High-stakes? 10-11-year-old children's stories of primary school assessment

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Abstract

'HELP. I'm a failure. I can't do this.' (words within a picture by Anay, aged 10)

'*Tests are a great way of helping children know what they need help on. They help teachers to be able to help students…*' (words within a picture by Jayesh, aged 10)

My interest lies in children's perceived experiences of educational assessment in primary schools in England. I track back in time to track the journey of where we are today – arguably a high-stakes system of assessment that has led to the datafication of teaching (Stevenson, 2017) and of children. Children are seemingly being trained to pass tests – primarily in English and Maths – at the expense of other curriculum subjects, learning outcomes and their mental health and well-being. My research explores the stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) of primary-aged children in relation to assessment using an experiential narrative inquiry approach (Andrews, Squire and Tambouku, 2008) and multiple methods: questionnaire; pictures and/or free-writing; and semi-structured group interviews. Through this research, I reveal a unique insight and interpretation of primary-aged children's stories through their own spoken and written words and pictures.

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Abbreviations

ADP	Academy Development Plan
APU	Assessment of Performance Unit
ARE	Meeting age-related expectation
ARG	Assessment Reform Group
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BESA	BESA
BREO	Brunel University's Research Ethics Online
CAG	Centre assessment grades
CLS	Centre for Longitudinal Studies
DES	Department of Education and Science
DfE	Department for Education
EXC	Exceeding the expected standard
EXS	Working at the expected standard
Fig.	Figure
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GD	Working at greater depth
GDS	Greater depth standard
HHS	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspectorate
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
INSET	In-Service Training Day
KS	Key stage
LEA	Local Education Authority
MTC	Multiplication tables check

n.p.	No page number available
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRU	Pupil referral unit
PSHE	Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
RBA	Reception Baseline Assessment
RE	Religious Education
REC	Research Ethics Committee
RSE	Relationships and Sex Education
SAT	Standard Attainment Test
SCAA	School Curriculum and Assessment Authority
SEAC	School Examinations and Assessment Council
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SPaG	Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar
STA	Standards and Testing Agency
STA	Standards and Testing Agency
TA	Teacher assessment
TAG	Teacher-assessed grade
TGAT	Policy Task Group on Assessment
U.S.	United States
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

VITAE	Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives and Effectiveness
WHO	World Health Organisation
WTS	Working towards the expected standard
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

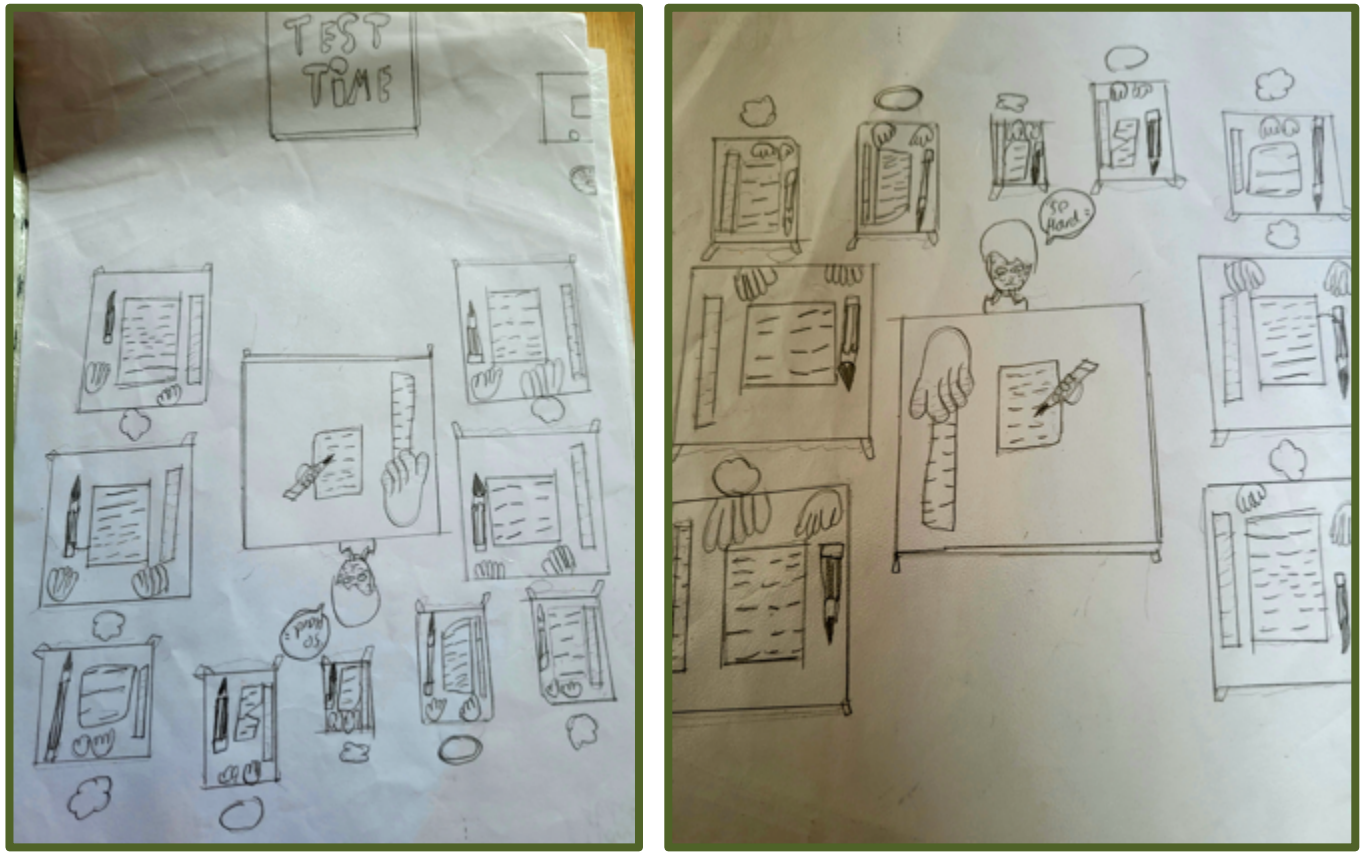


Fig. 1 Abdul's picture, pre-SATs; shown rotated to enable both sets of text to be read and the images to be seen from both sides

1.1 Introduction

School assessment has long been a subject of debate (Collins, Reiss and Stobart, 2010; Jerrim, 2021; Mccarthy, 2024) and the opening pictures to this chapter (Abdul, Fig. 1), depict one aspect of this debate: one participant's story (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) of primary school assessment, specifically what he perceives to be 'test time' (Abdul, Fig. 1). Throughout this thesis, pictures such as this are combined with the words of the participants, forming the basis of this research and sharing the stories of children experiencing primary school assessment; 'we interpret and make sense of our experiences by telling stories' (Meegan, 2023a: 1275). This chapter introduces this thesis and explains the background to my research, beginning with discussion on the meaning of 'high-stakes' assessment (Baird, Andrich, Hopfenbecka and Stobart, 2017; Jerrim, Allen and Sims, 2024; Moss, 2022) in the context of this research. It examines the perceived significance of school assessment and how it is currently enacted within the English school system and curriculum before sharing my own perceived experiences of primary school assessment as my motivation for this research. This includes reference to the impact of 'test time' (Abdul, Fig. 1) and how this might be interpreted as being high-stakes. Throughout this chapter, I make clear my personal motivations for carrying out this research and how this relates to children's stories of primary school assessment as 'it is through story that people are able to understand, make meaning of, and relate experiences, because story is how people make sense of their existence' (Caine, Estefan and Clandinin., 2013: 576).

1.2 'High-stakes'?

A 'high-stakes' situation is one where there is a high level of risk or serious consequences involved in winning or losing (Munoz-Chereau, González and Meyers, 2022; Reay, 2022). Assessments are used to 'investigate what people *know* and *can do* [emphasis in original]' (Baird et al., 2017). There is a more specialised definition of these terms when put together in an educational context: assessments are used to make important educational judgements with consequences for key stakeholders such as

students, staff, schools and communities (Gregory and Clarke, 2003; Stevenson and Wood, 2013). Existing literature related to high-stakes assessment (explored in Chapter 2) uses either the term 'assessment' (Bailey and Gibson, 2023; Jerrim, Allen and Sims, 2024;) or 'tests' (Collins et al., 2010; Marshall, 2017) or refers to both interchangeably (Bradbury, Braun and Quick, 2021; Mccarthy, 2024; Moss, 2022). However, these terms can be interpreted as having distinct meanings from one another. Assessment 'can be defined as the process of collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting information to aid decision making' (Gregory and Clarke, 2003: 66); assessment is a way 'to make decisions regarding whether they [learners] have learned what was expected' (Baird et al., 2017: 317). Alternatively, testing takes the form of 'creating measurement tools' (Tennent, 2021) and using that 'measuring instrument' (Baird et al., 2017: 326) against a given set of objectives and 'scoring criteria', (*ibid.*: 321). The literature often uses the word 'tests' and/or 'exams' to mean the same thing (Marshall, 2017; Mccarthy, 2024), sometimes distinguishing between tests for primary school due to the taking of the SATs (Standard Attainment Tests) and GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) at secondary school (Brighouse, 2022), both of which are explained more fully later in this chapter. However, Mccarthy explains that 'reference to 'exams' should be considered as indicating these instances of high stakes testing' (2024: 1057), thus as one and the same. Mccarthy later highlights that there is a 'current exam-based system of assessment in England' suggesting that exams, or tests, are only one type of assessment (2024: 1067). As a test is one possible form of assessment, I use the terms 'assessment' and 'tests' distinctly from one another: by 'test' I mean a product used to measure set objectives and by 'assessment' I mean a procedure leading to judgements about ability, which may or may not incorporate tests. Thus, in this thesis I use the word assessment to encompass tests unless otherwise stated.

It has been claimed that international and national assessments do not necessarily qualify as high-stakes assessment:

> … international and national assessments, although they may be consequential, are not high-stakes tests in the conventional sense. High-stakes tests historically refer to attempts to measure student performance for the purposes of selecting students into different branches of the educational system or limiting access to credentials or higher levels of schooling…
>
> (Ramirez, Schoffer, and Meyer, 2018: 345)

A historical account of the development of assessment in England has been included in Chapter 2 and discusses the origins of assessment being used to select students in education. For the purposes of this research, the potentially high-stakes nature of assessment is determined by the consequence it carries for some or all of those involved in the process (Berliner, 2011; Harsh, 2013; Solorzano, 2008). Related to education within schools, these could be consequential outcomes for children (Huber, Caine, Huber, Steeves, 2013; Reay, 2022), parents/carers, teachers and support staff (Huber et al., 2013; Mcarthy, 2024), middle and senior leadership teams (Bradbury et al., 2021), schools and academies (Tennent, 2021), trusts and beyond. More precisely, whether assessment is low or high-stakes assessment can be determined 'by the consequences they carry for success or failure' (Carnoy, Elmore and Siskin, 2003: 4), an example of a low-stakes consequence being disapproval from the school principal, whereas a more high-stakes consequence might be a sanction or reward of some kind (*ibid;* Madaus; 1988.). This suggests the possibility of a spectrum along which there are low and high-stakes assessment outcomes for key stakeholders involved in the assessment system. An additional consideration here is that what might seem to be 'high-stakes' for one individual may infact be low-stakes for another (Jerrim, 2021). Indeed, Saeki, Segool, Pendergast and von der Embse (2018) stress the importance of considering 'perceptions of context' (*ibid.:* 393) when exploring teachers' experiences of assessment and I wondered if this might also apply to the children's perceptions as a significant group of key stakeholders. Assessment could also be viewed as high-stakes when the issue of consequence also permeates 'all aspects of the work of schools' (Black and Wiliam, 2018: 552) such as the regular 'completion of 'practice' exam questions, taken from specimen or past exam papers' (Mccarthy, 2024: 1061) or 'the prevalence of systems where children are removed from normal lessons, assemblies or playtimes, usually in small groups, on the basis of needing to rectify 'gaps' in their learning or being 'behind' in one area' (Bradbury et al., 2021: 156). Authors such as Marshall (2017) and Polesel, Rice and Dulfer (2014) have added to the definition of high-stakes assessment by stating that specific tests results are often put it into the public domain for the purpose of comparing students' attainment (scores compared to a standardised expectation) and achievement (progress in learning).

In England, this has taken the form of performance tables: annual government published tables showing data on children's attainment in national exams (Gov.uk Website, 2024d). This means of standardised testing and reporting has been described as part of a 'fierce high stakes and narrowly focused accountability regime' (Brighouse, 2022: 20), of which the 'assessment regime' (Marshall, 2017: 27; Guimaraes, Howe, Clausen and Cottle, 2016), and more specifically the 'testing regime' (Bradbury et al., 2021: 158), is an integral part. The word 'regime' is more often associated with politics rather than the teaching and learning of children. Indeed, it has been suggested that the introduction of the league tables by the government in 1989 marked the beginning of the politicisation of testing in England (Marshall, 2017), whereby schools have become subject to 'marketisation' (Reay, 2022: 16), creating competition by allowing comparisons across schools (Marshall, 2017; Munoz-Chereau et al., 2022). This high-stakes accountability system is driven by the perceived significance of assessment and how assessment is enacted in the English school system and through the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014).

1.3 Perceived significance of assessment

There is a weight attributed to the term 'assessment':

> …any assessment is a claim. A claim that a person can do 'a' or 'b'; that they know and understand 'x' and 'y'. These are claims which have consequences - that a person is ready to study medicine or engineering, that they are ready to progress into advanced study in languages; that they know things.
>
> (Gibb, 2015: n.p.)

In his role as Minister of State for School Reform in England at the time, Gibbs emphasised that such is the potential power of assessment in primary schools in England that it can go on to affect a child's future studies and even their opportunities beyond education, such as 'university or getting a job with good wage prospects' (Machin, McNally and Ruiz-Valenzuelac, 2020: 14) or 'jobs with good progression possibilities' (*ibid.*). This long-term impact of assessment is also mirrored in the shorter term whereby there might be 'potentially negative personal and emotional consequences for schools, teachers and children' (Tennent, 2021: 482) This has been

exemplified by my 13 years' experience (2012-2025 to date) as both a mainstream primary school and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) teacher and leader, particularly in relation to the SATs. The SATs are annual Statutory Assessment Tests in English and Maths based on the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) and currently used as a method to assess children at various stages throughout their school lives. At the time of writing, these tests are compulsory if children attend a mainstream school in England – one which is not selective in regard to its intake of students and does not require students to pay fees to attend.

In conversation at a school summer fair, a 7-year-old child in my class at the time said to me that she felt Year 6 (children aged 10 and 11-years-old in their final year of primary school) were 'the best' year group of children because they were, in her words, 'very brave to go through the SATs without crying'. This child's comment can be contrasted to one head teacher who often told staff that children looked forward to the SATs and enjoyed taking tests. Additionally, a different primary school head teacher acknowledged that like it or not, a school's value and whether it lives or dies, is determined by its SATs results. These revealing reactions to primary school assessment from both a 7-year-old child and two experienced head teachers contributed to my understanding and interpretation of assessment within the English school system and related to the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014). The explanation of the curriculum that follows gives the context to the content and objectives against which educational assessments are carried out and judgements are made. It also provides the background to my personal perceived experiences of assessment, which contributed to my motivations for undertaking this research.

1.4 National Curriculum assessment

The National Curriculum in England aims to provide 'pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens', (Gov.uk Website, 2014: 3.1). At the time of writing, all government-maintained schools are legally required to follow this statutory curriculum, signifying that this is written into the law. Government maintained schools include local council-controlled community schools, foundation and voluntary schools, faith schools and special schools, which provide for children

with special educational needs (Gov.uk Website, 2025c). Government funded grammar schools select their pupils, often through an exam, but they are still required to follow the same curriculum. Some government funded state boarding schools, where education is free but a boarding fee is charged, also have to follow the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014).

In contrast to the schools that must follow the National Curriculum (*ibid.*), there are academy schools, free-schools, some state boarding schools and private schools, all of which are not required to follow that curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2025c). Academy schools are government maintained, but a governing body runs them independently of the local council and they can follow a different curriculum if they chose to. Related to this academy trusts are not-for-profit companies that might be made up of only one academy or multiple academies; 'some academies are supported by sponsors such as businesses, universities, other schools, faith groups or voluntary groups' (*ibid.*: n.p.), which work with the schools in the interest of the academy. The government also funds free schools, which are not run by the local council and that are therefore free to follow a different curriculum. Free schools are run on a not-for-profit basis and can be set up by organisations which can include, but are not limited to, businesses, community and faith groups, charities, universities, teachers and parents/carers. State boarding schools can be run by academies and free schools (as opposed to the government) and in these cases, they, too, need not follow the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014). Private schools are not government run, they do charge fees for education, and they do not have to follow the National Curriculum (*ibid.*). Children educated at home are not obligated to follow the National Curriculum (*ibid.*) either. This is of course subject to change and the most recent government (Starmer ministry from July 2024) has announced a Curriculum and Assessment Review that is due to produce a report in autumn 2025 and after which 'all state schools, including academies, will be required to teach the national curriculum' (Gov.uk Website, 2025c: N.P.)

The relevance of these variations in schooling is that children in England are currently not all subject to the same education, curriculum or assessment. However, my experience of working at two schools and two academies during my teaching career, is one where the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) was followed.

Additionally, according to the British Education Suppliers Association (BESA), in the 2022/2023 academic year there were '24,413 schools in England – including 388 nurseries, 16,791 primary schools, 3,458 secondary schools, 2,366 independent schools, 1,005 special schools, 57 non-maintained special schools and 348 pupil referral units (PRUs)' (BESA, 2024: n.p.). This means that most of the children in England attend a school in which the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) is taught and assessed against.

The framework for the first English National Curriculum (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1988) was established when parliament passed the 1988 Education Reform Act. Since then, there have been several versions of it (Bradbury et al., 2021; Tennent, 2021). The most recent version of the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) is divided into programmes of study for each of the twelve subjects it covers. These subjects are legally classified into the core subjects of English, Maths and Science and the non-core, or foundation subjects of Art and design, Citizenship, Computing, Design and Technology, Languages, Geography, History, Music and Physical Education (PE). Within each programme of study, the subject content and standard to be taught is prescribed. The content is further organised into blocks of years called Key stages (KS), of which there are four in total, ranging from the beginning of the primary school years to the end of the secondary school years. Children aged 5 to 7 years are in Key stage 1 (KS1), children aged 7 to 11 are in Key stage 2 (KS2), Key stage 3 (KS3) is comprised of children aged 11 to 14 and there is also a fourth Key stage (KS4) of children aged 14 to 16 (Gov.uk Website, 2025b). Key stage 5 (KS5) refers to 16-18-year-old students (Gov.uk Website, 2023), but this is not covered by the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014). This information is summarised in the following table, in which the ticks indicate which subjects are taught at different stages of a child's school life. In addition to the twelve core and foundation subjects, Religious Education (RE) must be taught in both primary and secondary schools and secondary schools must also teach Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) is a non-statutory subject that the government describes as 'an important and necessary part of all pupils' education' (Gov.uk Website, 2021), but that is not part of the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014).

