure and the stresses and strains of exams remain one of the greatest causes of anxiety – with several describing fear and sleepless nights before tests."

Teachers in our research said anxiety about tests affected a wide range of pupils, including high-attaining and conscientious pupils, as well as low-attaining pupils or those with special needs. Primary teachers talked about pupils' anxiety about the Key Stage 2 SATs:

*You just see them sat there, a ten or 11-year-old kid in complete meltdown. (Primary, I)*

*I have just had a child off school for three days because he was so worried about his recent test result and didn't want to take any more tests. In the lead up to SATs, I have had pupils in tears, feeling sick, feeling stressed because they were so worried about the results from the tests. (KS2, 'Good', W)*

Some teachers pointed out that parents can add to the pressure their children feel:

*In our school, many parents put pressure on their children to 'achieve' and as a consequence, a significant number of children are being privately tutored. It seems the parents are actually more competitive for their children. The parents are more eager to know where their children are in the class in terms of ability. (KS2, 'Good', W)*

But not all parents are in this group. A teacher commented about his/her own son:

*My child is in Year 6 and he and his friends were worrying about SATs all through the summer. He has had migraines and a close friend, who is slightly autistic, has been placed on medication because the stress caused her to stop eating. Consequently I have withdrawn my son from his SATs. I feel measuring teachers and schools has just put a damaging amount of pressure and stress on children from pre-school age. We are causing long-term damage to their mental health and it will impact on society for years to come.*

The primary pupils interviewed had not yet experienced the Key Stage 2 SATs, but talked about anxiety about regular tests, and increasing nervousness in the lead-up to SATs.

*When I do a test I feel like I'm not going to do very well because I'm worried. (Year 5 pupil)*

*I'm a bit nervous and I think that people put too much expectations on us. (Year 6 pupil)*

A secondary SENCO commented that the primary to secondary transition also causes serious anxiety:

*We've seen a really significant increase in people who are experiencing significant levels of anxiety to almost a debilitating level moving from Year 6 to Year 7 – that's something I've noticed particularly in the last couple of years. (I)*

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## SECTION 6: The impacts of accountability measures on teacher-pupil relationships and pupils' emotional health and well-being

GCSEs were reported as a major cause of anxiety for many pupils:

*... the higher ability, and the ones with the very supportive or pushy parents are receiving higher levels of stress because of how much is being expected of them; I think the lower end or those with maybe less supportive parents as well are suffering from the fact that they are not being given a curriculum that suits them. (Secondary, I)*

Some of the secondary pupils interviewed were in Year 12 and had taken GCSEs the previous year. They said that the levels of stress had been visible:

*Some people did [get really stressed]. They'd be crying for most of the exam, they were just so stressed out. I knew people that was crying before they went into the exams. (Year 12 pupil)*

While the main cause of stress/anxiety about tests/exams was simply the fact of having to do them, and the real possibility of failure, this is exacerbated by the way that school practices make the importance of tests and exams very clear to their students. The extent to which schools emphasise tests and exams varies. One primary head said *"we don't build it up to be a big thing. We try and leave it relatively low key"*. However, even in that school, pupils talked about ways in which their teachers reinforced the importance of the SATs, for example, by regular mentions (a Year 5 pupil reported, *"our teacher, she's like, if you don't listen in class you're not going to do very well in the SATs, you're going to fail or you're not going to get good marks"*). Such comments, together with actions such as organising booster groups, made pupils feel under pressure.

The pupils we interviewed said that another reason why they felt under pressure was because the SATs would have an impact on their future opportunities:

*Well I get nervous because I know it's going to change my levels and it's going to affect what I'm going to do and what school I might get into in a few years' time. (Year 6 pupil)*

*You've got to try hard in all of them because you take them grades to secondary school and you've got to get good grades for secondary school. (Year 6 pupil)*

Although the impact of SATs results is on schools, not pupils, the Kellogg's survey (2015) similarly showed that children believed that doing badly in the SATs would impact on their future lives: 55 per cent said they worried that not getting a Level 4 would impact on their future.

Another factor that can increase stress is the way pupils talk among themselves about levels and test outcomes. Primary pupils said that classmates sometimes boasted about the levels that they had reached or jeered at those who were less successful.

