
Evaluation of the Single Level Test (SLT) pilot Final report

PWC

Introduction

The former Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) LLP to undertake an evaluation of the Single Level Tests (SLTs) Pilot.

SLTs are externally marked tests for Key Stage (KS) 2 pupils taken in mathematics, English reading and English writing. Each test paper covers one National Curriculum level from Level 3 to Level 6. Pupils are entered for a SLT when they have been assessed as working at that Level and, having achieved that Level in the test, progress to the next Level and are tested again when they are deemed to be ready. In 2010, mathematics SLT results will be used in place of National Curriculum Tests in the Achievement and Attainment Tables (AATs).

The SLT Pilot trialled the tests in 225 primary schools across 10 Local Authorities (LAs). The evaluation gathered evidence on how staff, parents/carers and pupils participating in the Pilot viewed the tests and the extent to which arrangements in place were viewed as being manageable in terms of workload and sustainable over time.

Key findings

- There was broad support amongst Pilot schools for SLTs and the principles which underpin the tests, in particular testing pupils when they are ready and using the test to validate Teacher Assessment (TA).
- The choice to enter pupils for one or more SLTs was made with reference to TA and professional judgement. The vast majority of schools were confident that their TA processes accurately predicted pupil performance. A large proportion of schools had put moderation processes in place to ensure TA consistency.
- Pilot schools invested more time in preparing pupils for mathematics SLTs as opposed to English reading and English writing SLTs. This could possibly be linked to the new accountability arrangements for mathematics.

- Most schools responding to an evaluation survey said that SLTs were given the same or greater importance in their school when compared to National Curriculum Tests (NCTs).
- Most schools responding to an evaluation survey felt that SLTs contributed to a broader and more balanced curriculum across KS 2, and particularly in Year 6, by freeing-up more class time to enable: more of the curriculum to be covered; more validation of TAs to be undertaken; and more effective differentiation/personalisation of the curriculum to suit pupil needs.
- Respondents also agreed that SLTs had contributed to improved tracking and monitoring of individual pupils' progress. This was said to have had a positive impact on most KS 2 pupils, but particularly for more able and motivated pupils.
- Pilot schools felt that the overall benefits of SLTs outweighed the additional workload associated with the administration of the tests.

Background

SLTs are externally marked tests for KS 2 pupils in mathematics, English reading and English writing. A number of key principles underlie SLTs, including: testing pupils when they are ready; more closely aligning testing to teaching and learning activities; and, placing an emphasis on TA in appropriately selecting pupils for test entry including making best use of Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) materials. In addition, and unlike end-of-key-stage National Curriculum Tests, each SLT is designed to cover one National Curriculum level only and pupils may only take a particular test level when they have successfully completed the previous level and when their teacher believes the child is working at the level for which they are being entered.

There have been a total of six SLT test sessions, which took place between 2007 and 2010 on a six monthly basis (December 2007, June 2008, December 2008, June 2009, December 2009 and June 2010). The tests were undertaken as part of the Making Good Progress Pilot up to June 2009 by schools in 10 LAs. The December 2009 and June 2010 test rounds were undertaken as part of the SLT Pilot, which involved a total of 225 primary schools. In 2010, mathematics SLT results will be used place of National Curriculum Tests in the Achievement and Attainment Tables (AATs).

Research Methods

The evaluation was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 covered the period October 2009 to January 2010 and phase 2 was undertaken between April and July 2010. The research was undertaken in all 10 pilot LAs.

Phase 1 of the evaluation included the following research activities:

- A postal survey of school staff in all 230 pilot schools;
- Six focus groups with teachers;
- Four focus groups with pupils; and
- Four focus groups with parents/carers.

Phase 2 of the evaluation included the following research activities:

- A postal survey of school staff in all 225 pilot schools;
- Ten focus groups with teachers;
- Six focus groups with pupils; and
- Six focus groups with parents/carers.

The achieved response rate for the Phase 1 teacher survey was 26%, whilst the response rate for Phase 2 was 22%.

Findings

Test awareness

The evaluation concluded that awareness of SLTs varies across different stakeholder groups and is largely dependent on levels of involvement with the test. For teaching staff and support staff, the inclusion of mathematics test results in the AATs had contributed to an increase in awareness across the school. Findings from the teacher focus groups suggested that awareness amongst governors had increased slightly over the course of the evaluation, which was attributed, in part, to the change in the accountability context.