Table 1.1 Structure of the National Curriculum

	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3	Key stage 4
Age	5-7	7-11	11-14	14-16
Year groups	1-2	3-6	7-9	10-11
Core subjects				
English	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mathematics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Science	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foundation subjects				
Art and design	✓	✓	✓	
Citizenship			✓	✓
Computing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design and technology	✓	✓	✓	
Languages		✓	✓	
Geography	✓	✓	✓	
History	✓	✓	✓	
Music	✓	✓	✓	
Physical education	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: At key stage 2 the subject title for languages is 'foreign language'; at key stage 3 it is 'modern foreign language'.

Source: National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014)

The National Curriculum includes the 'statutory programmes of study and attainment targets for all subjects' (Gov.uk Website 2014: 7.1). The information provided for the foundation subjects and Science is minimal compared to the sections for English and Maths. Indeed, out of the 224-page The National Curriculum in England Framework document detailing the programmes of study and attainment for KS1 and KS2 in primary school (DfE, 2013), 85 pages offer instruction on English, 43 pages instruct on Maths and 31 pages are on Science. Thereafter, between 2-5 pages are dedicated to each of the foundation subjects (Table 1.1). This distinct variation in the amount of guidance offered for different subject areas is interesting given the curriculum's claim

that part of its aim is to 'engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement' (*ibid*.: 6). Yet there are far fewer standards set for the creative subjects (such as Art and design and Music) compared to the core subjects. Thus, the weighting attributed to each subject within this document might make one consider the message this sends to schools and staff about the value of each subject and subsequently I was motivated to find out what impact this might also have on the children.

There is an argument to say that fluency in English is essential as it is the means through which content in other subjects is accessed: 'studying English is vital to understanding the rest of the curriculum, as well as for educational success beyond school' (Ofsted, 2022). Similarly, numeracy and other mathematical skills are a prerequisite for learning in other subjects, such as algorithms in computing and working with data during fieldwork in geography. In spite of this, as an example, society has reached an age when computer aided technology is becoming more prominent in our day-to-day lives; reliance on computer use was brought to the fore during the recent worldwide pandemic, Covid-19 (World Health Organisation Website (WHO), 2024) when most social communication and education took place through computer aided technology (Moss, 2022; Reay, 2020). However, the primary curriculum has only two pages of guidance on computing, with no specific reference made to learning how to use a keyboard efficiently or effectively, despite typing being an integral part of the use of technology. In contrast to this, the English guidance contains enough detail on handwriting to specify that children in Years 3 and 4 should be 'ensuring that the downstrokes of letters are parallel and equidistant…spaced sufficiently so that the ascenders and descenders of letters do not touch' (DfE, 2013: 38). This contribution towards the prioritisation of certain subjects within the curriculum is termed critically by Bleazby as the constant 'traditional curriculum hierarchy' (2015: 671), who draws on the ideas of philosopher and psychologist John Dewey (1930, 1938b, 1990, 2004) and highlights his proposal of 'a curriculum grounded in authentic social problems that required students to draw simultaneously on knowledge and methods from multiple disciplines in an interconnected manner in order to work through such problems' (*ibid.*). This resonated with me not least because the practical use of computing aided technology was so valuable during the problem of the Covid-19 pandemic (Section

1.8). However, the impact of this hierarchy of subjects is not limited to this one specific scenario.

The relatively low status given to the foundation subjects in contrast to the core subjects (Duncombe, Cale and Harris, 2018) is also reflected in time spent on the teaching and learning of each subject: the allocation of time to subjects on school timetables. The National Curriculum states that individual schools are free to organise their school day as they wish as long as the curriculum content is covered (Gov.uk Website, 2014). My experience in four different school settings is that this typically equates to approximately an hour of reading, an hour of writing and an hour of Maths each day (predominantly all in the morning). In contrast to this, teaching and learning time for all other subjects is then reduced to the afternoon, which tends to be shorter and may amount to the equivalent of only one hour or so a week for each of the foundation subjects. In the case of history and geography, I have found that teaching time often equates to the equivalent of one hour every two weeks. This is because, in my experience, the teaching of history and geography has been alternated every half-term (one school half-term lasting between 5-8 weeks). This means that, comparatively, less content is covered in Science and the foundation subjects compared to English and Maths. In my experience, this amounted to 'a fixed timetable tied to a test architecture with little capacity to flex' (Moss, 2022); arguably, this unequal distribution of teaching and learning time, along with the emphasis on core subjects at the 'expense of a broad and balanced curriculum' (Reay, 2022), is tied to the quantity and quality of assessment, the measuring and monitoring of assessment outcomes and to the reporting of assessment outcomes to school staff and parents/carers (Berliner, 2011; Mccarthy, 2024). Statutory assessments of the National Curriculum content (Gov.uk Website, 2014) are summarised in the table over the page.

Table 1.2 Statutory Assessments KS1-4

Early years foundation stage (EYFS)

Child's age	Year	Assessment
3 to 4	Not applicable	Not applicable
4 to 5	Reception	Assessment of pupils' starting points in language, communication, literacy and maths, known as the reception baseline assessment (first 6 weeks). Learning and development assessment, known as the EYFS profile (between April and June).

Key stage 1 (KS1)

Child's age	Year	Assessment
5 to 6	Year 1	Phonics screening check
6 to 7	Year 2	Optional tests in maths, English reading and grammar, punctuation and spelling. Optional teacher assessments in maths, science, and English reading and writing.

Key stage 2 (KS2)

Child's age	Year	Assessment
7 to 8	Year 3	Not applicable
8 to 9	Year 4	Times tables check
9 to 10	Year 5	Not applicable
10 to 11	Year 6	National tests in English reading, maths, and grammar, punctuation and spelling. Teacher assessments in English writing and science.

Key stage 3 (KS3)

Child's age	Year	Assessment
11 to 12	Year 7	Not applicable
12 to 13	Year 8	Not applicable
13 to 14	Year 9	Not applicable

Key stage 4 (KS4)

Child's age	Year	Assessment
14 to 15	Year 10	Some children take GCSEs
15 to 16	Year 11	Most children take GCSEs or other national tests

Source: National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2025b)
(The KS1 SATs are optional for schools who can choose if they wish to administer them.)

Assessment outcomes, in my experience and according to the literature (Bradbury et al., 2021), have always been reported in relation to a child's attainment and achievement compared to perceived 'age-related expectations' (National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) Website, 2025a: n.p.). Age-related expectations are perceived standards of expectations for children's learning in each year group shaped by developmental approaches to childhood and how children learn (Section 2.3.1) . These are either created by schools based on the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) or adopted from the work of other educational organisations, such as the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). This is significant as the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) only includes the standards for expectation for the end of each Key stage, rather than for the end of each school year such as Year 1, Year 2, Year 3 and so on. Thus, when children are assessed in school, they are expected to make attainments that correspond with their age. The scores of the SATs taken in the final year of primary school (Year 6), are also reported according to age-related expectations: 'scores translate into three categories: - working towards age-related expectation - meeting age-related expectation (ARE) - working at greater depth (GD)… If a pupil reaches ARE or the higher level of GD, they are described as 'reaching the

expected level'' (Bradbury et al., 2021). These outcomes are then reported to parent/carers using the following table:

Table 1.3 Comparative Report Template

Key stage 2 comparative report

This information allows you to compare your child's performance at the end of key stage 2 with the attainment of other year 6 pupils in our school and across England.

Subject	Percentage of pupils achieving the expected standard: school	Percentage of pupils achieving the expected standard: nationally	Average scaled score: school[1]	Average scaled score: nationally
English reading				
English grammar, punctuation and spelling				
Mathematics				
English writing (teacher assessment)			N/A	N/A
Science (teacher assessment)			N/A	N/A

Source: National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website (2024b)

This comparative report records a child's assessment outcomes in the SATs and is then shared with parents/carers, whilst at the same time comparing their child's attainment to children of the same age (Gov.uk Website, 2024b). Perhaps, due to this reporting, it is less surprising that the National Curriculum document is weighted more heavily towards the core subjects reported on in the SATs and that more teaching and learning is dedicated to these subjects. Having spent two years of my teaching career teaching in Year 6, it added to my motivation to further explore the impact of this on the children themselves.

For children working 'below the standards of the national curriculum but still engaged in subject-specific study at the end of KS2, the report must include the achievements in each subject studied, identified by the statutory teacher assessment under the pre-key

stage 2 standards' (Gov.uk Website, 2024e: n.p.). Alternatively, if those children are 'not engaged in subject-specific study at the end of KS2, the report must include a narrative commentary of the pupil's achievements and progress in the areas of engagement identified in the engagement model' (*ibid.*). This may include children with SEND and the engagement model is described as an 'assessment tool' in five areas (Gov.uk Website, 2024i) for them: exploration, realisation, anticipation, persistence, and initiation. Thus, almost all children are subject to some form of statutory assessment and comparison to their peers, further reinforcing the weight of assessment in schools.

Children aged 3 to 5 years do not follow the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014), but instead they are taught according to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (Gov.uk Website, 2024a), as indicated in Table 1.2. From April 2017, the teaching of this framework became mandatory for all providers of early years education, inclusive of government maintained, non-maintained and private schools. The framework's aim is to 'promote teaching and learning to ensure children's 'school readiness' and gives children the right foundation for future progress through school and life' (*ibid.:* 6). These children are required to meet early learning goals in seven areas: communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; literacy; mathematics; understanding the world and expressive arts and design. As with the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014), assessment of children's attainment in these areas is explicitly linked to the framework. In this way, the curriculum for the education of children from early years through to age 16, is linked to the expectation of subsequent assessment and this is enacted in various ways within schools, which I have experienced first-hand as a teacher and will now draw on.

1.5 Personal experience

Throughout my three years at a previous school – 2016-2019 – the teaching and learning of Science held a prominent role on the school's Academy Development Plan (ADP), a document outlining the school's priorities for the year. Science had become an important issue for the entire trust, mainly due to Key stage 1 and 2 SATs results in Science having been lower at the school for all groups of children compared to the national average, which was a trend that the school and trust were trying to change.

When I joined the school, Science was the subject area for which I was given a leadership responsibility above and beyond my teaching role. Having prepared for and delivered an In-Service Training Day (INSET) for teaching staff, I found myself looking into the teaching and learning of Science, with an emphasis on the practical activities designed to engage and enthuse children in this subject. This sparked my enthusiasm for the subject and its potential opportunities for all children regardless of characteristics such as social background, SEND, stage of English, gender or race.

One of the activities I did with my class of children as part of my preparation for the Science INSET was one where children communicated their perceptions of what it was to be a scientist. I asked my then class of 7-8-year-old children to draw their ideas and I held a one-to-one discussion with each of them afterwards about their drawings. I found the results to be of interest – for example, I noticed that only 3 out of the 28 of the drawings depicted female scientists and the characters drawn typically had wild white hair and were wearing glasses or goggles and white laboratory coats. It became apparent through their drawings and our conversations about their drawings, that the children made no evident connection between Science and day-to-day experiences or ordinary people; they did not think of a scientist as an ordinary person. Instead, their drawings indicated that they viewed scientists as eccentric characters who concocted make-believe potions in their top-secret laboratories.

The findings of D'Addezio and Besker (2024) into primary school children's changed perceptions of Science and scientists between 2011 and 2021 resonated with my own personal experience. In their study, one of their findings related to the image of a stereotyped scientist from their 2011 dataset was that the 'most represented stereotype is the lab coat, at 45% [drawn by 45% of total participants], followed by crazy/untidy hair, at 25.9%, and eyeglasses at 21.2%' (2024: 7). Similarly, from their 2021 dataset, 'the most represented stereotype is the lab coat, with a percentage of 41.7%, followed, in this dataset, by eyeglasses, at 24.4%, and then by crazy/untidy hair, at 18.3%' *(ibid.)*. The authors described this as an 'Einstein-like scientist' (*ibid.*), which was comparable to the drawings of scientists done by children in my class. The impact of this drawing activity on me and of reading this literature, was firstly how insightful it had been to obtain children's perceptions through the method of drawing and conversations about

their drawings. In their study, Kamarudin and Noor have also argued that 'follow-up interviews to supplement an exploration of children's drawings is important' (2024:13). This enables one to 'construct a more holistic and accurate portrayal of children's thoughts, perceptions and conceptualisations, ultimately yielding more informed and deeper insights into the views of young minds' (*ibid.*). Secondly, I found myself wondering if Science was a profession that some children thought might be enjoyable, but not one that they felt would be a realistic option for their own futures. I questioned what it was about Science that might make the children think this way. I reflected on the teaching, learning and assessment of Science and the way in which attainment and achievement was reported to the children and their parent/carers. Thus, another of the activities that stayed with me because of preparing for the Science INSET was an activity that related to engineering.

For this activity, the children had to try and build the tallest tower they could with only four sheets of card and nothing else. The child in my class who was most able to do this effectively was a child who was unable to read or write at perceived age-related expectations. Yet, he was the one and only child in the class who was able to work out and explain that it was necessary to fold the card to make it balance better and stand taller. He independently built the tallest tower and the other children were copying and learning from him. What I also noticed was that despite this child's apparent ability in this area, there was no record to reflect this capability other than a photograph, a handwritten note by the teacher and one tick in a box in the end of year report to show that he might be 'exceeding' in this subject area compared to his peers. His ability in this area was unrecognised by the supposedly more rigorous and detailed school assessment policy and practice, which was applied to assessment in English and Maths. This is a worrying picture considering Gardner's 'Theory of Multiple Intelligences' (Gardner and Hatch, 1989), which suggests that 'individuals [are] differing from one another in the specific profile of intelligences that they exhibit' (*ibid.:* 4) and that one standard style of assessment is not adequate This led me to consider class-specific assessment procedures for Science within the school.

1.6 Class and subject-specific example

The above examples from my personal experience led me to believe that the assessment of Science in that school at that time were inaccessible to some children and thus depicted an inaccurate picture of their scientific understanding, as illustrated by the following example. The children had completed a module of learning about light and at the end of this, we asked all children to complete a written test of 15 questions amounting to 25 marks, with each question carrying a different weighting. My colleague and I carefully chose the test from an outside provider as it included the key areas of teaching and learning that had been covered (Appendix A). Additionally, because we had used parts of a sequence of lessons and resources from the same provider, it appeared logical to use the test from the same provider. Furthermore, the questions on the test were related to the five assessment criteria provided by the school to assess the children's knowledge of light. The five criteria were taken from the 2014 National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) and were as follows:

Table 1.4 – Statutory statements from the National Curriculum relating to the subject of light

1	recognise that they need light in order to see things and that dark is the absence of light
2	notice that light is reflected from surfaces
3	recognise that light from the sun can be dangerous and that there are ways to protect their eyes
4	recognise that shadows are formed when the light from a light source is blocked by a solid object
5	find patterns in the way that the size of shadows change

These five assessment criteria were present on an assessment spreadsheet created by the school and used across school for the assessment of English, Maths and Science. It had been adapted accordingly for each year group's National Curriculum content (Gov.uk Website, 2014), this being the most updated version of curriculum. For Science, children received a tick in a box next to their name for each of the five assessment criteria the class teacher believed the child had met. The number of criteria

ticked off on the spreadsheet was then used to determine if the child was working at an 'emerging, developing, secure or greater depth' level in relation to age-related expectations. This terminology for different gradings and the boundaries between them had been decided on by the school, but were based on government documents related to the assessment and reporting of children's attainment against the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014).

In the test taken by the children, it was perceived that those who received a high score out of the 25-mark test would have shown that they had developed a wide understanding of learning across the subject of light. What follows is a possible scenario based on the hypothetical results of a class of 30 children for illustrative purposes:

Table 1.5 – Marks awarded to class for end of unit test on light

No. of marks (out of 25)	Between 0-4	Between 5-9	Between 10-14	Between 15-19	Between 20-25
No. of children receiving mark (out of 30)	1	1	9	15	4

Despite there being 15 questions on the test, only the information related to five of these questions were included as criteria on the school-wide spreadsheet. I found myself wondering why only these five criteria were identified by the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 20214) as being more important than, for example, the fact that light travels in a straight line and the meaning of key vocabulary such as transparent, translucent and opaque, which had also been taught to the children within that unit. In addition to this, some members of my class incorrectly identified a mirror and the moon as a source of light in the test, which was a common misconception across our entire year group at the school. Yet, the curriculum for this age group (Year 3) deems this knowledge to be non-statutory knowledge rather than statutory (Table 1.4) and therefore not a requirement for children as part of their understanding of the overall topic of light.

Putting aside for now the issue of what is and what is not prioritised as important knowledge in the current version of the curriculum (Section 1.4), one can take a closer look at how this hypothetical assessment data might have represented the attainment of

each child in my class. Child A in my class received 24/25 in the test, which was the highest score in the class. One might argue that this child showed an understanding of learning across the subject of light (within the boundaries of the test). This child achieved a positive outcome for all five of the criteria identified as integral to the understanding of light as identified by the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) and subsequently, the school-wide spreadsheet. Child B received a score of 21/25 in the test, which was the third highest overall score in the class. However, this child only achieved a positive outcome for 4/5 of the criteria. Child C received 20/25 in the test, which was the fourth highest score in the class, but only received a positive outcome for 3/5 of the criteria. In contrast to this, Child D's mark was 18/25, which was the joint sixth highest overall score in the class. However, this child still received a positive outcome for 5/5 of the criteria highlighted by the National Curriculum and the spreadsheet. This resulted in Child D receiving a more positive outcome on the school-wide spreadsheet, 'greater depth' at that stage, compared to Child B and Child C, who both received a higher overall score on the test that covered a wider scope of knowledge than the criteria on the spreadsheet. Child B and Child C received an outcome of only 'secure' and 'developing', respectively, on the school-wide spreadsheet.

Based on examples such as this one, it is arguable whether the school-wide spreadsheet should have been used as an indication of children's attainment in the field of Science and in this case, specifically the topic of light. It might be interpreted as a false indication of whether a child had reached a certain standard of learning and understanding. Based on the spreadsheet data alone, one might assume that Child D was a more able learner in the subject area of light, or even the subject of Science as a whole, than Child B or C. Arguably, it would be more fitting to say that Child D had responded more positively to the framework used to assess them. This notion can be examined further by looking more closely at one of the questions in the year group test, the answer to which was used as evidence for meeting one of the Science criteria on the school-wide spreadsheet.

The question as it appeared on the test was 'What is dark?' The corresponding objective to be met on the spreadsheet was that children 'recognise that they need light in order to see things and that dark is the absence of light' (Table 1.4). The question on the test only required a child to explain that darkness is the absence of light. However, the

statement to be met on the spreadsheet included the requirement that children should also be able to recognise that light is needed in order to see things. Many children in my class were unable to state that darkness is the absence of light in that precise way. However, when they were asked what is needed to see things, most children were able to answer 'light'. This made me wonder what exact type of response was required of a child to be able to meet the above objective on the spreadsheet and whether or not all children were able to access or use the language and words required to answer the question correctly. For example, children with English as a second language may have understood the idea that light is needed to see yet be unable to understand the question or accurately communicate their answer. Indeed, with hindsight, it would have been interesting to seek the children's perceptions of the questions being asked and their experiences of answering them.