*Sometimes people say 'oh wow look at me, I've got a 5C level' and say you have like a 4C level and they sometimes boast about them. (Year 5 pupil)*

*When ... you haven't passed; people make fun of you. (Year 6 pupil)*

A teacher reported a conversation where a child who would not be taking the SATs was put down by a classmate (*"you're not even taking the SATs"*). It is unfortunate that levels of attainment and test results have provided fresh ammunition for children to use to put one another down.

Some teachers commented that in their schools pupil attainment data is on display; a secondary teacher noted, *"Published rank orders displayed in school for all pupils and staff to see PUBLICLY how students are performing in each subject – one for attainment and one for progress"*. Such strategies must surely add to pupil anxiety and disaffection.

A number of teachers said that they tried to *"protect"* or *"shield"* their pupils from the pressure:

*No matter how much we strive to protect our pupils from these additional pressures and provide them with a childhood experience that they will love and remember, teachers are stressed and exhausted and our pupils are sadly affected by this. (KS2, 'RI', W)*

This was easier for schools with higher attainment or Ofsted grades. A primary teacher commented: *"We are lucky being an 'outstanding' school that we can shield the children from a pressurised curriculum a little."* The use of these words is significant because it implies that there is a real threat.

### ***6.3.2 Impact on motivation and interest***

Disaffection is a second way in which tests and the drive to raise standards impact on some pupils. This pattern of low achievers becoming "overwhelmed by assessments and demotivated by constant evidence of their low achievement", which then further increases the gap between low and high achieving students, was highlighted by Harlen and Deakin Crick (2002, p.5). In interviews and survey comments, disaffection and demotivation were described in all age groups and types of school. Interviewees described pupils who were aware that they were doing less well than others in the class, or who found it difficult to understand what they were being taught. The consequent loss of self-esteem and motivation resulted in disaffection, which sometimes manifested itself as disruptive behaviour.

In our survey, 96 per cent of teachers agreed that: *"When pupils know they are doing less well than others in class and in tests, their confidence and motivation suffers"* (with 70 per cent agreeing 'a lot'). There were no differences in these figures across school phases or different Ofsted categories.

Teachers noted that some children who do not achieve their targets lose motivation. This starts young, and is exacerbated by school practices:

*'I'm afraid we need some extra writing today and you know your target', and they're already maybe saying, 'well my target's miles behind his, oh what's the point?' And I think as children become older ... it's almost like, we're encouraging them to switch off. (Year 2 teacher, I)*

A secondary SENCO commented that he had observed a substantial increase in the number of children who enter secondary school:

*... with a really, really poor self-esteem and really low view of themselves, they do not believe they can do anything and it either turns inwards so they are very quiet and quite reserved, ... or they will be students who are ... being quite challenging. It will tend to go one of those ways.*

He said this was often the case with children who struggle with maths and English, or who have specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, or who learn more effectively in practical ways.

Interviewees suggested that when children behave badly because they are not doing well, this can create a vicious circle; a primary headteacher said:

*They're not motivated and their behaviour then suffers and they're out of class because the teacher can't have them in class because they're so disruptive to other children. So it becomes a downward spiral of not doing very well in the lesson, they're out the lesson, they're in trouble, they don't want to be here. They're on a short fuse and somebody says something to them and they blow up.*

This is exacerbated because the over-crowded curriculum and the focus on tests mean there is not enough time to support children's social and emotional development (see Figure 9 on page 50).

Pupils interviewed also talked about the way that getting poor marks can have a negative impact on self-confidence and motivation. A Year 6 pupil explained, *"it makes people that aren't as good and don't have enough confidence in themselves less confident, have, like, less confidence."*

It is clearly a concern that any children becomes disaffected, but is a particular concern with the youngest children. Heyman et al (1992) found that five and six-year-olds who failed in a task were more likely to make global negative self-judgements ('I am no good'), whereas older children were more likely to

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## SECTION 6: The impacts of accountability measures on teacher-pupil relationships and pupils' emotional health and well-being

compartmentalise, and say they were no good at that specific area of task (e.g. 'no good at maths', or narrowing it down further, 'no good at algebra').

The drive for every pupil to take rigorous academic subjects and the devaluing of vocational subjects has also contributed to disaffection in secondary schools; this was discussed in Section 5.4.2 and 5.4.3.