Parents'/carers' awareness of SLTs was very much dependent on their level of engagement with their child's learning. Findings from pupil focus groups suggested that pupils who sat a test (and particularly those in Years 5 and 6) were most knowledgeable about the test.

Test entry

Almost all schools (97%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident in the quality of their TA and its ability to be able to predict pupil performance. Whilst TA continues to be the most important evidence source used in deciding test entry, an additional element of teacher professional judgement is also applied, taking into consideration both home environmental factors and the emotional maturity of the pupil. A large proportion of school survey respondents indicated that their school had put moderation processes in place to ensure TA consistency across the school.

The inclusion of mathematics in the AATs appeared to have impacted on test entry decisions as schools had adopted a more ambitious entry approach, particularly for pupils with a banked SLT level (a reportable level achieved in a previous test session). This was particularly the case for Year 6 pupils, where schools reported that they took 'greater risks' by entering borderline, i.e. sub-level c pupils for the higher level.

While schools agreed that the administration associated with entry for SLTs was greater than for National Curriculum Tests (NCTs), this was not necessarily regarded in negative terms as survey respondents felt that it was both manageable in terms of workload and sustainable over time.

Test preparation and revision

A greater proportion of respondents reported that they prepared pupils for the test as opposed to helping them to revise for the test. For example, over one-half of respondents reported undertaking preparation activities for both English reading and English writing in comparison to over two-thirds of respondents who reported undertaking preparation activities for mathematics. However, the majority of those respondents indicated that they invested only 'a little time' in such activities. In comparison, a lower proportion of respondents (28% English reading and English writing and 46% in mathematics), stated that they invested time in helping pupils to revise for the June 2010 SLTs.

As with NCTs, class-based teachers were largely responsible for making decisions about test preparation and revision for SLTs, but the senior leadership team and assessment coordinator are often involved in this decision-making process as well. Overall, the amount of Year 6 time invested in revising for SLTs in June 2010 was less than the time invested in revising for NCTs in 2009.

The inclusion of the Year 6 mathematics results in the AATs does appear to have resulted in an increase in the proportion of schools investing time in preparation and revision activity.

Impact on schools

The majority of respondents said that SLTs were given the same or greater importance in their school, compared to NCTs. With slightly more importance placed on the mathematics SLTs, this is likely to be as a result of the new accountability arrangements for mathematics.

The majority of respondents felt that SLTs had contributed to a broader and more balanced curriculum across KS 2, and particularly in Year 6, by freeing up more class time to enable: more of the curriculum to be covered; more validation of TAs to be undertaken; and more effective differentiation/personalisation of the curriculum to suit the needs of individual pupils or groups of pupils.

The use of SLTs and APP materials together had positively impacted on how the vast majority of respondents teach their pupils, because it contributed to better identification of pupil's needs, improved target setting and enabled greater personalisation of the curriculum. All of these impacts are expected to be sustainable over time.

Respondents also agreed that SLTs had contributed to improved tracking and monitoring of individual pupils' progress. This was said to have had a positive impact on most KS 2 pupils, but particularly for the more able and motivated pupils. However, there was a perception amongst some survey respondents (c. 10%) that there was the potential to negatively impact pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or those who may be less confident in a test situation. This was a closed question and no explanations were provided as to why this might be the case. A possible explanation though may be that SEN pupils may not be entered alongside their peers or may be entered at a lower level.

Impact on pupils, parents and carers

Pupils appeared to be more aware of SLTs as the Pilot progressed. In particular, older year groups appeared to have a better understanding of SLTs and how they differ from NCTs. The findings suggest that SLTs have had a limited impact on pupils' attitudes towards tests, but findings from all focus groups suggest that pupils tend to be less stressed sitting the SLTs when compared with NCTs. Teacher focus group participants also reported an increase in pupils' interest in what they needed to do to reach the next level.

Teacher focus group participants reported limited cases of increased parental awareness. However, by the end of the Pilot schools have begun to share more information with parents/carers on pupil progress, in particular their APP level.

Additional Information

Copies of all of the reports can be downloaded free of charge at
<http://www.education.gov.uk/research/>

Further information about this research can be obtained from Michele Weatherburn,
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This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.