The decision to tick off a particular statement on the school spreadsheet is then not solely based on the answer to a test question but left, in part, to the teachers' judgement. Government guidance on teacher judgement states:

> A school's assessment policy forms the basis of a teacher's judgements about what pupils know and can do. This will provide the evidence needed for teachers to make statutory judgements against the TA [teacher assessment] frameworks. These judgements are designed only to report an outcome to the Department for Education (DfE) at the end of the key stage.
>
> (Gov.uk Website, 2024c: 4.1)

At the time my class completed the abovementioned Science test, the school's assessment policy detailed how to mark work and populate the school spreadsheet but did not provide guidance on the specific answers to a test or the evidence required from a child to qualify ticking off a statement on the spreadsheet. In this case, one might suggest merits of a discussion between, for example, the teachers within the same year group at the school, regarding what meeting the spreadsheet criteria might look like. However, if this led to a consensus, it would only have been between the teachers in the same year group in one school and in one city within the entire country. There is no guarantee that teachers elsewhere, in a different school or locality, would share the same teacher judgement. This leads to the issue of whether similar Science tests were

administered and marked or judged in a consistent way across the school I worked at, across the region and even nationally. As staff in my school, we were told that the actual once used to inform teacher judgement, the completed paper tests could be discarded of (either sent home or thrown away). We would, therefore, have lost the evidence used to inform the assessment. Without keeping this evidence base, it would be difficult to check if there was a shared and consistent approach to assessment within the school and beyond. Without a consistent approach there is little to support the claim that one child can do or understand something that another child cannot, which seems highly consequential.

An additional impact of such tests is on choosing particular children to take part in extra special Science activities and opportunities. At this particular school, this included days such as such as 'Robotics Day' for children who were thought to excel in Science based on their test performance and teacher judgement as recorded on the school-wide spreadsheet. The boy in my class who excelled in tower building could not communicate his ideas on paper and therefore did not do well in written tests. Subsequently, according to the spreadsheet data, he would not be recognised as a child who excelled in Science. Additionally, he would therefore not qualify to be rewarded with attending Robotics Day, something I perceived he would very much have enjoyed. This seemed potentially highly consequential to his perception of himself as a learner, making it a matter of high-stakes. In my role as a teacher, there have been many other children I have worked with since who were in a similar position to him. I wondered how these children might perceive the way in which children were selected to take part in these special activities and how this might impact their own educational journey and mental health and well-being going forwards. By mental health and well-being, I mean that an intergral part of mental health is well-being (Clarke, 2023): 'the state of feeling healthy and happy' (Day, Stobart, Sammons, Kington, Smees, and Mujtaba, 2006) and not under stress (Murphy, Lundy, Emerson and Kerr, 2013; Sibley-White, 2019). More specifically in relation to educational assessment, not feeling 'without any clear sense of purpose and value, other than that which can be calculated from test scores and examination grades' (Ball, 2018). The definition of well-being is something I will return to throughout Chapter 2.

The gravity of assessment is illustrated further by Gibbs (2015), when he stated that any assessment is a claim that a child can or cannot understand something (Section 1.3). It is a judgement that may go on to affect a child's perceptions of themselves as being successful in a particular subject and it may also affect their future opportunities in school and perhaps in life, such as when it comes to job opportunities (Machin, et al., 2020). The outcomes of the primary school SATs can sometimes be used by secondary schools as the baseline and predictor of GCSE results and subsequent target setting (*ibid.*), which has further implications for the child (explored in Chapter 2). Again, I wondered how the children themselves might perceive this outcome and if it might be one of low- or high-stakes for them and if it was perceived as high-stakes, what the 'negative effects of high-stakes tests on children's mental health' and well-being might be (Sibley-White, 2019: 339) in both in the present and the future.

It may seem from the example above that there was simply work to be done in the assessment of Science at that particular school and to some extent that is true. Despite this, it is worth noting the additional impact of limited government guidance regarding the nature of assessment other than statutory tests, which indicates that policy at a government level might be inconsistently enacted within individual schools and academies: ''fast' policy and 'elite' solutions in which government and big business impose their own aspirations and intentions on local communities (Ball, 2022: 65). Indeed, in the current National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) it is made clear that the content of the programme of study for Years 3 to 6 is only required to be taught by the end of Key stage 2; it is not a statutory requirement that the content is taught and assessed at particular times or years throughout the course of Key stage 2. Thus, it would appear that the assessment of Science using the school-created spreadsheet, despite its faults, provided more of an ongoing and detailed picture of how children were progressing in the subject through Key stage 2, compared to what was required by the government. Nevertheless, it still remains a skewed and therefore inaccurate picture, given my example from my observation of the young boy, his tower building and the Science test.

1.7 School-wide, subject-wide assessment

The school spreadsheets described above were required to be filled out for children across the school, from Year 1 to Year 6, but this data was only recorded in this format for the subjects English (reading and writing only, not including speaking and listening), Maths and Science. There was nothing similar to measure the progress of children in the foundation subjects (Table 1.1). However, having explained what the assessment of Science looked like in one of the school settings I worked in, it is worth noting that in some of the other settings I have worked in, Science assessment has been treated with similar time and attention to English and Maths, but in others, Science assessment has been closer to the assessment of the foundation subjects. I now endeavour to summarise my personal perceived experience of the distinction between the two.

From my experience, the assessment of English and Maths – in the year groups other than Year 6 – comprised the taking of tests put together by either the school or provided by any one of several external providers. The number of marks attained on the test compared to the total number of marks available was then used to decide whether children were working below (described in some schools as working towards), at, or above age-related expectations. The boundaries between each category, or judgement, were either decided by the school or predetermined by the test provider (if the tests used were created by an external provider). Many of these test providers claim to provide tests that correlate with the eventual expectations found within the SATs; 'all of our tests and SATs assessments are great for preparing your pupils for their exams' (Twinkl website, 2025: n.p.). In some cases, there might be flexibility for teachers to amend judgements, for example if a teacher felt the test scores were not truly reflective of a child's capabilities. These judgements were then used by the school for analysis and reporting, including the reporting of attainment and achievement to parents/carers on an ongoing basis. As with the SATs, the judgement about writing is usually decided by teacher assessment, other than with Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG). Thus, the assessment of writing takes the form of assessing attainment and achievement against perceived age-related expectations based on the National Curriculum standards for writing (Gov.uk Website, 2014). Again, this might rely on counting up the number

of criteria met to attain a particular judgement, or the school may have decided which standards they feel qualify for working below (described in some schools as working towards), at, or above the age-related expectations. In any case, there are numerous standards set out by the government for writing through the English programme of study (Gov.uk Website, 2014), which have then been adopted by some schools as the criteria for assessment and the comparable lack of government set standards in the foundation subjects may then account for the differences I experienced in their assessment.

For assessment of foundation subjects, I have previously been asked to complete termly tick box exercises where teachers, including myself, tick a box stating whether a child is working towards, at, or above perceived age-related expectations in the foundation subjects. This might be based on teacher judgement and/or on the results of end of unit/topic tests (Appendix A), and/or work completed by the child during lesson time, which serve to inform the teacher judgement. I have also completed similar exercises, where I have been asked to record children's attainment against specific but a more limited number of criteria (such as in the example of the school-wide spreadsheet described above). However, in my experience, I have never been asked to assess or report on attainment and achievement in the foundation subjects as comprehensively as I have been asked to do so in English and Maths.

The effects of this discrepancy between assessment in core and foundation subjects can be exemplified by another 7-year-old boy who I encountered in one of my previous teaching roles. This child was acknowledged to have SEND, by way of autism. This had led to him working on an adapted curriculum because he was not accessing age-related expectations in English and Maths and struggled to cope with the social demands and behaviour for learning expectations at the school. However, he showed a great enjoyment of and aptitude for his learning in art, producing pieces that reflected the artistic skills as outlined in the National Curriculum for art at his age and Key stage (Gov.uk Website, 2016). He had what one might describe as a special passion, interest and ability in this area (Koshy and Pinheiro-Torres, 2013). However, within the whole-school context, his attainment in this area was not recorded and celebrated in a comparable way to attainment in the core subjects. There was no system to record his

ongoing attainment and progress in art other than to say whether he was working below (described in some schools as working towards), at, or above age-related expectations: his attainment was shown by way of a tick in the 'Art, Exceeding' box on a report given to parent/carers only once at the very end of the academic year. This differed from English and Maths, which were reported on to parents/carers three times a year on a written document and during parent/carer evenings, along with an additional target on how to improve in these subjects. As with the previous child I described above (Section 1.6), I wondered how this might affect his perception of himself as a learner, and whether it was a matter of high-stakes for him.

In Sections 1.5-1.7, I have outlined my own early perceived experiences of assessment and reporting on assessment outcomes, all of which indicate the weighting placed on assessment in some primary schools in England. This weight of assessment is particularly in relation to testing in all year groups and specifically the SATs in Year 6. However, despite this emphasis on assessment and reporting that has permeated my perceived experience as a teacher (Collins et al., 2010; Proudfoot, 2024), there have been times when assessment was called into question on the national stage.

1.8 Assessment called into question

School assessment was brought further into question during what was announced on 12th March 2020 as a worldwide pandemic, Covid-19 (World Health Organisation Website (2024), and more recently, following the suicide of primary head teacher Ruth Perry in January 2023 (Grimshaw, 2023). Following the onset of the pandemic, it was announced by the United Kingdom (UK) government on 18th March 2020 that schools nationwide, like schools in many other countries, would be closed for most children. This would be from Monday 23rd March 2020 for an indefinite amount of time. Some schools were still open (in part) to the children of those classed as 'key workers' and for children deemed as more vulnerable (Moss, 2022). Key workers referred to those who worked in what the government classed as sectors essential to the pandemic response, such as frontline healthcare workers. Vulnerable children included those children supported by social services and children with safeguarding and welfare needs such as disabled children and young carers (Gov.uk Website, 2022).

The decision to close schools was a controversial one (Viner, Russell, Croker, Packer, Ward, Stansfield, Mytton, Bonell, and Booy, 2020) and it is estimated to have affected approximately 15,401,609 learners in the UK, of whom 4,820,283 learners were primary school aged children (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Website, 2025). The implications of the school closures affected many children for different reasons (Grimshaw, 2023; Richards, 2023). However, for the purposes of this research, it is noted that when the closing of UK schools was announced, it was also confirmed by the government that assessments and examinations would not take place and that there would be no publishing of performance tables that academic year; 'in the primary sector, the normal testing and inspection regime and the accountability measures associated with it were effectively put on hold' (Moss, 2022: 4). Instead, alternative measures were put in place for secondary school statutory assessment; summer 2021 results were teacher-assessed grades (TAGs) given based on student's predicted grades (Crisp, Elliott, Walland and Chambers, 2024). The previous year, schools were made to submit centre assessment grades (CAGs) for secondary statutory assessment and to place these in rank before they were passed through a 'standardised model' (Mccarthy, 2024: 1059) to generate student's results. The cancellation of standardised tests for whole cohorts of children and the reliance on predicted grades, in place of tests, was in complete contrast to the weight attributed to these forms of assessment prior to the pandemic. It was a contentious decision (Roberts, 2020) and led to questions about the future for children who would no longer be sitting their exams, including the SATs.

The argument in favour of the limited attendance at schools and the subsequent cancellation of tests reflected the sentiment that there had been an acknowledgement of what was most important at the time: the health and safety of children, their friends and families and school staff through minimising the spread of Covid-19 (Moss, 2022). It appeared that the physical and mental health of these children and adults was now of greater concern than the long-established routine of test taking at school. However, the fairness of the alternative measures for secondary school statutory assessment was questioned (Crisp et al., 2024), resulting in 'public attention' (Taylor, 2021: 9) including 'the 2020 'backlash' of A-Level student protests [that] meant that student voices were listened to' (Mccarthy, 2024: 1066). In addition to this, in her study of how secondary school pupils reacted to this situation, Mccarthy (2024) states that exams had

been such 'a prominent part of the participants' everyday experience of education to the extent that their cancellation resulted in participants questioning the value and purpose of the education system they participated in'(2024, 1066), exemplifying the high-stakes nature of assessment to these children. In support of this, Bailey and Gibson, in their study of the high-stake assessment experiences of secondary school leaders during the pandemic found that a crisis had been caused because of 'the high-stakes competitive nature of these assessments and the direction of successive governmental policy directions over the last 30 years' (2023: 206), an argument I will return to in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Literature on the experiences for primary schools during this time is limited compared to the attention given to secondary schools, which might be interpreted as being indicative of a hierarchy; the literature review in Chapter 2 explores the literature available on assessment in primary school settings compared to secondary schools. According to Bradbury, Braun, Duncan, Harmey, Levy and Moss' study with primary school leaders, 'crisis policy enactment' (2023: 776) took the form of responding to the needs of the local community during the pandemic, rather than focusing on assessment. It has also been claimed that education during Covid-19 reinforced social equalities (Reay, 2022), for example through lack of equal access to the technology required for remote learning (Moss, 2022). My personal experience of this was as primary school teacher of Year 5 (9 and 10-year-olds) in the first year and Year 6 (10 and 11-year-olds) in the second year. When in Year 5, the children in my class and the rest of Year 5 who were still attending school (approximately 15 children, which was half the number of children in the full class pre-pandemic) were still required to take three tests: Maths (both arithmetic and reasoning) and English (reading). The purpose of this was to generate internal assessment data for these children in advance of the following year, when their cohort would ordinarily be in Year 6 and therefore it was assumed they would be taking the SATs the following year, although they eventually were cancelled due to the ongoing pandemic. Thus, despite the UK government's stance on assessment during the pandemic, assessments, in one form or another, remained a prominent part of life in some schools such as my own.

The pandemic and its impact on education reignited the debate on the purpose of education and the significance of assessment at a time when most people were unable

to leave their homes, including to go to school or their place of work due to three successive national lockdowns (Moss, 2022). Some of the research linking educational assessment outcomes to future jobs and earnings (Morgan, 2019; Viner et al., 2020) extends to discussion around the purpose of education and one prospect of it leading to more highly paid jobs and their subsequent contribution to society:

> Many of the best-paid jobs only exist to facilitate exchanges; to make money. They serve no wider purpose to society… Yet because they make lots of money we have lots of consultants, a huge advertising industry and a massive financial sector. Meanwhile, we have a crisis in health and social care, where people are often forced out of useful jobs they enjoy, because these jobs don't pay them enough to live.
>
> (Mair, 2020: n.p)

The pandemic had shown that the highly paid jobs, the ones that had previously been linked to high educational and assessment outcomes, were not the most essential jobs required at that time. The more essential jobs with a greater purpose to society at that point were that of the key workers in critical sectors, such as the frontline healthcare and social care workers (who often earn comparatively less) . This leads one to consider the purpose served by the aims and intentions of English school system, its curriculum and assessment. This added to my interest in how this aspect of assessment was perceived by the key stakeholders involved it.

In addition to the pandemic, a second event which received wide publicity and again called school assessment into question was when head teacher Ruth Perry took her own life, Described as 'shocking and indescribably sad' (Grimshaw, 2023: 40), this occured six weeks after the government Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspected and reported on the school at which Perry was headteacher, Caversham Primary School in Reading, England. In its report (Ofsted, 2023) the school was downgraded from 'outstanding', (the highest available grade) to inadequate (the lowest available grade). Despite this grading being attributed to safeguarding concerns (Tian and Diamond, 2024), the Ofsted report did make reference to some children with SEND 'not achieving as well as they could', suggesting that education assessment still played a part in the inspection and subsequent judgement. Indeed, Grimshaw draws attention to Ofsted's history of 'emphasis on pupil

performance data' (2023: 35) and Perry's family believe that the grading at her school led to stress, which resulted in her suicide (Water and McKee, 2023). Water and McKee emphasise that unlike many other countries, 'in the UK we do not even know with certainty how many teachers have killed themselves in circumstances linked to Ofsted inspections, but we are aware of at least eight others' (2003: 1). Given this statistic, Richards reminds us that 'a post-Covid world necessitates the re-examination of a wide-range of previously held assumptions, policies and practices, not only in education but in other policy areas, such as health and social care. School inspection should not be an exception to that fundamental review' (2023: 20). Following on from this, it might be considered appropriate to re-examine the assumptions, policies and practices surrounding educational assessment given its perceived significance in primary schools in England and with a focus on the stories of the those that experience it directly.

1.9 Chapter summary

In this Chapter, I have drawn on my own perceived experiences of assessment to explain my motivations for this research, whilst acknowledging that the stories of children's experiences are yet to be shared because 'it is through story that people are able to understand, make meaning of, and relate experiences, because story is how people make sense of their existence' (Clandinin, Huber, and Murphy, 2011: 576). Against the backdrop of the primary school assessment system in England and my own perceived experiences of it, I sought to understand the stories of children as the key stakeholders in assessment and the extent to which they perceived it to be high-stakes. Before engaging in my own research, I first explored the available literature relating to primary school assessment in England, including whether and how the stories of key stakeholders had previously been shared and interpreted. Chapter 2 consists of: the development of assessment over time; learning and assessment; policy into practice; mental health; and stakeholders' stories. This led me to arrive at my research questions:

1) What did children say was the impact of assessment on their experiences of a) the curriculum; and b) their mental health and well-being?
2) Did children have any recommendations about assessment?