### 6.3.3 Impact on mental health

There is now substantial evidence that a variety of mental health problems have increased among young people, and the pressure to achieve in school work and tests/examinations is among the causes (e.g. *The Times*, 12 March 2015). ChildLine (2014, p.37) reported that school and educational problems were related directly to suicidal thoughts: "The pressure and stress of exams and not being able to deal with failure was another reason young people wanted to escape, seeing suicide as their only option." Similarly, Sharp (2013, p 10), drawing on research from the UK and Hong Kong argued:

There are clear indications ... that the pressure to perform in an increasingly micro-managed, accountable education system may be playing a part in developing mental health problems and in suicidal behaviour.

In our survey, 76 per cent of primary teachers and 94 per cent of secondary teachers agreed that: "*Some pupils in this school have developed stress-related conditions around the time of SATs/public exams.*" This can start very young. A teacher reported that:

*We have a number of children who start Nursery at a very low level. They are not always ready or willing to be shaped and pushed in the way that they are expected to learn. As a result the behaviour of the children at home has become an issue, as is the fact that many EYFS/Year 1 children are suffering from night terrors, sleep walking and other sleep disorders. Parents confide that the children cry at the thought of coming to school and are often exhausted due to the stress of learning. (Primary, 'Good', W)*

A secondary teacher wrote: "*Many girls self-harm, have panic attacks and emotional problems because they cannot be 'perfect'.*" ('Outstanding', W). But teachers identified a wide range of pupils who suffered from depression, self-harm, thoughts of suicide, and eating disorders. While acknowledging that there are other causes of stress among young people, teachers claimed that stress about exams or tests was often the immediate trigger. For example a primary teacher wrote in the survey:

*Last year I had a Year 6 pupil turn to physical self-harming which she attributed to the pressure she felt to achieve a level similar to that of her peers, and to hit a Level 4 in her SATs (she is severely dyslexic and an incredibly hard worker). (KS2, 'RI', W)*

While children are now diagnosed with mental health conditions at increasingly young ages, it is in secondary schools that they are most common. An experienced secondary teacher wrote:

*I have never known stress-related conditions ... to be so prevalent in secondary education ... Self-harming is rife in KS4. Last year ... one was hospitalised for three months in a psychiatric ward following a suicide attempt, another very nearly starved herself to death, and again was institutionalised for five months in a specialist eating disorder unit. Another student with Crohn's disease became exceptionally unwell at exam time ... Numerous other students suffered from the symptoms that are on the questionnaires that the NHS uses to diagnose depression. ('Good', W)*

One mental health condition that has been shown to correlate with high stakes testing is Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The number of young people diagnosed with ADHD has increased considerably in the last decade. In the USA, 11 per cent of children aged 4-17 have been diagnosed with the disorder (Sharpe 2014). In the UK, numbers are lower, but are rapidly increasing; there was a 50 per cent increase in the use of drugs for ADHD between 2007 and 2013. Hinshaw and Scheffler (2014) linked this increase to education policies; they noted that in the USA the incidence of ADHD varies

considerably between states, and they discovered that when a state introduced high stakes testing, the incidence of ADHD increased soon afterwards. Overall, the rate of ADHD diagnosis increased by 22 per cent in the first four years after No Child Left Behind was implemented. A number of factors seem to be involved in this:

- There is evidence that taking ADHD drugs has a short-term positive effect on pupils' attainment (Scheffler et al 2013; Sharpe 2014); thus both parents and schools may welcome diagnosis and medication.
- In some school districts, an ADHD diagnosis also results in that child's test score being removed from the school's official average (Koerth-Baker 2013).
- The narrowed curriculum and less varied teaching that accompany high stakes testing (see Sections 5.4 and 5.5) make schools less able to meet individual pupil needs for movement, stimulation etc. Arguably pupils who might have coped in a less pressured system are now finding it harder to cope.

Thus it appears that some children are being diagnosed and medicated because school environments have been made intolerable for them.

