



The Joint ATM / MA Primary Group

The Joint ATM/MA Primary Group,
259 London Road,
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The Rt Honorable Nicky Morgan MP,
House of Commons,
London.
SW1A 0AA

3rd November 2014

Dear Ms Morgan

We are writing on behalf of the joint primary group of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics and The Mathematical Association whose members have a particular interest and expertise in primary mathematics education.

We are aware of the changes being suggested to early years assessment, with bids to deliver a new Reception baseline test due in December. From the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group, we understand that you are concerned about early years mathematics and would like to bring the following to your attention. Whilst we agree that “... *good teachers assess children regularly to inform teaching, provide feedback to pupils and to communicate children’s progress to parents*” (DfE 2014), we consider that your current proposals will confuse such valuable *assessment* with the *testing* of children for accountability purposes. This is both misleading and unhelpful for teachers.

We therefore have **three urgent recommendations** for implementation before any further policy decisions are made.

You have declared your intention to improve government relationships with the teaching profession. We wonder if you are aware that the DfE (2014) disregarded responses to the consultation on this issue, 54% of which were from primary teachers and head teachers. 57% of respondents who answered the question said ‘no’ when asked whether the principles outlined would underpin an effective curriculum and assessment system. To the question ‘*Should we introduce a baseline check at the start of reception?*’, 51% of those who answered said ‘no’. To the question ‘*Should we allow schools to choose from a range of commercially available assessments?*’, 73% of those who answered said ‘no’. To the question ‘*Does a scaled score, decile ranking and value-added measure provide useful information from national curriculum tests?*’, 70% of those who answered said ‘no’. However, this appears to be exactly what is proposed.

Recommendation 1

Acknowledge, accept and take account of responses to the consultation on the baseline assessment.

The new baseline is costly, inappropriate and flawed in terms of both reliability and accountability. We refer to both experience and educational research supporting our concerns and make two recommendations in connection to this.

It is difficult to reliably assess 4 and 5 year-olds, as outcomes vary from day-to-day. This is why teachers continually assess young children’s understandings informally in a variety

of contexts. Diagnostic interviews are more reliable assessments of young children than pencil and paper tests (Young-Loveridge 2011). A score obtained from a test taken on one occasion will not reveal anything useful and formalises a process that does not require formalisation. More importantly, formal testing puts pressure on children and schools. It labels children, creating self-fulfilling prophecies for children, teachers and parents (Boaler 2013). Formally testing our non-statutory school-age children, when most European children of similar age are not, for sound evidential reasons, in formal schooling, is harmful. It gives a distorted message about what is of most value in education, leads to impoverished learning and risks depressing later achievement (Royal Society 2014).

In terms of accountability, whilst schools must justify themselves to external organisations, a score allocated as a result of baseline tests will be meaningless. Firstly, they will not compare like with like. Reception children will be of significantly different ages when assessed: proportionally, comparing the scores of a 4 year-old with a 5 year-old is akin to comparing those of a 12 year-old with a 15 year-old, which is obviously nonsense. In addition, some schools will not use the baseline at all whilst those that do will be using different baselines (DfE 2014). Finally, it would appear to be in schools' interests to obtain low baseline scores in order to both benefit from 'low prior attainment funding' (DfE 2014) and to demonstrate 'progress' into Key Stages 1 and 2.

Recommendation 2

Consider a simple, evidence-based and appropriate assessment that informs practice and contributes to children's mathematical learning.

Teachers need help to assess our youngest children in the ways supported by research findings, rather than being encouraged to engage in time-consuming activities of questionable merit. For instance, one reliable assessment of a reception child's number knowledge and understanding is their ability to count out a small number of items from a larger amount. This simple and appropriate task can be replicated easily, with a variety of materials and in different contexts, and also predicts a child's ability to access later mathematics (Gifford 2014).

Recommendation 3

Replace costly new baseline proposals with the funding of further mathematical professional development for early years practitioners to address teacher confidence in subject knowledge and pedagogy, including effective assessment.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you urgently to discuss your thoughts on our three recommendations.

Yours sincerely,



F.J. Watson, Chair

p.p. The Joint Primary Group of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics and Mathematical Association

c.c. Joint Mathematical Council, Advisory Committee for Mathematics Education, Tristram Hunt (Shadow Education Secretary), Sam Gyimah (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Childcare and Education), Warwick Mansell (Freelance Education Journalist), Richard Adams (Education Editor the Guardian), Ann Mroz (Editor T.E.S.), Sue Cowley (writer, teacher, trainer), Liz Roberts (Editor Nursery World), Beatrice Merrick (Chief Executive Early Education)

References

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Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi/10.1080/03004430.2011.536645>