Following on from Chapter 2, in Chapter 3 I explain the methodology used for this study (for which data was collected from within the school I worked in at the time, but no longer) and the reasoning behind it: the methodological framework; my positionality as a researcher (a teacher to the children who became participants in this study); research design; data analysis; and dissemination of findings. Chapter 4 puts forward the data and its interpretation and analysis. This is separated into themes in relation to the research questions, literature review and data. Finally, Chapter 5 includes: a discussion; a summary of the outcomes; contributions to new knowledge; recommendations for policy and practice; limitations; and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

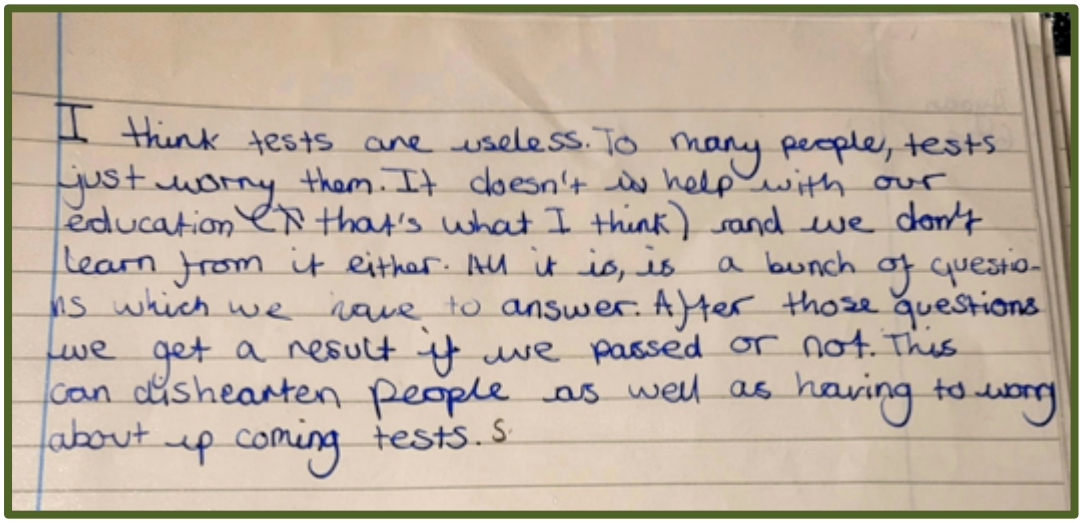

I think tests are useless. To many people, tests just worry them. It doesn't do help with our education (IN that's what I think) and we don't learn from it either. All it is, is a bunch of questions which we have to answer. After those questions we get a result if we passed or not. This can dishearten people as well as having to worry about up coming tests. S

Fig.. 2 Anay's free-writing, pre-SATs

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical overview of the literature related to primary school assessment in England and some of the stories of key stakeholders in relation to it: those who have an interest in educational assessment, such as children, parent/carers, school staff including leadership. In doing so, I first searched for terms in the literature: assessment; high-stakes assessment; tests; and exams, focusing on the English school system as this was the one most familiar to me through my experiences of teaching in primary schools from 2012 to date. Reading enabled me to identify themes across the literature and closer analysis of these themes led to further searching of sub-themes relating to the overarching ones. I have endeavoured to present this review in the chronological order in which events have taken place, reflecting how and why themes have developed over time. Thus, in order to explore the roots of high stakes assessment in English primary schools I explore its origins, beginning with the Second World War (1939-1945) because it was a time of great change in English education and assessment (Barber, 1994; Harland and Lawton, 1988), I then examine the themes that have emerged from this historical context and that can therefore be found within and across

the existing literature. The overarching themes for consideration are: the development of assessment over time; learning and assessment; policy into practice; mental health; and stakeholders' stories. In exploration of these themes, I will draw on examples beyond England and beyond primary schools to provide context and comparisons and to emphasise the point being made. Weaving its way through these themes and their sub-themes are the two strands of 1) curriculum, and 2) mental health and well-being, as these were recurring elements within the literature and their definitions and relevance are discussed throughout this chapter. These strands were also found to be of great importance to the participants at a later stage of the research. (Anay, Fig. 2) and so this chapter provides the backdrop to subsequent chapters of this thesis. Throughout this review, a case will be made for conducting the research and establishing the research questions.

2.2 Assessment over time

2.2.1 Social, economic and international comparisons

The Second World War (1939-1945) had brought to the fore some of the perceived problems regarding the school system as it had been operating since the Education Act 1921. This aim of this Act had been 'to consolidate the enactments relating to Education and certain enactments relating to the Employment of Children and Young Persons' (Crown Copyright, 1921: NP). However, it has been suggested that the years of war highlighted inadequacies in the impact of the provision.

> For twenty years it had been a policy of jam tomorrow. A whole series of forward-looking reports had had only a token effect. The aim of the school system had remained as re-stated in the Education Act of 192I, to provide for all children between the ages of five and fourteen 'efficient elementary instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic.' Notwithstanding this modest nineteenth century aim to teach merely the Three R's, mobilization had shown how inadequate and shallow was the service given in the schools. The armed services were handicapped in their training by the virtual illiteracy of some quarter of the recruits… Wartime expansion of industry required large numbers of skilled men to be trained quickly for

> special trades, but lack of basic educational skills considerably handicapped the process of intensive training.
>
> (Middleton 1972:184)

The standard of education not only affected adults during the war on both the front lines and at home but it also had an effect on children during this time and afterwards. Due to the war, some children had not attended school for some years after being evacuated from major cities and other children who were at school had faced disruption to their learning (Ku, 2016). At the end of the war, calls for reform came under the wider umbrella of social reconstruction and the growth of a welfare state wars' (Burke, 2009; Middleton, 1972; Ørskov and Ydesen, 2018), of which education was one strand (*ibid.*). At this time, the UK was being compared to other countries, such as Germany, where they had chosen to 'strengthen their social democratic infrastructures and invest in social welfare and public education' (Burke, 2009: 425) and educational expansion was seen to be leading to economic gains (Ball, 2021). Thus, the post-war intention was to 'redistribute social goods and resources more equitably and to encourage economic growth and productivity' (Tomlinson, 2005: 13). In the UK, children in education went to elementary school from 5-14 years old but only one out of seven thirteen-year-olds remained in school after that age and only five per cent of children went on to higher education after school (*ibid.*). At the time, these statistics were compared internationally whereby secondary attendance rates were much higher in countries such as Germany, France the United States of America (Ball, 2021). These comparisons prompted the setting up of new systems in schools in England, some of which still exist today, although over time they may have been adapted or replaced by variations on the originals; 'in the UK we have proved to be particularly bad at changing our educational system' (Reay, 2022: 9), paving the way for discussions around the purposes and impact of education (Bradbury et al., 2021; Mccarthy, 2024; Reay, 2020) and educational assessment (Baird et al., 2017; Tennent, 2021). Indeed, throughout this historical account of assessment over time, it would seem that 'change is occurring in the context of large-scale criticism of schools' (Isaacs, 2010), which might explain the evolution of new systems and greater accountability.

2.2.2 New systems, new opportunities

Described as a 'highly significant moment in educational history' (Batteson, 1999: 5) and also as optimistic (Tennent, 2021), the Education Act (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025), also known as the Butler Act (named after the politician who drafted it), was passed in 1944. Within the UK, it applied to England and Wales, whereas Scotland and Northern Ireland had their own corresponding Acts in 1945 and 1947 respectively. This historical separation is relevant to today because it has recently been stated that 'education is a devolved matter in the UK, creating clear differences in policy priorities and modes of governance' (Moss, 2022: 3). To build on this, 'Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own accountability systems that are not necessarily considered high-stakes, [therefore] we focus on England rather than the UK' (Munoz-Chereau, 2022: 1128). This is arguably another reason, along with my personal experience explored in the previous chapter, for this review to concentrate on the development of primary schools in England rather than the rest of the UK.

The Education Act 1944 (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025a) aimed to address issues that had come to the fore in the years prior and the measures put in place set the foundations for initiatives that followed. Selected measures of relevance to my research include: 'special educational treatment' (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025a: 33, 34) for children deemed to have a 'disability' (*ibid.*) was established; school attendance was made free and compulsory for all children up to the age of 15; an element of 'welfare state principles' (Tomlinson, 2005: 51) introduced, including medical inspections, free school meals and milk and grants for school clothing and transport where necessary. This suggests that children's well-being, particularly in regards to health and 'illness' (Day et al, 2006:51), was being considered as a component of education. This is interesting given Reay's recent assertion that 'in the pressurised, inequitable, underfunded system we have in England, caring has never really been part of the agenda… there is little space for caring, let alone love, in our educational system' (2022: 15). Thus, it is useful to continue to track assessment over time to consider what might have changed since the introduction of this act to result in where we are today.

For the overseeing of educational provision, the Education Act 1944 (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025a) stated that Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were to be responsible in local areas which was organised into primary, secondary and further education institutions. Rules were set out for inspections by the Ministry of Education (the central government department responsible for education in England and Wales 1944-1964) and the LEAs, perhaps establishing the roots of school accountability that we arguably have in schools today: an agenda of control' (Proudfoot, 2024: 532,533); and 'a lack of autonomy' (Reay, 2022:11).

This Act also intended to address issues of social inequality (Tomlinson, 2005). Prior to this, access to secondary education was primarily only for those who could afford it (Harland and Lawton, 1988); by ending fees charged for government maintained secondary schools, the Act aimed to offer opportunities for secondary education to more children and from more varied social backgrounds (traditionally known as working , middle and upper classes), 'marking the end of the class antagonisms which has prevailed between the wars' (Middleton, 1972: 1). Despite this, it has been claimed that from 1946, approximately 80 per cent of mainly working-class children were placed in secondary schools that had lesser resources and lower qualified staff compared to other secondary schools (Tomlinson, 2005). This would suggest that inequality in education still prevailed (Batteson, 1999). In addition to this, although provision had been made for the school leaving age to be raised to 15, shortage of teaching staff and school accommodation meant that the compulsory leaving age was postponed until 1947 (Bridges, 1945), further reducing the immediate impact of the Act on children of working-class social backgrounds to the age of 15. In addition to this, the subsequent interpretation of the Act by government commissioned committees supported the proposed tripartite system, which arguably reinforced social inequalities of the time (Batteson, 1999) and paved the way for formal assessments with seemingly high-stakes consequences, which it has been argued further reinforce social inequalities even today; inequality is at the very core of our educational system, sedimented into its values and ethos (Reay, 2022:9).

2.2.3 The tripartite system

The tripartite system separated 11-year-old children into one of three different types of secondary school: grammar, technical and secondary modern. Psychometric approaches had 'emerged at the dawn of the 20th century and focused on assessing mental capabilities of students, such as their intelligence, mental ability, or aptitude, that were hypothesized to underlie learning' (Zimmerman and Dibenedetto, 2008: 207). Children were allocated to a school based on their perceived abilities (Morris and Perry, 2017). The reasoning behind this was explained in the report *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), 1943), also known as the Norwood Report. It stated that the separation of children into three types of school was in the best interest of the child as a member of the community and a human being because it 'would lead them to an occupation where their capacities would be suitably used' (HMSO, 1943: 4). However, Tomlinson has argued that this was actually an 'administratively convenient and educationally spurious notion that there were three types of mind, the academic, the technical and the practical, and that children could be separated at 11 by their measured abilities and aptitudes' (2005: 16). To add to this, it has also been argued recently that particularly the English 'educational system has always been an elite hierarchical one in which the three social classes are mainly educated separately from each other' (Reay, 2022: 9). The means by which the separation occurred offers further insight into assessment at that time.

The *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools* report (HMSO, 1943) claimed that 'special interests and abilities do in fact often reveal themselves clearly by the age of 10+ or 11+' (HMSO, 1943: 4) and to secure entry into one of the three types of secondary school, teacher judgement at primary school was required; it was suggested that this might be reached on the basis of intelligence or performance tests. These tests were, and still are, sometimes referred to as the eleven plus (11+) exams, or tests, due to the age of the children taking the tests. The report went on to acknowledge that not all children would be secure in their special ability by age 11 and so there would be two years at the start of secondary school, during which children could be moved to a different type of school, but again it would be based on the judgement of adults at the school and additional tests as required. The report described further examinations to be

taken prior to entry into university and it also advised that 'a dress rehearsal' (*ibid*.: 29) of the examinations be conducted to minimise the chances of 'possible failure' (*ibid.*). Such suggestions in the report and the choice of language used within it makes clear the weight of the assessments, which would begin in primary school and continue throughout a child's education. The report also planted the seeds of assessment-related policies and practices that are used today: the grouping of children according to perceived ability through setting (Bradbury, et al. 2021); and streaming (Reay, 2022); the SATs (Marshall, 2017) and teacher assessments (Bradbury, et al., 2021), all of which will be explored further later in this chapter.

Returning to the idea of international comparisons, it is worth noting that at this time Germany was an example of a country that was already using a tripartite system of education throughout most of the country (Wiborg, 2010) and to which England compared itself. Against this background of 'tripartitism' (Ball, 2021: 75), Tomlinson has highlighted the role education had in securing English national economic interests at the time; 'post-war government was concerned to provide the workforce desperately needed for economic reconstruction and it made economic sense to hurry as many working class young people through their education and into waiting jobs at 15 as possible' (2005: 16). At the other end of the spectrum, those from the upper classes in society were being better prepared for more powerful and influential positions in life (Tomlinson, 2005). This view is supported by Harland and Lawton (1988) and Ball who agreed that this reinforced a 'class-divided vision of education' (2013: 74) constructed in a way that was believed to best serve both economic and international interests. Reay is in agreement that 'from its inception, English education has been a system that educates the different social classes for different social and economic purpose' (2022: 9) Thus, educational assessment had the consequential outcome of being used to separate children into different schools and potentially different careers, which reflects the high stakes attached to them.

Some of the contemporary research written about these tests criticised the commonly held view of the time that intelligence was fixed and measurable (Floud and Halsey, 1957) and others argued that the intelligence tests used in the selection system were flawed because the questions favoured the middle-class child and so defined the type

of intelligence being measured (Simon, 1953). In addition to this, some LEAs did not have all three types of school available, or even a choice of two different ones, leading to discrepancies within the system (Ball, 2018; Godard, 2015; Harland and Lawton, 1988). These inconsistencies meant that having taken the entry tests, children still did not have equal access to the tripartite system throughout the country. The Ministry of Education published The Nation's School – Their Plan and Purpose (Ministry of Education, 1945), in which it described all three types of school listed in the order of grammar first, then technical, and lastly secondary modern school, which were described as being for a 'considerable number of children whose future employment will not demand any measure of technical skill or knowledge' (Ministry of Education, 1945: 21), revealing an arguably negative aspiration for a child who went to a secondary modern school following the result of their 11+ exams. Within the available literature from this time, it would have been interesting if there were stories told by the children who were subject to the effects of the tripartite system and how this impacted their own perceived well-being, particularly whether they experienced 'low levels of individual well-being' brought about by test scores (Ball 2018). Because of all these concerns, the selection process for secondary schooling quickly became less popular with parents and the public (Morris and Perry, 2017) and was also 'demonstrated to be unfair by educational research' (Harland and Lawton, 1988: 462). As the contemporary view of the tripartite system became subject to more criticism (Ball, 2018), there was a shift towards 'comprehensivisation' (Morris and Perry, 2017; 2). and a change to the high-stakes assessment outcomes that had characterised the tripartite system.

2.2.4 Towards a comprehensive system

The government definition of a comprehensive school at the time was one which was 'intended to provide all the secondary education facilities needed by the children of a given area, but without being organised in clearly defined sides' (Hansard HC Deb., 4th March 1954) and this was an education priority for the Labour government, which replaced the Conservative government in May 1945. In the move towards comprehensive education, the assessment through the 11+ exams was used in a slightly different way than before to secure entry into a secondary school; a 'mixing of intakes was usually achieved by banding, with each banded school constrained to take a certain proportion of children across each ability band' (Godard, 2015: 259). A zoning scheme

was also used, whereby children were assigned to schools based on a school's proximity to where a child lived. According to Harland and Lawton (1988), the main barrier to comprehensivisation during the 1950s and early 1960s was that schools were not being built quickly enough to accommodate a rapidly growing population and also that there was a shortage of teachers. Despite this, there came a 'gradual abandonment of selection at 11+' (Wyse and Torrance, 2009: 214), which appears to suggest that comprehensivisation was the beginnings of a more inclusive approach to education. Again, within the available literature from this time, it would have been interesting to find more about how children perceived this change impacted them. Godard has suggested that the way in which the comprehensive system evolved made England 'a generally fairer country in terms of educational provision, opportunity and outcomes' (2015: 260); it was a more child-centred approach to education, incorporating 'progressive thinking on understanding and knowing the child' (Grosvenor and Myers, 2006:230).

2.2.4 A child-centred approach

It has been claimed that progressive, or 'child-centred', education became the dominant orthodoxy in English primary and secondary modern schools in the post-war period' (Tisdall, 2017). In the 1950s to mid-60s, there was a return to a Conservative government and whilst they continued to support the tripartite system and favoured grammar schools, the Labour party continued to pursue comprehensive schooling. Labour came back into power in 1964 and in 1965 they issued *Circular 10/65 The organisation of secondary education* (Department of Education and Science (DES), 1965), a written statement of policy expecting LEAs to move away from the tripartite system to a comprehensive one. Also, in relation to the concept of grouping children, *The Home and the School* by J.W.B Douglas (1964), Director of the Medical Research Council Unit at the London School of Economics, published findings of a national survey into primary school ability and attainment. He found that working-class children were disadvantaged by both selection and streaming. Similar issues were highlighted in *Children and their Primary Schools* (HMSO, 1967), also known as the Plowden Report, which made several recommendations relating to children's primary education and their transition into secondary school, with a reminder that 'at the heart of the

educational process lies the child' (*ibid.*,:7). Recommendations were as follows: positive discrimination towards children living in poverty; training for teachers to teach English to immigrant children; less reliance on intelligence and attainment tests; and an end to physical pain as a punishment to children. This suggested a new focus on children's well-being from a policy perspective: 'one of the main educational tasks of the primary school is to build on and strengthen children's intrinsic interest in learning and lead them to learn for themselves rather than from fear of disapproval or desire for praise' (*ibid.*:196). The report went on to state that teachers should 'not assume that only what is measurable is valuable' (*ibid.*:202). Thus, the emphasis was not just on well-being, but on developing teaching and learning so that it included a curriculum that inspired and motivated children to learn of their own accord and did not depend on assessment through measurement. However, in 1975 William Tyndale School in London were brought to the public's attention by the media because 'the principal and teachers of the school took child-centeredness to extremes, defying any attempts at control by parents or the local authority… a symbol of the seemingly total absence of accountability in schools at the time' (Whetton, 2009: 138). According to Whetton (2009), this was the beginning of greater school accountability, which would come to have a growing impact as time went on.

Curriculum content had not been such a focus in education prior to the 1960s. Indeed, it had not been mentioned at all in the 1944 Education Act (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025a). However, in 1964, a national advisory group on curriculum and examinations was set up called the Schools Council; this group made different kinds of teaching materials available to school as a central source for resources. Despite this and despite the recommendations by Plowden regarding children's interests (HMSO, 1967), there was still no centralised control of the curriculum other than the tests taken by children when they left secondary school at the age of 16. By the end of the 1960s, questions were being asked about the decline of the grammar schools, progressive teaching methods and 'value for money' in education (Harland and Lawton, 1988: 463). The foundations of school accountability were being built upon and as Barber has stated, 'it explains the demands for a National Curriculum, national assessment, published performance indicators, regular inspection, teacher appraisal and performance-related pay' (1994: 355), all of which were to be configured over the coming years.

2.2.5 Accountability versus autonomy

As the purpose of and approach to education continued to evolve, the government became increasingly involved in school life and there was a back and forth between the notions of accountability and autonomy. For example, in 1974 the Department for Education and Science (DES), which had replaced the Ministry of Education in 1963, set up the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU). This promoted the development of assessment and monitoring of children's attainment and commissioned research teams to create instruments and methods of assessment in the subjects Science, Maths, Foreign languages and Design and technology. Surveys were carried out using samples of children and findings were reported back to the government, LEAs and schools. The APU also made available booklets for teachers detailing accounts of what was tested and summaries of performance. At the same time, Labour's Education Act 1976 (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025b) put the principle of the comprehensivisation into law. Also, around this time, legislation such as the Warnock Report (HMSO, 1978) supported the integration of children with SEND into mainstream schools, signifying an 'egalitarian belief that a common school should be inclusive of children of all abilities' (Thomlinson, 2005: 36), in line with the vision of comprehensive schooling.