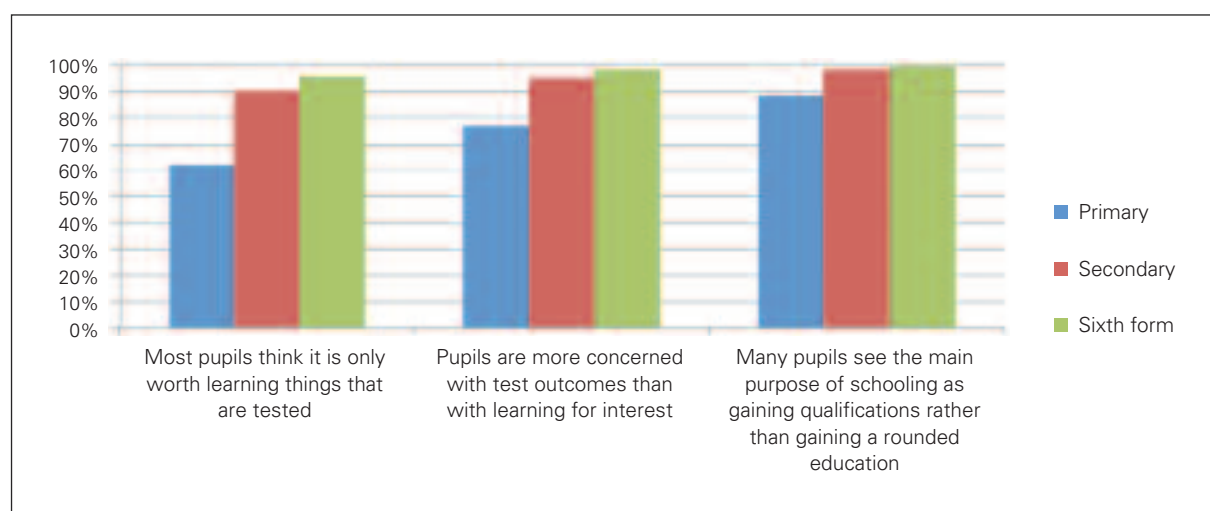
### 6.3.4 Emotional impact: Discussion

These pupil responses to testing and academic pressure are of even greater concern because teachers argued that there is now less time to focus on pupils' social and emotional development; 84 per cent agreed that: *"The focus on academic targets means that social and emotional aspects of education tend to be neglected."* It is thus somewhat ironic that the recent Times manifesto on young people's mental health (12 March 2015) recommends that Ofsted should inspect emotional support and mental health provision in schools. A more appropriate solution might be to identify the ways in which accountability measures are contributing to young people's mental health problems, and act to reduce them. This would inevitably involve a reduction in high stakes testing and the way in which Ofsted reinforces the importance of this.

## 6.4 Impact on perceptions of purpose of education

One of the impacts of high stakes testing is that many pupils now see education entirely in terms of tests and qualifications. This develops as pupils go through their school careers. Figure 12 shows teachers' responses to statements about this.

**Figure 12: Percentage of respondents in mainstream schools agreeing with statements about pupils' understanding of the purpose of school (N = 6,267)**





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## SECTION 6: The impacts of accountability measures on teacher-pupil relationships and pupils' emotional health and well-being

One reason for this emphasis on test/exam outcomes is that all the pupils we interviewed claimed that their results would affect their future options. This is undoubtedly true for those in the sixth form, where university places depend on the grades achieved. GCSE results also have a bearing on whether the pupil is accepted into a sixth form, for example. But the results of primary school tests have no impact whatsoever on children's futures, and are used to assess the school, not the individual child. However, several teachers commented that "*children in Year 6 talk about SATs as though it will affect their entire future success,*" and acknowledged that the emphasis that they themselves give to the importance of the tests is giving children that impression. All the pupils interviewed (including those in primary schools) asserted that SATs or GCSE results would influence and potentially limit their future options (see quotes in Section 6.3.1 on page 57). Secondary students interviewed (especially sixth formers) talked about the waste of time of having to continue with subjects other than those they were taking in exams.

Many teachers deplored the emphasis on tests and exams, arguing that, "*it does reduce education all the time down to that which can be easily measured.*" A primary headteacher argued in interview that it has resulted in losing sight of other key aims of education: developing the whole child, fostering a love of learning, and developing dispositions and attitudes that will be useful in life:

*It's not anywhere near the whole picture of what youngsters can do ... I think we've lost a little bit on getting children to be self-reliant, resilient, motivated and to want to do things not just because it will give them a good result in a test. That there is a natural love of learning and quest for knowledge for its own sake, not just because it will get you through a test which might get you to college which might get you a good job.*

It has been widely argued that the focus on test/exam results as the main outcome of schooling means that that other potential aims of education are not being achieved: for example, developing creativity, divergent thinking, collaboration, ability to learn (e.g. Robinson 2008). A secondary teacher (W) argued:

*Currently we are turning our schools into sausage factories churning out identikit, neatly packaged, quality controlled, food stuff to fuel the employment sector. Don't we want something more, something individual, something creative, something personal for our children and something better for society? (Secondary, 'Outstanding', W)*

Universities have expressed concern that school education is too narrow and focused on exams, and does not prepare students for higher education:

The problem we have with A-levels is that students come very assessment-oriented: they mark-hunt; they are reluctant to take risks; they tend not to take a critical stance; and they tend not to take responsibility for their own learning. But the crucial point is the independent thinking. It is common in our institution that students go to the lecture tutor and say, "What is the right answer?" That is creating quite a gap between how they come to us with A-levels and what is needed at university. (Professor Steve Smith, Vice-Chancellor, University of Exeter, quoted in Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2008, para 129)

Employers, too, are unhappy that the present educational regime is not preparing children for adult life. The CBI, in a response to Ofqual, argued that "the current exam system risks turning schools into exam factories that are churning out people who are not sufficiently prepared for life outside the school gates." They warned that businesses were "concerned that the examination system in place in recent years has placed young people on a continuous treadmill of assessment," and that while young people were academically stretched, they failed to show the "series of attitudes and behaviours that are vital for success – including determination, optimism and emotional success" (quoted in The Independent, 17 January 2014).

In the light of these views, it is deeply problematic that children and young people believe that the test/exam results are the main thing that matters, and that as a result of the intense pressure from Ofsted, teachers are encouraging this view (see, for example, the special school headteacher quoted at the end of Section 5.4.2 on page 43).

## **6.5 Impact on different pupil groups**

This report has shown that accountability measures are most damaging for disadvantaged pupils, pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, and pupils with low attainment. Teachers were extremely concerned that these pupils are expected to follow the same curriculum and achieve in line with national levels regardless of their particular needs and circumstances. Those in mainstream schools often experience a narrower curriculum than their peers because they are removed from classes to attend booster sessions in literacy and numeracy. Some are explicitly labelled. Pupils in these groups may struggle more with tests and exams than other pupils. Poor test results often lead to disaffection and bad behaviour. Ongoing changes to the curriculum and to accountability measures mean that many of the options that might have suited their needs and interested them are no longer available.

While headteachers interviewed argued that they prided themselves on the work their schools did with disadvantaged and SEND pupils, they were also acutely aware of the impact that their intakes could have on test results, and thus on Ofsted judgements. As a result, increasing inclusion was seen as a risky option:

*Pupils with SEND and those needing a lot of social emotional /pastoral support can be seen as a resource burden and a drag on the school attainment figures. (Primary SENCO, 'Good', W)*

This was an issue raised in the case studies. For example, a single form entry primary school had experienced a fall of ten points in the percentage of pupils achieving the expected level, and attributed this to three statemented pupils who failed to score. One of these could have achieved Level 4 but the pressure of the test made her distraught on the day. The head had unsuccessfully asked for these pupils to be disappplied. The “drop” in attainment had attracted attention from the local authority, and would presumably be viewed negatively by Ofsted.

It is clearly a major concern if the way that Ofsted views the attainment of SEND pupils is encouraging schools to become less inclusive. Galton and MacBeath's (2015) report on inclusion draws attention to the reluctance of some schools to take on pupils who are likely to lower test scores, because of the assumed Ofsted reaction. They describe some schools setting limits to the numbers of such pupils they admit.

Many interviewees and survey respondents expressed concern about the government model which assumes that all pupils can progress at the same rate, regardless of their starting point, and urges schools to support their disadvantaged pupils to make greater progress than their peers:

*The notion they can accelerate their learning faster than other children which always seems a bit crazy to me. If they find learning these things difficult it's hard to see how they can suddenly be learning them faster than children who've had a lot of advantages or don't have some of these other issues in their lives. (Primary head, I)*

Teachers expressed concern about the demand that children should, “conform to some ideal of what children should do at a certain age even when they're not all the same age at that point.” This was a particular issue among early years teachers who expressed concerns about pupils born in the summer:

*Some summer born children are simply not developmentally ready to write a whole sentence independently that can be read by an adult with no support. That is unrealistic. (Foundation, 'Good', W)*

A primary headteacher described these expectations of disadvantaged and summer-born children as “a kind of inhuman way of developing our children”, who perceive themselves as failures.