Comprehensivisation was then repealed by the Conservative's Education Act 1979 (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025c), which marked the end of comprehensivisation as government policy. One example of the impact of this was that the Conservative-controlled Bolton council decided (by one vote) to stop its comprehensive scheme, which meant that 3,000 children suddenly had to take 11+ tests and then when Labour regained control four years later (1976), Bolton finally went comprehensive again.

Prior to the latter stages of the 1970s, there was less centralised control of education (Harland and Lawton, 1988) but in 1977, Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) issued Curriculum 11-16 (DES, 1977), which in their view provided a curriculum that was more suited to preparation for the exams taken by 16-year-olds. A few years later, the DES published The School Curriculum (DES 1981), which set out guidelines for LEAs and schools requiring them to report back on their curriculum planning policies. Schools had now become more accountable to the central government, which could be

interpreted as being high-stakes as they were having to answer to them regarding children's attainment. In 1979, the Conservative Party came back into power and stayed in power until 1997 pursuing their policies, which were in contrast to comprehensive ideals.

Writing in 1988, Harland and Lawton had predicted that new legislation would continue to threaten existing comprehensive schooling by creating hierarchies between and within schools. They imagined that pupils' anticipated performance would lead to children being prepared for different tests or questions through ability grouping in schools. Thus, they worried that children's learning would be dictated by the acquisition and application of knowledge being 'reinforced by the pattern of assessment' (Harland and Lawton, 1988: 466) and as illustrated in the sections that followed, this was characterised by 'successive governments [that] introduced new, centrally controlled, curriculum and assessment instruments' (Isaacs, 2010: 317). The Education Reform Act 1988 (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025d) paved the way for some of Harland and Lawton's 1988 predictions to come into practice, beginning with a more centralised curriculum that increased the high-stakes nature of assessment.

2.2.6 Centralised curriculum

The Education Reform Act 1988 (Legislation.gov.uk Website (2025d) established a National Curriculum and Key stages for the first time. It detailed what was to be to be taught. For example, the three core subjects (English, Mathematics and Science) were distinguished from the seven foundation subjects (History, Geography, Technology, Music, Art, Physical education and a Modern foreign language in KS3 and KS4). This marked a change in that it was the first time these foundation subjects were made a compulsory part of the curriculum alongside reading, writing and maths, as the Act aimed to create a more 'balanced and broadly based curriculum' (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025d: 1). Attainment targets and programmes of study were also to be established and almost 20 years later it was acknowledged as 'what they learn is spelled out in great detail, and they are constantly assessed to try to ensure that they have learned it' (Isaacs, 2010: 319). However, this level of prescriptive detail, 'though

remarkable for the scope of the changes that it envisages, should not be seen as a sudden unpredictable change of direction… [but rather as] the culmination of a series of measures designed to challenge the autonomy of both teachers and local education authorities' (Harland and Lawton, 1988: 465). For example, 'one of the main 'drivers' was explicitly to reduce local authority control over schools even if that meant massively extending central government powers' (Smith and Exley, 2006: 585). One way in which this was achieved was through the setting up of grant-maintained schools, which would get their funding directly from central government rather than LEAs, therefore making the schools more accountable to the government.

> The 1944 Act, forged during the war against fascism, steered clear of the curriculum altogether. …it is a supreme irony that the most centralised government of century - one which fixed the price of hake daily - avoided prescribing the curriculum altogether, while 40 years later a government elected to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' prescribed it to a degree unprecedented in this country or elsewhere.
>
> (Barber, 1994: 353)

To follow on from this prescribed curriculum content, the reform act (Legislation.gov.uk Website, 2025d) also required that a suitable assessment system be set up. A School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) and a National Curriculum Council was set up, which in 1993 merged to become the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) and in 1997, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The role of the SEAC included reviewing exams and assessments of the curriculum, publishing assessment information and moderation of assessments. These regular changes in regulatory bodies in a short amount of time were politically motivated and led to inconsistencies in arrangements (Whetton, 2009).

Proposals for a new assessment system were made following the formation of the Policy Task Group on Assessment (TGAT); this was a coming together of volunteer researchers by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). They distinguished between assessment as a 'general term enhancing all methods customarily used to appraise performance of an individual pupil or a group' (DES and WO, 1988, Preface and Glossary) and a test as:

> … any assessment conducted within formal and specified procedures, designed to ensure comparability of results between different test administrators and between different test occasions. For some it implies a set of written questions, externally prescribed, with written responses marked according to rigid rules; for others, any of a broad range of assessment instruments with standardised rules of administration and marking which ensure comparability of results.
>
> (DES and WO, 1988, Preface and Glossary)

Pupils were to attain levels against set criteria. Thus, it appears that comparisons were key to this new system of assessment, which had a high-stakes element to it. The group explained the purpose of the system: formative (ongoing) assessment; summative (overall) assessment; evaluative of teachers and schools; informative to parents; and the professional development of teachers' (DES and WO, 1988). However, 'the mode of assessment was not set in stone in the earliest incarnation of the national curriculum' (Isaacs, 2010: 319).

It has been noted that 'several accounts of this first implementation have been published. These give the story from the viewpoints of various participants in the events' (Whetton, 2009: 140). These included a politician's story, a chief executive's story, the new system's architect's story, a council member's story, a union official's story and a test developer's story (*ibid.*) However, an interesting omission is that none of these early accounts include the stories of the children or teachers involved. Despite the task group's recommendations for formative assessment to be the 'principal means of raising standards and… it should be central to any national assessment policy… it was almost completely ignored in subsequent developments' (Black, 2020: 407), with the government being 'sceptical, branding it complex, too reliant on formative assessment, and expensive' (Isaacs, 2010: 320) thus change was very limited. Despite this, the new curriculum in 1988 brought with it the introduction of the SATs in 1991. The history from this point onwards has been summarised by Whetton as follows:

> … stages of the history have been: the initial establishment of a system; a turbulent revolt and a simplification of that system; then a period of relative stability but with a gradual increase in the uses and purposes of the assessment system and a growth in the influence of the accountability purpose; and most recently, a search for an alternative system.

(Whetton, 2009: 138)

Thus, this review will now explore the SATs system, and its impact related to the continued growth of school accountability.

2.2.7 Testing times

SATs in England today are made up of a combination of what has been described as high-stakes testing (Parliament. House of Commons, 2017) and teacher assessment (Gov.uk Website, 2024c). Key stage 1 SATs were introduced in May 1991, followed by Key stage 2 SATs in 1994 and Key stage 3 SATs in 1997 (Collins, 2011). The assessments were only introduced in the core subjects on English, Maths and Science (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1988: 2). Described as 'the first part of the assessment regime to be put into place' (Whetton, 2009: 142), the assessments that were first introduced in Key stage 1 in 1991 were based on cross-curricular open-ended tasks carried out in the classroom (Hutchison and Schagen, (eds.). 1994; Dearing, 1994). By cross-curricular, I mean that the tests were not specific to one discrete subject. However, these tasks were then replaced by more formal subject-specific tasks (*ibid.*). The assessments in Key stages 2 and 3 comprised of more formal tests from the outset (*ibid.*).

At the time of their introduction, the results of both the SATs tests and the teacher assessment elements were initially reported using a scale of attainment levels, which had consisted of assessing pupils' performance against the level descriptors within the curriculum, numbered from 1 to 8 across all of the four Key stages. It was regarded as the national expectation that pupils would receive a Level 2 by the end of KS1, Level 4 at the end of KS2 and Level 5 or 6 by the age of 14 (QCA, 2010). Over time, the SATs were modified on an on-going basis to reflect the changing content of the National Curriculum.

In KS1, the statutory outcome of Year 2 children in Reading, Writing, Maths and Science was recorded by teacher assessment, which could be supported by test results

in line with a school's assessment policy (Standards and Testing Agency (STA) 2018c). This means that for Reading, Writing and Maths, teachers made a judgement of one of the following in regard to the expected age-related standard:

- Working at Greater Depth within the Expected Standard
- Working at the Expected Standard
- Working towards the Expected Standard
- Foundations for the Expected Standard
- Below the Standard of the pre-Key stage

For Science, children could only be judged as 'Working at the Expected Standard', or not yet having met the expected standard for their age and there was no Science test. Each judgement band above is illustrated in the Teacher Assessment guidance with reference to descriptors of performance (STA, 2018a, 2018b). To achieve any one of the standards, children must have achieved all the descriptors within that band. However, for children working below the standard of National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014 (described in some schools as working towards), such as some children with SEND, a separate judgement was permitted to be made using the Pre-Key stage documentation (STA, 2018b). In addition to this, there was an optional grammar, punctuation and spelling test to support writing judgements. In response to these changes, teachers' unions balloted their members about boycotting the SATs (Isaacs, 2010). Following the criticism, there was a curriculum review by Chair of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Ron Dearing (Dearing, 1994), which resulted in the attainment targets being replaced with progressive level descriptors.

The government felt that 'the key stage 3 testing was not justified. Parents could obtain information from GCSE results and a new system of 'real-time reporting of progress' would be developed for tracking individual pupils' (Whetton 2009 154). Thus, in 2008, the KS3 SATs were stopped. In 2009, compulsory KS2 Science SATs were dropped in favour of teacher assessments and sampling. Additionally, after a 2010 change in government, in 2011 the QCA was replaced with the Standards and Testing Agency (STA).

It was announced by the government in 2017 that KS1 SATs would be stopped from the 2021-22 academic year. It was planned that these would be replaced by a Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) from 2020. However, the ending of the Key stage 1 SATs was delayed until the 2022-23 academic year and the introduction of the RBA to September 2021, both due to the pandemic (Covid-19). The ending of the KS1 tests was then further delayed by one year, after which they continued to be published so schools could optionally administer them. The KS2 SATs remained.

Turning now to when children are in Year 6 during their final year of KS2, Today, children take written SATs in three subjects (Table 1.2): Reading; Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling; and Maths (one paper on arithmetic and two on mathematical reasoning). Writing is assessed against the Key stage 2 Teacher Assessment Guidance 2025 (Gov.uk Website, 2024c). Prior to 2016 and as had been the case with the KS1 SATs before they were stopped, children's attainments in KS2 SATs were reported as levels. The available judgements at the time are summarised in the table below.

Table 2.1 – Judgements for SATs prior to 2016

<table>
<tr><th>Broad ability</th><th>Mathematics</th><th>Reading</th><th>Writing</th><th>Science</th></tr>
<tr><td>Above Expected</td><td rowspan="2">Working at the Expected Standard</td><td rowspan="2">Working at the Expected Standard</td><td>Working at Greater Depth within the Expected Standard</td><td rowspan="2">Working at the Expected Standard</td></tr>
<tr><td>Expected Standard</td><td>Working at the Expected standard</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Below Expected</td><td>Has Not Met the Expected Standard</td><td>Working Towards the Expected Standard</td><td>Has Not Met the Expected Standard</td><td rowspan="3">Has Not Met the Expected Standard</td></tr>
<tr><td>Growing Development of the Expected Standard</td><td>Growing Development of the Expected Standard</td><td>Growing Development of the Expected Standard</td></tr>
<tr><td>Early Development of the Expected Standard</td><td>Early Development of the Expected Standard</td><td>Early Development of the Expected Standard</td></tr>
</table>

	Foundations for the Expected Standard	Foundations for the Expected Standard	Foundations for the Expected Standard	
	Below the Standard of the pre-Key stage	Below the Standard of the pre-Key stage	Below the Standard of the pre-Key stage	

The available judgements at KS2 were different to those in KS1 in that Reading and Maths had 6 available judgements as the statutory focus was on the test results, whereas writing had 7 available judgements because it was part of the statutory accountability judgement, thus based solely on the teacher assessment. Science only had two available judgements, which could be interpreted as making it seem less important than English or Maths. Across all three subjects, the judgements did not have the refinements needed.

The Independent Review of Key Stage 2 testing, Assessment and Accountability: Final Report (Lord Bew, 2011) recommended that the system of National Curriculum levels used to report attainment should be reviewed and in 2013, Michael Gove, then Education Minister, announced that when the new version of the National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014) was introduced to schools from 2014, there would no longer be the system of attainment levels (DfE, 2014b). When, in 2014, the existing version of the curriculum was replaced by a new National Curriculum (Gov.uk Website, 2014), it came with a new definition of assessment as a system 'which enables schools to check what pupils have learned and whether they are on track to meet expectations at the end of the Key stage, and to report regularly to parents' (DfE, 2014b: 2). Commonly referred to as 'assessment without levels' (Williams, 2015), this contrasted with the previous situation and required assessment to be built into the teaching and learning of the curriculum *(ibid.).* To replace the previous system, the DfE stated that the 'Government will not impose a single system for ongoing assessment' (DfE, 2014a: n.p), but outlined three core principles of effective assessment within schools: (1) give reliable information to parents about how their child, and their child's school, is performing; (2) help drive improvement for pupils and teachers; (3) make sure the school is keeping up with external best practice and innovation (*ibid*.). Thus, it was left to individual schools to implement these principles and administer assessments in the

way they best saw fit. Subsequently, this resulted in tests and teacher assessments following different models at each Key stage. Therefore, since 2016, the old system with levels was no longer used.

A scaled score system was put in place and remains in place. It has been explained by the government as follows.

> … we need to convert the total number of marks a pupil gets in a test (their 'raw' score) into a scaled score to ensure we can make accurate comparisons of pupil performance over time. Pupils scoring at least 100 will have met the expected standard on the test. However, given that the difficulty of the tests may vary each year, the number of raw score marks needed to achieve a scaled score of 100 may also change. For example, if the overall difficulty of a test decreases compared with previous years, the raw score required to meet the expected standard will increase. Similarly, if the test is more difficult, the raw score required to meet the expected standard will decrease… The raw scores for each test are calculated by adding the scores from each paper for a subject.
>
> (Gov.uk Website, 2024i: n.p.)

For Maths, Reading and SPaG, the scaled score from the test results in one of three judgements: working towards the expected standard; working at the expected standard; and working at greater depth within the expected standard. These are the same judgements used for Writing, but Writing continues to be based on teacher judgement. Science also stayed the same in that there are still only two judgements available: not met the expected standard and working at the expected standard, also based on teacher judgement. Tennent (2021) writes critically about the impact of using of scaled scores:

> … [a scaled score] allows for children to be judged against each other and to be placed in a type of rank order. As such, scores in these tests are being viewed normatively. The reasons for this are likely to political… the desire to make comparisons on both national and international levels has led to a move towards standardised measurements of learning, of the type used in psychological testing.
>
> (Tennent, 2021: 482)

As with the previous system of SATs judgements, the scaled scores can be seen as politically motivated based on international comparisons. Additionally, Tennent (2021) links these scaled scores to the psychometric testing that characterised the intelligence tests of the tripartite system (Section 2.2.3) and arguably still exist today (Section 2.3.1). It has been argued that in one way, assessment without levels marked a major change in England's assessment system (Williams, 2015). In his speech on assessment after levels, Gibbs stated that 'levels have been a distracting, over-generalised label, giving misleading signals about the genuine attainment of pupils' (2015: n.p.). At the same time, one could argue that one system of levels and judgements has simply been replaced by a different form of levels and judgement. The question remains as to whether the changes implemented through assessment without levels have created an assessment system that is more or less high-stakes in nature, or whether the outcomes are much the same as what had come before. It has been suggested that the SATs, albeit in their new form, still have highly consequential outcomes.

Other than the KS2 SATs, statutory assessment data is taken at the following stages of children's primary school and secondary school experience (Table 1.2): Reception in the form of the RBA; Year 1 Phonics screening check; Year 4 Multiplication tables check; and Year 10 and 11 GCSE exams. In other year groups, there are no statutory tests but as revealed in Chapter 1, some school still decide to test children themselves. Launched from 2021, the RBA is an assessment of Reception-aged children's ability to carry out tasks at their school starting point (within the first 6 weeks of starting school). Despite the government stating this information is not shared with parents but is used at the 'end of year 6 to form the school-level progress measure' (Gov.uk Website, 2024g: n.p.), it has been claimed in some cases that 'the information is passed on to parents and to year 1 teachers and is also used in a formative way during the foundation stage' (Isaacs, 2010: 321). This is because although the numerical score 'will not be available to parents, pupils, teachers, schools, or external bodies' (NFER Website, 2025b: n.p.), teachers 'will receive a series of short, narrative statements' (*ibid.*) about a child's performance, which need only be shared with parent/carers if they request it and not as a matter of course. Additionally, the government guidance states 'the assessment will enable us to create school-level progress measures for primary schools which show the progress pupils make from reception until the end of key stage 2 (KS2). We will publish these measures for all-through primaries in the summer of 2028 for the

first time'(*ibid.*). This is a reminder of the high-stakes nature of assessment for schools. The assessment of Phonics in Year 1 became statutory in 2012 and tests a child's ability to 'decode' words, rather than recognising words on sight (Parliament. House of Commons, 2018). The Multiplication tables check in Year 4 is to see if children can fluently recall their times tables. In secondary school, children sit their GCSE exams. Results are reported to using a numerical scale of 9 (the highest grade) to 1 (the lowest grade). The results of the Phonics test, Multiplication test and GCSEs are all published by the government online, making the assessments high-stakes for schools. Additionally, explicitly described as 'secondary accountability measures' (Gov.uk Website, 2024h) Progress 8 measures the progress children make between their SATs at Key stage 2, to their GCSEs in Key stage 4 and Attainment 8 is the average measure of a child's progress taken from across their 8 best performing subjects GCSE, further increasing the stakes for schools and children. To further appreciate the impact of these many assessments through a child's school life, it is worthwhile exploring further the concepts of learning and assessment: how children learn; different types of assessment; and assessment policy.

2.3 Learning and assessment

2.3.1 How children learn

The first part of this chapter has tracked the historical development of assessment to provide the background to what assessment looks like today. It has been commented on that 'although the impact of high-stakes national and international assessments on teaching and learning is considered in the literature, remarkably, there is little research on the connection between theories of learning and educational assessments. (Baird et al., 2017: 317). I will now examine theories on how children learn, before considering different types of assessment linked to theories of how children learn.

There are many influential theories of learning that have been developed to explain how children learn. Behaviourist approaches had previously dominated educational thinking and had focused on observable and measurable outcomes that could be controlled. However, theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Dewey, Bandura and Dweck

offered a view of learning as an active, social, and meaning-making process. Their ideas continue to inform current debates about teaching, learning and assessment.

Dewey (1938a) emphasised the importance of experience in learning. He argued that education should be rooted in real-life situations and problems and that learners should then reflect on their experiences. Dewey's approach influenced progressive educational theories and highlighted the need for learning environments that promote inquiry and reflection.

Piaget's (1952) work challenged the idea of learners as passive recipients of knowledge. He argued that children construct understanding through interactive engagement with their environment as they make sense of new experiences. According to his theories, children's learning has different stages of growth and is individual to the child in the way in which it develops.

Building on this, Vygotsky's theories (1978) moved attention away from the individual to the social context of learning. His theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed that children learn best when they are supported by others such as peers, teachers, or parent/carers. Thus, children move forward from what they can do independently to what they can achieve with assistance. Vygotsky also emphasised the cultural nature of learning, suggesting that language and social interaction are central to the development of higher-order thinking.

Bruner (1960, 1976) developed Vygotsky's ideas further, introducing the concept of scaffolding to describe how teachers can structure learning to support learners. Bruner viewed education as a process of discovery and problem-solving rather than rote learning. He argued that understanding is built through dialogue and exploration. His view aligns with social constructivism, in which knowledge is not transmitted but co-constructed through interaction.

Bruner also highlighted the central role of narrative and storytelling in how people make sense of the world and construct meaning. In his later work, (1990, 1996) he argued that human thought operates through two complementary modes: the paradigmatic, which is logical and analytical, and the narrative, which organises

experience through stories. He suggested that stories are fundamental to learning because they allow individuals to link new information to existing understanding in personally and culturally meaningful ways. Through narrative, learners can interpret their experiences. In the classroom, storytelling provides a way for teachers and students to co-construct understanding, making concepts more accessible and memorable. Bruner's emphasis on narrative aligns with the broader social constructivist view that learning is a meaning-making process, related to language, culture, and interaction.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory also contributed to a broader understanding of learning as social. Bandura proposed that children learn through observing and modelling the behaviours of others, reinforcing the idea that learning occurs through participation in social contexts rather than in isolation. Central to Bandura's later work is the concept of self-efficacy, which is an individual's belief in their own capacity to succeed at specific tasks (Bandura, 1997). High self-efficacy enhances motivation, resilience, and persistence, while low self-efficacy limits engagement and performance. In educational contexts, self-efficacy helps learners approach challenges with confidence and view mistakes as opportunities for growth.

Building on these perspectives, Carol Dweck's (2000, 2006) theory of growth mindset extends Bandura's ideas by exploring how beliefs about intelligence shape motivation and learning. Dweck distinguishes between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset, which views intelligence as developable through effort and effective learning strategies. Learners with a growth mindset are more likely to embrace challenges, persevere through setbacks, and engage with feedback to improve. Thus, when teachers emphasise progress and effort, they help learners' self-efficacy and resilience, supporting ongoing improvement as opposed to test performance, for example.

Taken together, these perspectives offer a view of learning that is interactive and developmental. Interpreted this way, assessment should not simply be a tool for measurement but a way to support and extend learning. Formative assessment, as discussed by Black and Wiliam (1998), emphasises the importance of feedback, dialogue, and reflection in helping learners to understand their progress and identify next steps. Encouraging a growth mindset and supporting self-efficacy within formative

frameworks can empower learners to take ownership of their learning, persevere through challenge, and view assessment as a tool for growth and further learning. This approach contrasts with judgements based on performance in high-stakes testing.
Formative frameworks are one type of assessment amongst many different types of assessment and these variations are explored below.

2.3.2 Types of assessment

As introduced in Chapter 1, assessment can be defined as being used to 'investigate what people know and can do [emphasis in original]' (Baird et al., 2017). Another alternative definition is 'a judgement which can be justified according to specific weighted set goals, yielding comparative or numerical ratings' (Taras, 2005: 467). However, there is debate about whether assessment needs to be related to goals or result in comparisons or ratings. Under the umbrella term of assessment there are many variants based on the way in which the judgement is arrived at and its use. Student selection under the tripartite system (Section 2.2.3) was based on perceived intelligence measures. Zimmerman and Dibenedetto noted that '30 years ago, Carver (1974) questioned the appropriateness and effectiveness of psychometric approaches for instructional evaluation purposes' (2008: 207). Thus, in this section, some different forms of assessment and its purposes are considered: This will include an exploration of what feedback is and the discreet nature of attainment and achievement. Next, I will examine distinctions between summative, formative, ipsative, normative and dynamic assessment, before considering the notion of teacher judgement and self and peer assessment. I will then discuss the development of policy in relation to the various forms of assessment. The purpose of this exploration of the different types of assessment is to provide context for how and why assessment policy is enacted the way it is today, through what is arguably high-stakes testing.

Summative assessment typically occurs at the end of a unit, term, or key stage and is used to provide an overall judgement about what has been learned (Taras, 2005; Kibble, 2017). It aligns most closely with behaviourist and accountability-driven models of education, where learning is evidenced by measurable outcomes. Summative assessments, such as national SATs, are often considered high-stakes because they can

influence school reputation, funding, and pupil progression. However, critics argue that summative assessments "do not adequately highlight individual areas of strength and weakness" (Tennent, Stainthorp and Stuart, 2008: 444) and may fail to capture the complexity of children's understanding. Children may appear to meet standards yet lack the deeper comprehension needed to succeed at subsequent stages (ibid.: 445). This resonates with my own classroom experiences, such as with the summative test on light described in Section 1.6, where scores did not reflect the depth of pupils' conceptual understanding.

In contrast to summative assessment is formative assessment, which it has been suggested is 'at the other end of the spectrum' (Kibble, 2016: 110). Formative assessment fits more closely with constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1960; Black and Wiliam, 1998). This includes 'assessments for learning [rather] than assessments of learning' (*ibid.*) (Section 2.3.3). Despite assessments for learning being contrasted with assessments of learning (Baird et al., 2017), there is a lot of debate over the precise definitions of each. There is a 'broad agreement that this is a complex relationship in which functions overlap' (Baird et al., 2017: 337) and that they are not opposites. Importantly, the assessments themselves are not formative or summative, but the way in which assessment is used and the subsequent inferences made about a child's ability is what creates the distinction between formative and summative (Black and Wiliam, 2018). As an example, if one were to assess a child's knowledge of the alphabet; a summative assessment could be that a child knows 75% of the alphabet and a more formative assessment would be that they need to learn the last 6 or 7 letters. Thus, the same assessment could be used both summatively and/or formatively.

Beyond the continuum of formative and summative assessment, other assessment types offer alternative perspectives on learner progress. Ipsative assessment compares a learner's current performance with their own previous achievements, aligning closely with Dweck's growth-mindset approach (2000, 2006) and promoting self-reflection and resilience (Hughes, 2011). Normative assessment compares performance against that of others, often through standardised testing, which can motivate some learners but risk discouraging others when competition outweighs collaboration. Dynamic assessment, derived from Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the ZPD, focuses on the

potential for learning rather than the current level of attainment. It examines how learners respond to support and scaffolding, providing information about learning processes rather than outcomes (Lidz and Elliott, 2000).

Two further variations on how assessment can take place are 'self' and 'peer assessment'. Consistent with social-constructivist theories, self and peer assessment position learners as active participants in the assessment process. These are forms of assessment by the children themselves, rather than by the teacher although there may be some guidance or direction by the teacher. Topping defines peer assessment as 'an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners' (2009: 1). In the primary classroom this might be a child evaluating other children's written work or something similar, such as a presentation or performance. Topping (2009) found that peer assessment can be an effective classroom tool, which can be even more reliable and valid than teacher assessment because it is 'available in greater volume and with greater immediacy than teacher feedback' (2009:20). However, Topping's own research focuses on a secondary school setting (children aged 11-16 years old) and so the findings might not be the same with younger children. Indeed, much of the existing literature on peer assessment has been written about learners of a secondary school age or older (Huisman et al., 2018; Topping, 1998; Topping, 2009). More recently, Boon's (2015) study of 6 primary school pupils in England showed that the teaching and modelling of peer assessment skills was absolutely necessary to ensure accurate and valuable peer assessment was given. In support of this conclusion, Leenknecht and Prins (2018) examined peer assessment amongst 95 primary school aged pupils in the Netherlands. Their study found that pupils gave feedback that lacked in questions and explanations and was therefore not so valuable to their peers. This reinforces the view that assessment is itself a learned practice and that developing assessment literacy among learners is integral to effective classroom assessment (Willis, Adie and Klenowski, 2013).

As theories of learning emphasise the importance of feedback, dialogue, and learner agency, there remains tension between formative, learner-centred assessment and summative, performance-driven accountability systems. In England, assessment policy has increasingly prioritised accountability through high-stakes testing, shaping

classroom practice and narrowing the curriculum (Alexander, 2010; Baird et al., 2017). These multiple and varied definitions of assessment have led to a variety of policy initiatives and interpretations in education over time.

2.3.3 Assessment policy

By the late 1990s, education had become firmly established as a central political issue in the UK. As Bateson observed, "education has been an important political issue for most of the 1980s and 1990s. Government and opposition have expressed persisting anxieties about the performance of schools and have been eager to formulate new policies" (1997: 363). These anxieties reflected the growing association between educational outcomes, economic competitiveness, and international standing, themes that have continued to shape policy into the 21st century (Ball, 2018; Grek, 2020).

A significant policy idea that has permeated educational assessment was a variation on assessment for learning: the concept of 'assessment for learning' (AfL). This had its origins in the setting up of the TGAT in 1989 (Section 2.2.6). In 1996, the task group was no longer supported by BERA and changed its name to the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) which was funded by the Nuffield Foundation: a charitable trust that according to its website 'funds research, analysis, and student programmes that advance educational opportunity and social well-being across the United Kingdom' (Nuffield Foundation website, 2025). The Nuffield Foundation explains that the aim of the ARG was to ensure that government policy makers considered research evidence. The ARG also worked with LEAs and teachers to enhance understanding of the educational assessment and their findings were disseminated through publications, seminars and conferences before it was dissolved in 2010. In 1996, two members of the ARG, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, conducted a literature review on the use of assessment to help with learning. Based on the evidence they found, they published a guide for practitioners called 'Inside the Black Box' (Black and Wiliam, 1998), followed by further related publications.

Further to this work of Black and Wiliam (1998), the ARG published ten research-based principles for AfL, to serve as a guide to classroom policy on assessment. In summary: AfL should be part of effective planning; focus on how students learn;

recognise that assessment is central to classroom practice; be regarded as a key skill; be sensitive and constructive; consider learner motivation; promote goals and success criteria; give guidance on how to improve; create opportunities for self-assessment; and celebrate a range of the achievements of all learners (2002: n.p.). The definition of assessment provided by the ARG was 'the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning' (2002: n.p.) and this was also the definition adopted by the government in their Assessment for learning Guidance for senior leaders (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2004).

A distinction was drawn between 'assessment for learning' compared to 'assessment of learning'.

> The term 'assessment for learning' is then used to describe the process by which teachers use assessment evidence to inform their teaching, and 'assessment of learning' refers to the use of assessment to determine the extent to which students have achieved intended learning outcomes.
>
> (Black and Wiliam, 2018: 553)

In this way, if AfL was seen as a more formative assessment, assessment of learning was more summative. In June 2008 'the government announced spending of £150 million on a programme calling itself 'The Assessment for Learning Strategy'… the mass messages may not have been what the originators wished for (Whetton, 2009: 152). Writing in 2011, Black stated that subsequently, the term 'formative assessment' was increasingly replaced by 'assessment for learning', even though 'its precise meaning was rarely defined, beyond the idea that assessment should be used during instruction to improve learning outcomes' (Black, 2011: 11.).

A third variation of this known as 'assessment as learning' was also devised. It positioned learners as active participants in the assessment process – engaging in self and peer assessment to monitor their own progress (Earl, 2013; Clark, 2012). This shift aligned with constructivist and metacognitive approaches to learning, linking assessment directly to learner autonomy and reflection.

Over time, however, the policy landscape surrounding AfL became entangled with broader systems of accountability. While AfL was designed to enhance learning through formative dialogue, its incorporation into performance management frameworks risked transforming it into yet another compliance mechanism. The tensions between formative intentions and summative policy measures – between assessment for and assessment of learning – thus came to symbolise the wider contradictions of performativity in education. These tensions, and their manifestation in the daily realities of schools, form the focus of the next section, which explores how policy translates into practice and the consequences of performativity for curriculum, pedagogy, and well-being.

2.4 Policy into practice

2.4.1 Pressures of performativity

It has become clear that the historical, societal and cultural context, including international comparisons, has contributed to changes in educational assessment policies over time: 'the history of education policy is a mixture of reluctance, meddlesomeness, and muddle' (Ball, 2018: 209). In practice, these have resulted in pressures for schools, teachers and children to perform.

> What counts as education is in the current policy context, to a great extent, formed and produced by its measurement – that is, quality in education is defined in terms of performance, and what are referred to as educational standards are rendered as performance outputs.
>
> (Ball, 2018: 234)

These pressures of performativity are the subject of this section, before I explore what this looks like in the classroom and beyond: divisions and inequality; curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test; setting and interventions; impact on life outside school; and impact on life beyond school.

Tests throughout a child's school career continue to invite international comparisons (Gibbs, 2015). The concept of high-stakes assessment exists in many education systems

worldwide (Polesel et al., 2014). Indeed, Polesel et al. state that 'the current Australian approach may be said to have its origins in current educational policy structures in both the USA and the UK' (2014: 641), both of which the authors claim are educational settings based on high-stakes assessment. Black and Wiliam (2018) also draw a comparison between the high-stakes nature of assessment in these three countries specifically, although they acknowledge that there is some debate surrounding whether or not the Australian system, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (NAP Website, 2025), can be described as high-stakes as other countries. This is because, unlike some other settings, Australian schools are not currently at risk of being labelled as failing linked to test outcomes. However, two years after the launch of NAPLAN in 2008 (NAP Website, 2025), the Australian government launched a publicly accessible website called MySchool (MySchool website, 2025) that published the results of the tests for all to see. Thus, individual schools' data was made available to all for analysis, scrutiny and comparison with other schools despite the lack of explicit labelling, similar to the accountability within the English system.

Political aims for the education system became increasingly public after 1996 when the government started to publish performance tables: the results of the national curriculum tests. National newspapers published rank orders of schools based on test results, leading schools to scramble for ever higher places in national league tables. (Isaacs, 2010: 324). This put pressure on schools whereby 'inclusion of SATs data in league tables fosters competition between schools and creates a constant sense of threat for these headteachers, who fear one 'bad' set of results which will trigger an Ofsted inspection' (Bradbury, Braun and Quick, 2021: 158), which resonates with my personal experience when one headteacher told me that schools lie or die by their SATs results (Section 1.3).

In 1997, the new Labour government famously stated that its priorities were 'education, education, education', heralding an unbroken era of government influence over the national curriculum. It introduced literacy and numeracy strategies, which measured schools' success in those areas by the test scores their students achieved, as well as a target culture, mandating ever-higher proportions of students reaching certain levels of attainment. National curriculum assessment continued to be used for a variety of purposes: as a tool to raise standards; to ascertain individual students' progress; to judge

individual teacher performance; to ascertain where intervention in a school was necessary; and to hold schools accountable (Isaacs, 2010: 324).

Guimaraes et al. (2016) state that assessment in England, in its current form, consists of statutory testing based largely on English and Maths enabling the government to compare this data from the time that children enter full-time education at 4-5 years old, to various points in their education such as the end of primary school. Moreover, they imply that measuring the added value between these two points of assessment is to satisfy the government's desire for accountability, thus contributing to the 'assessment and accountability regime' (*ibid*., 2016; 249). According to Isaac, 'education is largely couched in economic terms – with considerable attention being given to making schools more like businesses' (2010: 319). Thus, the pressures to perform can be interpreted as a 'form of performance management derived from business practices rather than educational principles' (Ball, 2018: 207).

In stark contrast to the high-stakes settings describe above, there are countries that have not adopted this approach. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ratings on student achievement at aged 15, in 2011 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Website, 2025), countries that a school system that relies more on teacher judgement and minimally on testing and other central government intervention into local schooling have, in the past, scored well (Berliner, 2011). At the same time, 'recent decades have seen rapid growth in international educational tests… reflecting an emergent global testing regime' (Ramirez, Schoffer, and Meyer, 2018: 344). Thus, it has been argued, that these tests have led to wider societal divisions and inequality in addition to their impact on the classroom and the curriculum.

2.4.2 Divisions and inequality

The high-stakes assessment culture has been shown to reproduce and legitimise broader social inequalities. Kurt writes that childhood is a variable that 'can never be completely separated from other variables such as class, gender or ethnicity. Comparative and

cross-cultural analysis reveals diverse childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon' (2022: 732). This is reflected in education and assessment.

> …it is important to remember that the tests themselves are seen as detrimental to children, and especially those children with lower past attainment and those who are otherwise marginalised… The SATs assessments are in themselves, ultimately, a practice of division, designating children as at Age Related Expectation (ARE) or not. This binary between success and failure, passing or failing, is a brutal division of children at age 11. There are of course further levels of division too, such as those that are given ARE but do not reach GD, who may also feel like they have failed…
>
> (Bradbury et al., 2021: 158)

As Ball observes, performativity not only measures performance but also reproduces and legitimates complex social divisions' (2018: 207). Solorzano similarly questions 'accountability at what cost to students?' (2008: 314), highlighting that standardised systems often disadvantage marginalised groups. Disparities in attainment and access to resources are therefore symptomatic of deeper inequities embedded within the policy frameworks themselves (Francis and Mills, 2019).

2.4.3 Curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test

The Children, Schools and Families Committee in May 2008 published a report on national testing that stated that: 'national testing for school accountability has resulted in some schools emphasising the maximisation of test results at the expense of a more rounded education for their pupils' (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee 2008a). It claimed that teaching to the tests was widespread, narrowing teaching to English, mathematics and science and in particular those aspects that are tested, a fact that compromised teachers' creativity and children's access to a broad and balanced curriculum. While in principle supportive of national testing, it agreed with Paul Newton's arguments that national curriculum tests were used for too many purposes (Newton, 2007) and recommended that the current system should

uncouple the multiple purposes of measuring pupil attainment, school and teacher accountability and national monitoring. (Isaacs, 2010: 324).

Curriculum narrowing refers to children being taught mainly what is believed will be on the test, often at the expense of other learning and subjects. On the origins of the 11+ tests, Wrigley has commented:

> The 11 Plus exams, on the basis of which grammar school places were awarded, also restricted the upper primary curriculum. Ironically, given that its 'general intelligence' paper was supposed to measure something fixed and innate, most final year classes spent a lot of time practising test papers to improve scores. Thus the majority of curriculum time was consumed by rapid and accurate processing in English and arithmetic and the artificial logic of 'intelligence' tests.
>
> (Wrigley, 2014: 9)

This highlights not only the narrowing of the curriculum, but also how teaching itself has become more aligned to the content of the 11+ tests. Following on from this, Hursh has stated that a culture of high-stakes testing in the USA put pressure on schools and teachers to meet data targets, resulting in an ethos of 'teaching to the test' (2013; 577). A similar culture of reducing time spent on other curriculum areas, in favour of teaching to the test, has been found to exist in other countries such as Australia (Polesel et al., 2014) and including England (Paul and Black, 2018).