### **6.5.1 SEND pupils in special schools**

This report has identified a number of concerns from teachers in special schools. They were concerned that they are required to focus on teaching maths and English to all their pupils, rather than being able to educate their pupils in the skills that they need (e.g. life skills, independent living):



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## SECTION 6: The impacts of accountability measures on teacher-pupil relationships and pupils' emotional health and well-being

*Our pupils are SEBD [social, emotional and behavioural difficulties] and in our opinion have more important issues and aims to their learning than just academic national curriculum subjects. But ... we are expected to make the levels and progress as mainstream would. The pupils we teach are not getting enough of what they need emotionally, socially, pastorally, because we are too worried about being accountable when Ofsted arrive. It's sad. (Special, 'Good', W)*

Many teachers also expressed concern that Ofsted refer to RAISEonline data and national figures rather than focusing on their pupils' needs (see Section 2.1). However, it was noted by some that teams of inspectors vary in this respect, and some pay much less attention to data.

### **6.5.2 Impact on schools with high numbers of disadvantaged pupils**

Strand (2014), analysing data about attainment gaps in relation to Ofsted judgements, concluded that current accountability mechanisms, such as performance league tables and Ofsted inspections, fail to adequately take into account factors associated with pupil background or the socio-economic makeup of the school, and are therefore biased against schools serving more disadvantaged intakes.

Our analysis showed that Ofsted grades are strongly related to the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in a school. More than half the schools in the lowest quintile for percentage of disadvantaged pupils have been judged to be 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, whereas this is the case for less than 15 per cent of those in the highest quintile of disadvantage. At the other end of the scale, less than one per cent of those schools in the lowest quintile are rated 'Inadequate' in comparison with 13 per cent of the schools in the highest quintile of disadvantage.

One interpretation of this is that schools serving affluent communities do a better job than those serving disadvantaged communities (and this is the view Ofsted take in the 2013 report *Unseen Children*). However, an alternative interpretation is that Ofsted judgements do not adequately reflect the challenge faced by schools in disadvantaged communities. This is Strand's view, and was the view expressed by the teachers we interviewed in a case study school in an area of high social and economic deprivation, with "a history of negative Ofsted categories".

One implication of this pattern of Ofsted judgement is that disadvantaged pupils are more likely than their peers to be taught in schools judged 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate', in which staff are likely to be more stressed and the pressures to be greater. It was argued that such schools also have more difficulty attracting good teachers, which inevitably has a negative impact on pupils.

Staff in schools with high numbers of disadvantaged pupils argued that Ofsted totally ignores the amount of work that has to be done around social and emotional well-being before they are able to engage in learning. The head of a case study primary school in an area of deprivation explained:

*We take quite a lot of children who have been thrown out of other schools, or who were just failing in the school they were in, and we manage those children and do the work around their social and emotional health and they then settle. When Ofsted come here, verbally to us they're very positive about that. They always say 'it's brilliant that you can do that; it's brilliant that you take them; that you give them a second chance and that they are able to then really engage with education.' But the bottom line for them is 'Your results aren't enough at the end.' That's all they care about.*

She argued that it is vital "to sort children out emotionally" because "they're not going to make good progress unless they feel OK in themselves and they feel safe." These comments are very similar to those quoted at the end of Section 5.3.4 on page 40 about Ofsted's response to the work a school had done with pupils with special needs. In both cases, the inspectors' main focus was on attainment and they showed little interest in the work that the school had done to support pupils' well-being.



# **Section 7**

## **In conclusion**

## 7 In conclusion

This report has drawn on evidence from previous research and new data to show that while accountability measures may increase attainment as measured in tests, they do not increase underlying levels of understanding and skill. Moreover, accountability measures have had a number of negative impacts on children and young people:

- While test scores have increased this does not necessarily reflect children's underlying level of knowledge understanding and skills;
- Teaching is heavily focused on the material that will be tested, and on how to pass tests/exams, and as a result, some areas of the curriculum such as the arts, humanities and sciences are taught less or not at all;
- There is a tendency for lessons to be uniform and not involve creative and investigative activities;
- Some children are 'pushed' to learn things for which they are not ready; this affects behaviour and self-esteem;
- Some children are told at a very early age that they have 'failed', and this often results in low self-esteem and disaffection;
- There is a deterioration in the quality of teacher-pupil relationships;
- There is an increase in stress, anxiety and mental health problems linked to school work or exams; and
- The children and young people who suffer most from the impact of accountability measures are those who are disadvantaged or have special educational needs.

The extent to which these effects occur varies across schools. Inevitably staff in schools with low attainment and/or poor Ofsted outcomes feel under intense pressure to raise test/exam scores. However, the data collected for this research also shows high levels of pressure in other schools (for example, in some 'Outstanding' schools, teachers were under considerable pressure to maintain that grade). Even in schools where teachers claimed that the impact of accountability measures on pupils was limited, they referred to 'shielding' or 'protecting' pupils, indicating that they perceived real threats.

There is a substantial body of research, particularly in the USA, drawing attention to the negative impacts of accountability measures and in particular of high stakes testing. Despite this mass of evidence, rather than reducing the accountability pressures on schools, politicians continue to increase them. In particular, the effects of testing have been exacerbated by Ofsted's increased focus on data and attainment gaps. Thus, for our case study teachers and headteachers, Ofsted posed the most worrying threat.

What this report describes is a very clear difference of beliefs about what is in the best interest of children, and how it can best be achieved. Recent governments have emphasised the importance of literacy and numeracy at the expense of all other learning, seeing this as the key to greater economic success, and arguing that it will also increase the economic success of individuals. They have claimed that the best way to achieve this is through testing children and monitoring schools. Threats and sanctions are used to try and bring all schools into line.

Teachers also agree that literacy and numeracy are important, though they do not necessarily share government views of what is important within literacy and numeracy and how these skills can best be developed. But teachers also support a wider view of education which emphasises a much broader range of skills and attitudes that are important for adult life (including social and emotional skills, curiosity, enthusiasm for learning, and creativity). They are deeply concerned about the negative effects of telling children (particularly young children) that they have 'failed'. They are particularly concerned about the notions that all children should follow the same educational pathway, and that

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**Conclusion:** The impact of accountability measures on children and young people

schools should ensure that they all progress at similar rates. Teachers argue that children have differing experiences, aptitudes and needs, and that schools should take this into account in planning for their learning so that each child can flourish. The current accountability measures are preventing this, and are damaging children.

The title of this report is *Exam factories?* The question mark signals a lack of certainty about how appropriate this description of schools is. As the report has shown, some teachers described their own schools as exam factories, and argued that this resulted from the pressure exerted by accountability measures. Other teachers argued that they were resisting the pressure to become exam factories; they said they were shielding or protecting their pupils from the pressures of accountability measures and trying to meet their diverse needs as creatively as possible. Schools are not yet all exam factories, but if the current policies continue, this is what they will become.

The findings presented here have important implications for policy; a list of recommendations can be found at the beginning of this report. It is critical that politicians take note of the findings presented here, and undertake an urgent review of the ways in which schools are held accountable.

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**Appendix: Structure of years, levels and tests/exams: England**

Type of school	Alternative school structures	Age of pupils	Year	Stage	Level	Tests/exams	How used
PRIMARY	Nursery, Early years centre	3-5	FS1-2	Foundation Stage		Early Years Foundation Stage profile	published at Local Authority level
	Infant school	5-7	1-2	Key Stage 1	1-2	Year 1 Baseline assessment (new)	as a baseline for progress
						Year 1 – Phonics Screening Check (teacher assessment)	published at Local Authority level
	Junior school	7-11	3-6	Key Stage 2	3-4	Year 2 – Key Stage 1 SATS (teacher assessment)	published at Local Authority level
SECONDARY	Secondary	11-14	7-9	Key stage 3	5-6	Year 6 – Key Stage 2 SATS (externally marked)	published in school performance tables, used to assess primary schools
		14-16	10-11	Key Stage 4		(KS3 SATs discontinued)	
	Sixth form centre	16-19	12-13	Key Stage 5		Year 11- GCSEs and equivalent exams	published in school performance tables, used to assess secondary schools
						AS levels (Year 12) A levels (Year 13)	published in school performance tables, used to assess secondary schools

Current expected levels:

Key Stage 2, Year 6: Level 4 in English and mathematics

Key Stage 4, Year 11: five or more passes with grades between A\* and C of GCSE examinations or equivalents, including both English and mathematics (5+ A\*C EM)



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