The impact of this narrowing of the curriculum and teaching to the test can be extreme; it 'reduces many students' chances of being thought talented in school and results in a restriction in the creative and enjoyable activities engaged in by teachers and students' (Berliner, 2011: 287). Berliner (2011) shows that between 2001-2002, elementary schools (equivalent to mainstream primary schools in England) increased teaching time given to English by 47% and Maths by 37%, whereas other subjects including Social studies, Science, Physical education and Art faced a reduction of over 30% in allocated teaching time. This was solely for the purpose of test preparation. In line with these findings, Polesel et al.'s (2014) study in Australia also found that children's educational experiences have also become limited through teaching to the test. According to Baines and Blatchford (2023), who carried out their study at primary schools in England, this

included children missing out on the opportunity to develop play and social skills during breaktimes, because children had to stay in their classrooms for reasons including to complete class or homework. The curriculum taught and teaching time being focused on test subjects has led to the return of the setting of children and the introduction of interventions in some schools.

2.4.4 Setting and interventions

Drawing on the historical development of different schools for different groups of children, Reay states that 'our state system remains a bipartite system that separates the social classes either into schools that are predominately working- or middle-class or divides them internally between high and low sets' (2022: 10). An example of setting in school would be 'more than one mathematics class for each year group, with different classes for those with different abilities' (Isaacs, 2010: 321), or perceived abilities based on children's test performance. Through setting, children 'move from their normal class to different rooms and teachers for either Maths or English, or both, based on each child's attainment or assessed potential' (Bradbury et al., 2021: 152). Interventions are 'systems where children are separated, either physically or nominally, based on a view of their ability or potential' (Bradbury et al., 2021: 148).

The work of Bradbury et al. (2021) focuses on interviews with 20 headteachers across a range of schools in England and an online survey of 288 head teachers related to the grouping of children through setting and interventions, or what the authors refer to as 'practices of division' (2021: 148) through 'educational triage' (*ibid.*). Their findings were that these practices were 'a direct response to SATs' (*ibid*.: 152) that headteachers stated they were opposed to on moral grounds but were compelled to engage in because they felt pressure 'to prioritise results over the broader purposes of education' (*ibid*.: 158). Setting and intervention programmes, though intended to support struggling learners, can inadvertently stigmatise pupils and fragment learning experiences. Having explored the pressures of performativity within school, I now turn attention to their impact outside school.

2.4.5 Impact on life outside school

Performativity pressures extend beyond school gates, shaping family life and children's self-concepts. Testing seasons often dominate household routines, generating stress and anxiety for both pupils and parents (Wyse and Torrance, 2009). The framing of success through data and league tables can distort values around learning, reducing it to measurable achievement rather than personal growth (Clarke, 2023; Waters and McKee, 2023). In addition to the impact of performativity pressures felt outside of school, there is literature to reflect how this might manifest beyond school, into the future.

2.4.6 Impact on life beyond school

Performative cultures may influence young people's attitudes toward education, resilience, and their futures going forwards. In their study with primary aged children, Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan found that 'some of the children's narratives about success related to future remuneration and employment' (2021: 85). Additionally, studies have shown that pupils exposed to sustained high-stakes testing are more likely to associate self-worth with performance metrics (Rahman et al., 2016). This suggests that performativity has lasting social and emotional effects that persist beyond schooling.

2.5 Mental health

2.5.1 Well-being

As a result of the pressures of performativity, the mental health and well-being of teachers and children appears to be in decline and this is being increasingly reported on (Clarke, 2023; Harding, Morris, Gunnell, Ford, Hollingworth, Tilling, Evans, Bell, Grey, Brockman, Campbell, Araya, Murphy and Kidger, 2019; Waters and McKee, 2023). In Section 1.6, I explained that by mental health and well-being, I mean that an integral part of mental health is well-being (Clarke, 2023), which is 'the state of feeling healthy and happy' (Day, Stobart, Sammons, Kington, Smees, and Mujtaba, 2006) and not under stress (Murphy, Lundy, Emerson and Kerr, 2013; Sibley-White, 2019). More

specifically in relation to educational assessment, not feeling 'without any clear sense of purpose and value, other than that which can be calculated from test scores and examination grades' (Ball, 2018). In regards to the taking of tests such as the SATs, it has been stated, that 'although the pupils' teacher perhaps could have mediated the test preparation in a way that might have made the experience a more positive one for the pupils, the very existence of the system meant that these negative consequences became a possibility' (Wyse and Torrance 2009: 220). This section explores the effects on teachers, parents/carers, and children.

2.5.2 Teachers' experiences

Teacher stress and their subsequent exit from the profession appears to be a focus amongst many existing studies in education (Johnson et al., 2005) and reflects a current crisis in teacher recruitment and retention.

In the US, some states use students' test scores for teachers' annual reviews and to determine their pay and future role (Saeki et al., 2018). In the US, the 2009 policy Race to the Top put in place performance related evaluations for teachers based on children's scores on standardised tests. These evaluations were used, amongst other things, to determine teachers' salaries. (Hursh, 2013). Investigating the changing roles of teachers in elementary schools in the USA, Valli and Buese (2007) analysed teacher tasks over a four-year period. Drawing mainly on interview data, they found that 'rapid-fire high-stakes policy directives', relating to school accountability measures, contradicted teachers' ideas about best practice and caused them high levels of stress. They also found that most teachers they interviewed did not believe that testing was worth the time and effort it took to administer them. Additionally, this went on to have a negative impact on teacher-student relations as children were often pulled out of their class for interventions: a reading specialist at one of the schools in the study said '"I don't always know them [students] by face; I know them by data"' (2007: 548), reinforcing the high-stakes nature of testing. Other interviewees commented on how disheartened they felt tests were for the children and that it was difficult to encourage children to put their best effort into an important test, when all tests were classified as important. In this

way, tests appear to have very much impacted some teachers' mental health and well-being.

Another aspect to this been expressed by Berliner: 'in high-pressure situations people frequently do whatever they deem necessary to achieve their goals and keep their jobs or status' (2011: 289). This reflects the idea of Campbell's law (Campbell, 1975, as cited in Rodamar, 2018), which suggests that people can become corrupted when they have a lot at stake because of the value placed on a social indicator, such as a test-score. Due to the high level of accountability associated with assessment, it is unsurprising that test scores may be altered or manipulated in some way by different groups who may hold an interest in the results (Hursh, 2013), further suggesting the high-stakes nature of assessment. This group may also include teachers and school management. Additionally, Saeki et al.'s 2018 study found that even teachers who were not directly involved in test taking year groups, felt the stress associated with test related accountability policies, showing the wide-reach of high-stakes assessment.

2.5.3 Parent/carers' experiences

> I tell my kids that I value them as people, not scores. But even so, when I took a look at their scores, I breathed a sigh of relief that my kids had done as well as other kids in their school.
>
> (Starr, 2017: 72)

In her work exploring parent/carers experiences of their children's primary school assessment, Sibley-White noted 'that the child's voice is not represented within this research; instead, children's experiences are reported by parents who are against the tests. Therefore, another area for future research could be to explore children's own understanding and experiences of testing in school' (2019: 341). Thus, I will now consider the available literature on children's experiences relating to their mental health and well-being.

2.5.4 Children's experiences

Some studies such as Rahman et al., 2016, have found a correlation between academic performance and mental health amongst the children themselves. Rahman et al.'s study of the health and education records of over 650,000 primary school-aged children in Wales between 1999 and 2014, found that children who had developed depression were mainly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who were declining in primary school education: 'those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route' (Ofsted, 2023: 4), which fits with my exploration of divisions and inequality above (Section 2.4.2). Indeed, as the literature suggested when exploring assessment over time (Section 2.2), both professionals and the public have long had concerns about the effect of formal testing on children and their well-being (Locker and Cropley, 2004; Segool et al. 2013; Whetton, 2009). For these children, anxiety is also an issue as is student de-motivation with added pressures from league tables and target setting' (Oates, 2009: 232).

It is of importance that the majority of children's educational experiences as depicted through existing literature have been told by adults such as teachers and parent/carers. It is adults who have developed theories of learning and systems of educational assessment and adults who have more often than not, written about them. This lack of opportunity of expression was identified by Mayall (2000) in her study with 9-year-old children in London into childhood and their daily lives. She found that 'they [children] also emphasise their participation rights, but find that these are not always respected. Parents only sometimes, and school staff hardly ever respect their participation rights' (Mayall 2000: 255). There is an opportunity, therefore, for children to become more active in the reporting of their own perceived experiences.

> Even though children have lived only a comparatively short quantity of time it is important to consider children as having life histories, and to see them as capable reflexive autobiographers, for what children narrate about their lives can provide insight into not only their individual life experiences, but also the nature of 'childhood' within the life course as children themselves see it [emphasis in original]. The significance of this lies in its potential to demythologize 'childhood'; that is to understand what children, rather than

> adults, consider as important in their pasts and about the process of 'growing up'.
>
> (James, 2005: 259)

This idea that children are able to share their own experiences and should be given the opportunity to do, reflects the United Nations Convention on Rights of a Child (UNCRC), particularly Article 12, which states that 'every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This principle recognises children and young people as actors in their own lives and applies at all times throughout a child's life' (Unicef Website, 2025b). This, in turn, reflects and supports theories related to new values of childhood sociology (Section 3.3.2). Taking this into account, this study recognises children as key stakeholders in educational assessment, whose stories should be told by them in their own unique ways.

2.6 Stakeholders' stories

2.6.1 Untold stories

This literature review has given a historical overview of the development of educational assessment in England. Going back to where this literature review started its journey of educational assessment over time, almost a century ago in the 1940s and tracing it to now, one can appreciate why assessment might be interpreted as high-stakes. This is despite there being some research to the contrary (Jerrim, 2021). Almost 20 years ago, the literature was suggesting 'teachers have traditionally experienced that they do not have their own voice in the field of educational research and might find it difficult to feel empowered to tell their stories' (Moen, 2006) and this also applied to parent/carers. However, this has slowly changed over time and through my analysis of existing literature on school assessment, two things have became clear. Firstly, a vast amount of the available literature focuses on the perceived experiences of the adults involved in education (Santori and Holloway; 2023), including school staff (Bailey and Gibson, 2023; Jerrim, Allen and Sam Sims, 2024; Proudfoot and Boyd, 2022) or alternatively, on the perceived experiences of secondary school aged children (Clarke, 2023; Crisp et al., 2020; Howell, 2017.

Despite offering a valuable insight into school assessment through the lens of the teachers and parent/carers, one cannot underestimate the value of the children's perceptions of assessment as those who experience the taking of the tests first-hand and this lends itself to the opportunity for new stories to be shared.

> Just as we are learning to listen more carefully to parent's voices in the education and care of young children, we also have to concern ourselves with listening to children. We see these perspectives, and those of the practitioner or researcher, as not in competition but standing together in the construction of dialogues, in which there is mutual respect, active participation and the negotiation and co-construction of meaning.
>
> (Pascal and Betram, 2009: 254)

Guimaraes et al. (2016), who studied the links between well-being and assessment for 5-6-year-olds, highlighted that multiple perspectives should be considered, specifically including that of the children. Although the number of studies revealing primary school aged children's experiences of assessment have grown in more recent years, large proportions of existing studies with children both internationally and in England, focus on the perceived experiences of those in secondary education. In comparison, there is a smaller amount of literature available on the perceived experiences of those in primary education. This is surprising given the high expectations and multi-level policy related to primary school assessment outcomes and ain light of the negative attention given to high-stakes assessment in recent years, made more prominent in this age of social media.

In summary, existing literature on children's educational assessment highlights a complex landscape shaped by policy, accountability, and performativity. Authors such as Ball (2018) and Isaacs (2010) note the increasing pressures of performativity, where educational quality is defined by measurable outputs, leading to competition and heightened stress for schools and pupils. This culture also reinforces divisions and inequality, with assessments often reproducing existing social hierarchies of class, gender, and ethnicity (Ball, 2018; Francis and Mills, 2019; Kurt, 2022). The focus on performance has contributed to curriculum narrowing and 'teaching to the test'

(Berliner, 2011; Paul and Black, 2018; Wrigley, 2014), limiting creativity and breadth of learning, while Baines and Blatchford (2023) highlight lost opportunities for play and social development through children's breaktimes being taken away for children to work on their learning. Practices such as setting and interventions (Bradbury et al., 2021) have emerged in response to test pressures, often fragmenting learning and labelling pupils. Beyond school, the effects of high-stakes testing extend into family life and future aspirations, influencing children's identities and well-being (Clarke, 2023; Waters and McKee, 2023; Wyse and Torrance, 2009; Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan, 2021; Rahman et al., 2016). Overall, the literature suggests that assessment policies designed to enhance learning have generated a performative culture that negatively impacts children's experiences of curriculum, teaching and learning and their mental health and well-being.

In seeking to call attention to the stories of the primary school children themselves in relation to their experiences of primary school assessment, I have recognised the potential that 'children's well-being can be enhanced when their own views are taken into account to inform their educational provision' (Murray, 2019: 2). Thus, the primary goal of this research is to empower primary school aged children in their education through multiple methods, giving them a unique platform for their perceived experiences to be shared and their stories to be heard. Through the sharing children's stories, it is intended that 'qualities and feelings conveyed by the speaker's words, gives insight into the metaphorical perspectives and worldviews that individual inhabits'. (Robinson and Taylor, 2007: 6).

Importantly, this literature review revealed a largely pessimistic view of the perceived experience of high-stakes assessment, particularly in relation to the curriculum and mental health and well-being. Yet, some studies have highlighted evidence to indicate that there are some forms of testing that may be more desirable if they are used in different way (Polesel et al., 2014; Starr, 2017). So it may be that there are some more positive interpretations of assessment that can be used to suggest ways forward. Therefore, a second goal of this research was to bring attention to the children's suggestions regarding assessment and the dual aim of this study informed the research questions.

2.6.2 Research questions

Writing around the time that the 11+ tests and the tripartite system were a subject of contemporary debate, author and broadcaster Edward Blishen made the following contribution to a book about new trends in education:

> There are many ways of damaging a child; one of the worst, I think is to imprison him in a definition… he is capable of this or that limited amount of mental effort… The best of schools probably is at its most excellent when it forgets for while to be strictly and formally itself: when the definitions are blurred: when the child is seen to be more important than all the apparatus of lessons and assessments, and in the final analysis much too mysterious to be contained by them.
>
> (Blishen 1957: 74)

Reflecting on Blishen's sentiment and his assertion that schools should value a child beyond the boundaries of a school lesson and the constraints of assessment, my aim was to explore the stories of a sample of children in one mainstream primary school in England and interpret how they perceived assessment and their place within the assessment system. My research questions are:

1) What did children say was the impact of assessment on their experiences of a) the curriculum; and b) their mental health and well-being?
2) Did children have any recommendations about assessment?

Through seeking answers to these questions I hope to bring to light the perceived experiences of children related to primary school assessment and conclude whether, for these children, assessment is a matter of high-stakes.

2.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has examined literature related to the development and enactment of primary school assessment in England and some of the stories of key stakeholders in

relation to it: those who have an interest in educational assessment, such as children, parent/carers, school staff including leadership. Starting with the how high stakes assessment developed after the Second World War, I tracked how assessment developed over time: through social, economic and international comparisons, the setting up of new systems and opportunities such as those related to welfare; the tripartite system in contrast with comprehensivisation and a child-centred approach; the tension between accountability and autonomy; a centralised curriculum and the lead up to the existing primary school test system we have today. This led to a discussion of learning and development regarding how children learn, types of assessment and assessment policy, particularly AfL which has dominated much of my teaching career and is still referred to in schools today. The way policy is enacted is considered, with reference to the following: pressures of performativity; divisions and inequality; curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test; setting and interventions; and impact on life outside and beyond school. I then explored mental health by way of well-being and what existing literature has to say about the experiences of teachers, parent/carers and children. Finally, in considering key stakeholder's stories, I acknowledged gaps in the literature which led me to arrive at my research questions.

1) What did children say was the impact of assessment on their experiences of a) the curriculum; and b) their mental health and well-being?
2) Did children have any recommendations about assessment?

Consideration is now given to how to go about answering these research questions and this forms Chapter 3 of this thesis: Methodology.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

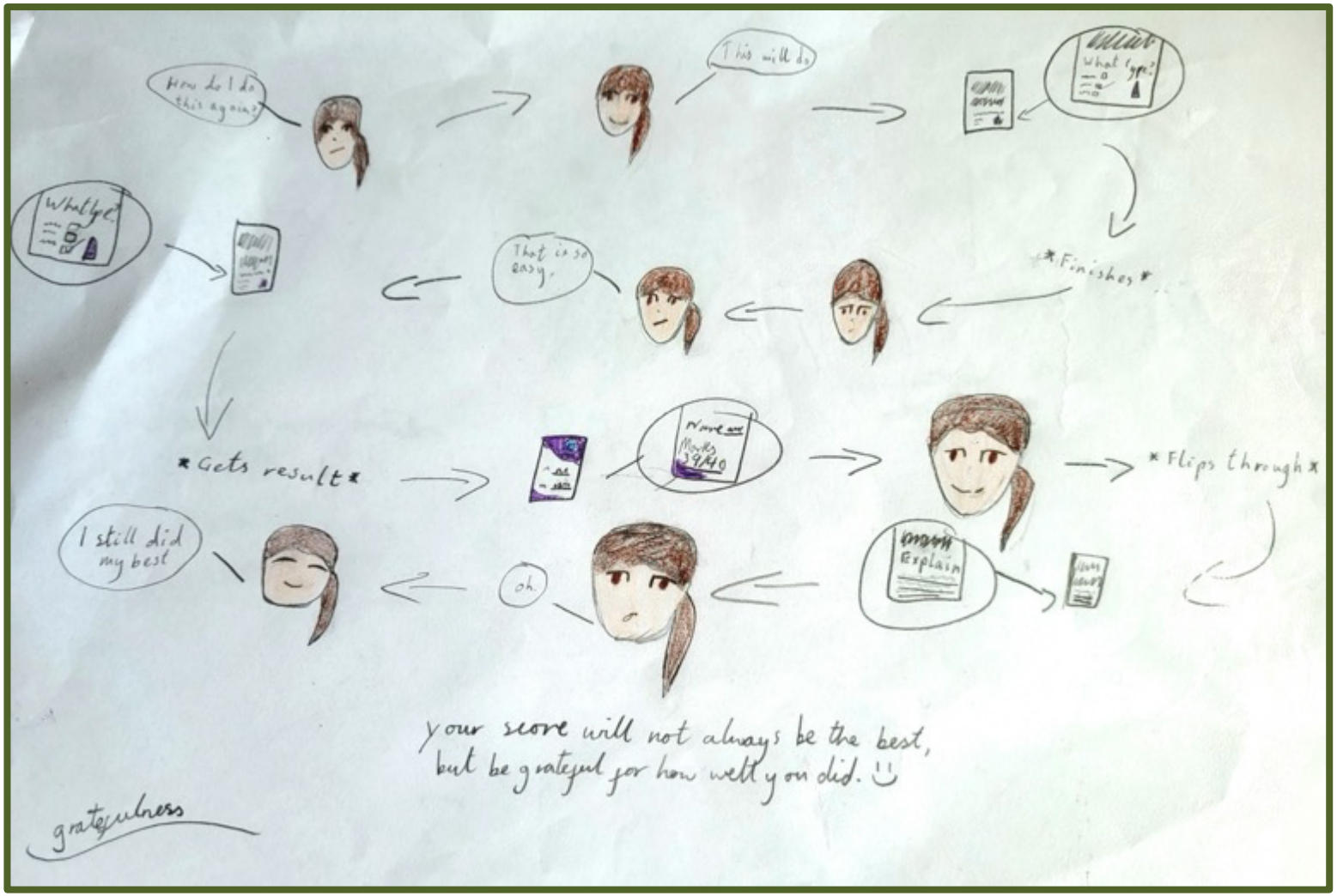


Fig. 3 Kelly's free-writing, pre-SATs

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the methodology used to carry out this study, for which data was collected from one mainstream primary school in England in 2021. It states the research aims, situating these within the conceptual framework of a constructed reality. The reasons for using a narrative approach are justified with reference to how this was the best fit for answering the research questions. My positionality as a practitioner researcher, a teacher to the children who became participants in this study, is discussed alongside the ways in which the research was devised to empower the children. Through the account of the research design, I set out the following: the setting of the research (the school at which I worked at the time); negotiating access to the setting and participants; the sampling strategy and participants; the design, pilot and use of multiple methods. I illustrate these elements of the research using a step-by-step approach before explaining how the data was interpreted and analysed using a narrative approach and drawing attention to the dissemination of findings. Taking inspiration from the drawing above (Kelly, Fig. 3) I will depict this step-by-step approach using a table to show the stages of the data collection (Table 3.1).

3.2 Research aims

My literature review revealed that despite more up to date research about the perceived experiences primary school aged children and assessment (Bradbury et al., 2021; Quick and Buchanan; 2023; Jerrim, 2021), authors have even recently acknowledged that there still remains a limited representation of the perspectives of children (Elwood, 2017; McCarthy, 2024). More specifically, there is less research available on the stories of primary-aged (10-11-year-old) children themselves and whether they perceive primary school assessment as high-stakes for themselves and for others, such as their parent/carers and teachers (Jerrim, 2021; Murphy et al., 2013; Reay and Wiliam, 1999). I was guided by the paucity of literature available in this area when considering my own contribution to the existing body of work. I wanted to add to the stories of the primary-aged children that had already been shared (Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellet,

Robinson, (eds.), 2004) and do this through a means that empowered them to tell their stories of assessment.

The way in which children's experiences have been communicated to date, has been by either by child or adult. Robinson and Taylor (2007) have noted that terminology around giving children a voice is varied and used interchangeably: 'student voice', 'pupil voice', (*ibid.* 33). It has also been noted that 'the word 'voice' also causes some concern as it implies that a pupil group has only one voice… such a monolingual assumption is illusory' (*ibid.*). James agrees that 'such conceptualizations uncritically clump children together as members of a category. This category is then held to speak with one undifferentiated voice (2008: 262). It is preferable then to share a range of diverse experiences to ensure inclusivity. It has also been noted that there are power implications to communicating children's experiences: 'the terms 'student voice' and 'pupil voice' are used to reflect a hierarchy where 'students' or 'pupils' are othered as less powerful than teachers' (Murray, 2019: 1). At the same time, it can be argued that in addition to providing students with opportunities to communicate their ideas and opinions, student voice work is also about students having the power to bring about changes which will improve their experiences in school' (Robinson and Taylor, 2012: 33). Thus, there is much potential in ensuring that primary school aged children's experiences are communicated by children, in a way that is empowering to them as key stakeholders in education.

A second strand that emerged from the literature was that the perceptions of school assessment, whether they are those of the adults or students, are largely negative on the basis that assessments are perceived as high-stakes because they have been interpreted as having highly consequential outcomes for key stakeholders. These outcomes are related to both curriculum, such as narrowing of the curriculum and teaching to the test (Moss, 2022; Munoz-Chereau et al., 2022; Wyse and Torrance, 2009) and mental health and well-being (Clarke, 2023; Water and McKee, 2023). Thus, the research sought to answer the following questions:

1) What did children say was the impact of assessment on their experiences of a) the curriculum; and b) their mental health and well-being?

2) Did children have any recommendations about assessment?

To answer these research questions, I designed the methodology to enable me to gather the stories of primary school children as they approached their end of year assessments and indeed, their end of primary school life in Year 6 in one mainstream primary school in England. I sought to capture their stories and make meaning of what they perceived as their everyday experiences of educational assessment through their responses to a questionnaire and also through their own words, pictures and/or free-writing. Through research with these primary-aged participants, this study aims to make a contribution to existing knowledge on high-stakes assessment and to make an original contribution to this through its methodological approach: the use of a narrative approach and multiple methods. Thereby, creating the potential for impact on improving practice within the setting of the study. This makes my study meaningful, perhaps even 'transformative' (Drew, 2006: 41), to the community (in this case, the school community) within which my research was conducted because a significant contribution to new knowledge could make the case for scaling up the research using multiple methods to capture primary-aged children's stories about assessment in different types of primary schools and various geographical regions across the UK.

3.3 Methodological framework

3.3.1 Ontological and epistemological stance

This section is an exploration of reality in relation to my own research because as a researcher, I understand the importance of making our [my] ontological and epistemological commitments visible' (Caine et al., 2013). I start with the premise that 'all research is interpretative in that it can only offer an interpretation, not an actual replica, of the world' (Opie, 2004: 19). In contrast to a longer-established positivist stance, this would suggest that research such as this study portray what those involved in the research understood as being real: their perceived experiences (Rezvani, Ghanbar

and Pourhemat Khanshir, 2024). To explain this more precisely, I turn to ontology, which can be defined as 'the character and conditions of existence' (Alleyne, 2014: 35). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four different realities: objective reality that exists independent of the knower; perceived reality where what exists can never be understood in its entirety because it depends on one's own vantage point; constructed reality where multiple realities exist based on many different constructions of meaning; and lastly, created reality where there is no reality at all. They go on to exemplify the ontological constructed reality by comparing it to a jury being presented with alternative realities by both prosecution and defence. In this analogy, the authors explain that a jury is first shown one construction of reality by the prosecution, followed by a contrasting interpretation of the same information by the defence with the aim of exonerating the defendant. In addition to this, there are the multiple realities of each juror to consider as they may individually interpret the 'evidence' as presented from both sides in different ways to one another. In contrast to Lincoln and Guba (1985), who take an ontological stance on reality, Crotty (1998) focuses his thinking from an epistemological stance. Epistemology is the nature of the relationship between what is real and known and the knower themselves, or put more simply, 'how we know what we know' (*ibid.*, 1998:18). According to Crotty (1998), meanings are not there to be discovered as facts, but rather they are constructed and can be understood in many different ways. To illustrate this, he gives the example of a tree being likely to have different meanings in different contexts such as in a logging town, an artists' settlement or a slum without trees. However, the key here is that the tree is not created by humans, but its meaning is constructed by them because 'what we have to work with is the world and objects in the world' *(ibid.:* 1998: 44). This idea is in agreement with Lincoln and Guba who also claim that 'events, persons, objects are indeed tangible entities' (1985: 84) and that constructed realities are used to make sense of them. Crotty (1998) further distinguishes between constructivism as the unique experience of individuals (psychological roots), and constructionism, where shared meanings create a culture that shapes people's view of the world (sociological roots). This is relevant to my research title and questions, which investigated the stories of individual children and at the same time established that there were, to some extent, shared experiences and perceptions of primary school assessment.

These definitions of a constructed reality resonate with what I have experienced as a teacher. For example, having taught and immersed myself in the learning of many subjects that encapsulate changing cultures and different beliefs and over time such as in History and RE, in which the context of time and place has come to have great significance because of the way history is told with hindsight and from differing perspectives in different places in the world and similar to the range of religions and belief systems that are explored as part of RE. Another example is the changing methods and strategies taught to children such as multiple procedures for various operations in Maths. My research questions sought to explore constructed realities through the meanings and sense that children have made of primary school assessment. To investigate these issues based on the ontological and epistemological position of constructed reality within which this research is situated, I decided to use a narrative methodology.

3.3.2 Narrative inquiry approach

The narrative approach and associated terminology have been used inconsistently and interchangeably in the literature (Caine et al., 2013). The definition of the word 'narrative' that I have adopted is one of 'both phenomenon and methodology' (*ibid.* 575; Meegan, 2023b); they are 'interwoven' with each other (Caine et al., 2013.). Thus, linked to my ontological and epistemological stance, 'narrative inquirers begin with an interest in experience… from an ontological position, a curiosity about how people are living and the constituents of their experience' (*ibid.*). For this reason, I chose a narrative approach to this research because it brings together people and their stories of personal experience (Andrews et al., 2008): children's stories of primary school assessment. Indeed, drawing again on Dewey (1934, 1938b, 1958), 'education is life and life is education, and to study life, to study education, is to study experience' (Huber et al., 2013: 220). Relating to experience, throughout this research and in keeping with my interpretative ontological position, I have more specifically used the term 'perceived experiences' or 'perceptions of experience' because people are influenced by their subjective reality; it is their perception of what they experience (Willis, 2007).

A distinction has been made by Andrews et al. between narratives that recount past events and narratives that consist of '*experience*-centred work [emphasis in original]' (2008: 5), which draw on participants' stories told through interviews and other written and visual materials such as notes, lists, videos and photographs. These experiential narratives are specific to an individual's circumstances and so a single phenomenon, being high-stakes assessment in this study, can create many different stories. It is these stories, in relation to primary school assessment, that I am interested in understanding and interpreting the meanings children attach to make sense of those perceived experiences. Andrews et al. (2008) define four key characteristics of experiential narratives in contrast to recounts: they are contextual in time and meaningful; they are how humans make sense of their world; they are reconstructed stories of experience; and they aim to be transformative in some way. This study embodies these four characteristics of experiential narratives. Firstly, this research took place at a critical moment in time that was meaningful to the children: the end of year (and primary school) assessments taken by 10-11-year-old children in Year 6, which also formed part of their transition from primary school to secondary school. Secondly, the children's narratives revealed how they had made sense of what they were going through at the time; their perceived experiences of assessments and future expectations in relation to learning and life affected their interpretations of assessment. Thirdly, the children's narratives were indeed their own meaning-making of primary school assessment; their perceptions of their experience. Finally, it is hoped that through the sharing of these stories, this research will make a positive contribution to the field that enhances assessment policy and practices for the children and for others involved in the process, such as parent/carers and teachers.

Central to my choosing to share children's stories is my interaction with and interpretation of the stories. Taking into consideration Dewey's theories of experience (1938b), 'particularly his ideas about continuity and interaction (Dewey, 1958, 1963), narrative inquiry seeks to understand how people construct their own stories about their lives and the world around them, and how these stories shape their identities and perspectives' (Meegan, 2023a: 1272). The theory also includes 'notions of situation, continuity, and interaction' (Huber et al., 2013: 226). Taking a narrative inquiry approach, these are summarised as a 'three-dimensional narrative inquiry space' (Meegan, 2023a: 623; Caine et al., 2013) that invites participants to retell and relive

their experiences (Meegan, 2023b). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) term these three dimensions as place (where the story is lived and told), temporality (which situates the story in the past, present and future) and sociality (involving interaction between the personal and social). Therefore, stories should not be viewed as data in themselves or representational forms or structures because they are not simply phenomena under study (Caine et al., 2013); stories are lived, told and retold (Huber et al., 2013) through their relational (*ibid.*) and transactional (Caine et al., 2013) retellings. Thus, 'we have to see experience as something that's unfolding and enfolding over time;' (Clandinin, 2018: 19).

> A narrative ontology implies that experiences are continuously interactive, resulting in changes in both people and the contexts in which they interact... It is through this experience that people's lives are composed and re-composed in relation with others who are also living storied lives.
>
> (Caine et al., 2013: 576)

My theoretical framework and perceived experiences as a teacher led me to conclude that these stories, interactive in their nature, were the most practical and effective way to gain an insight into the children's perceptions because through my interpreting their words and pictures they were enabled to create and share their perceived experiences of assessment.

Alongside the narrative approach, I considered the new values of childhood sociology in relation to children's rights (Mayall, 2000) as reflected in and supported by the UNCRC. Described as a 'paradigm within the literature' (Kurt, 2022: 731), new childhood sociology 'tries to understand the world of children through children's experiences (active participant) and occurrences in their daily lives, and which also focuses on forming an opinion about children and childhood' (*ibid.*). Section 2.6.1 explained the significance of children's own involvement in sharing their stories of experience – stories being told by the children themselves rather than stories being told about children by others. In discussing these approaches together, I acknowledge Mayall's point that 'the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is itself contextualised in dominant Western concepts. The Convention refers to a universal, free-standing, individual child; a child who is on a particular developmental trajectory' (2000: 245). However, that is part of the reason why the thread that runs through these

approaches is one that seeks to acknowledge children as 'competent, contributing social actors'(2000: 245). Writing more recently, James similarly describes the possibility of 'an arena within which children are seen as social actors who can provide a unique perspective on the social world about matters that concern them as children (2008: 261). This approach, taken together with narrative inquiry emphasis on interactive meaning-making, suggests that 'the question becomes what types of research dialogues can we have with children' (James, 2008: 269) that facilitates their stories being shared.

In summary, the narrative approach fits with research that is qualitative and interpretative (Rezvani et al., 2024) and the values of new childhood sociology as reflected in the UNCRC. Furthermore, because children's experiences are contextual (Maxwell, 2015) – dynamic, context-dependent interactive performances (Meegan, 2023b: 619) – the narrative approach taken is about how the participants make meaning of their perceived experiences in a particular historical, societal and cultural context. This reflects the findings of the literature review, which revealed the history of how primary school assessment originated and how its societal and cultural significance has shaped what assessment has become today in mainstream primary schools in England. Therefore, I aim to explore children's perceptions of experience on assessment and my subsequent interpretation and analysis of them: 'sharing children's stories and stories of children' (Meegan, 2023a: 1280). It was for these reasons that an experiential narrative inquiry approach was chosen as the best fit for this research and an integral component to this was my positionality as a researcher.

3.4 Positionality as a researcher

3.4.1 An ethical approach

I have explained the theoretical perspective that underpinned this study but equally important is the ethical approach that continues to run alongside it.

> … narrative inquiry is first and foremost a relational research methodology, and, while it is research, it is also a transaction between people, which makes ethical issues and concerns about living well with others central to the inquiry… This is a

> reminder that while we contemplate experience, we attend to participants and those we come to know in the telling and living of experience. (Caine et al., 2013: 578)

Regarding the 'relational ethics of narrative inquiry' (Meegan, 2023b: 1275), it is necessary to recognise that 'researchers are in the phenomenon under study' (*ibid.*). Given the importance of this, as stated by Caine, et al., 'our thinking as narrative inquirers grows out of being-in-relation. This thinking, our sensitivity to a relational orientation, is a methodological consideration that organizes what it is that counts as knowledge, as inquiry, and as knowledge of the practice for narrative inquirers' (2013: 579, 580). Thus, an ethical approach threaded its way through this research from the very beginning. In planning the research design, I ensured that ethics informed but did not determine the research design (Brooks, te Riele and Maguire, 2014), yet at the same time methodological decisions were not prioritised over ethics; both methodological decisions and ethical choices were made concurrently. In addition to this, I remained constantly aware that not all ethical decisions could be made in advance and that further decisions may need to be made during the research *(ibid.*).

To inform my ethical approach I referred to literature including books such as Liamputtong's 'Researching the vulnerable' (2006) and to journal articles on studies that had some similarities to my own study so that I could learn from them and adapt my research design accordingly. For example, with existing studies involving school staff and children, pseudonyms were used for the participants rather than their real names (Levy, Hall and Preece, 2018; Sikes and Hall, 2018; Tian and Diamond, 2004). This was to 'protect the integrity of the research participants' (Meegan, 2023a: 1276) and so I adopted the same approach. In addition to this, I considered established ethical guidelines such as the tenets of Belmont Report (Hss.gov Website, 2025) and the BERA guidelines (BERA, 2024). First published in 1979, it has been stated that the 'Belmont Report continues to be held in high regard' (Nagai, Nakazawa and Akabayashi, 2022: 157). The report contains ethical principles and guidelines seeking to protect human participants of research. An example of a guideline I followed was 'respect for persons demands that subjects enter into the research voluntarily and with adequate information' (Hss.gov Website, 2025: n.p). I addressed this by seeking informed assent from participants and consent from their parent/carers (Moss, 2022); a more detailed explanation of this is given in Section 3.5.2. As a member of BERA, I also have an

ongoing commitment to abide by their ethical guidelines (BERA, 2024). Other studies in education, such as Bradbury et al., 2021, have conducted their research within these ethical guidelines, and I refer to how I used the guidelines throughout the rest of this chapter. Throughout the rest of this thesis, I continue to draw attention to how ethics was applied to this research. It was (and remains) very much tied up in my positionality as a human instrument and a practitioner researcher.

3.4.2 The human instrument

The stories of and from the participants are at the heart of the narrative inquiry approach and the relationship between the participants and the researcher are vital to negotiating the meaning in relation to interpreting the data.

> Narrative inquiry is marked by its emphasis on relational engagement, whereby the understanding and social significance of experience grows out of a relational commitment to a research puzzle… it is important that narrative inquirers carefully consider who they are, and who they are becoming, in the research puzzle. The researcher's presence and investment is an important feature of narrative inquiry research. In studying and understanding experience narratively, researchers recognize the centrality of relationships.
>
> (Caine et al., 2013: 577)

The role of the researcher can be seen as an instrument of the research (Oakley, 1981). Lincoln and Guba (1985) were the first to introduce the idea of the human instrument in contrast to the use of a physical instrument of research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Peredaryengo and Kraus, 2013). They list several benefits to this method of inquiry: humans are responsive to personal and environmental cues; they are adaptable; they can take a holistic view of the research; they are capable of knowledge base expansion; they are able to create opportunities to clarify and summarise information; and finally, humans are able to explore individual and unusual responses in further detail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 193). These strengths to having a human being as instrument of research were of advantage in the context of this study. For example, during conversations with the participants, I was able to respond to an environmental cue of nearby building work being too noisy by pausing the interview and restarting at a more suitable time. Additionally, I was able to ask 'questions to maintain a focus on the three-

dimensional narrative inquiry framework' (Meegan, 2023b: 623). The notion of the human instrument fit well with my ontological and epistemological stance of a constructed reality and with my use of the narrative methodology and so I adopted this approach and considered myself to be the human instrument, seeking to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.4.3 Trustworthiness of the human instrument

My positionality as a researcher working within a narrative methodology meant that the notion of the human instrument permeated all aspects of this research design and so I had to remain reflexive (Braun and Clarke, 2019) and address 'the role of reflexivity in maintaining trustworthiness' (Kamarudin and Noor, 2024:6). The aim of trustworthiness is to establish that the findings of this study are 'worth paying attention to, worth taking account of' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 290). Traditionally, the four concepts that have been used to demonstrate trustworthiness are internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (Opie, 2004: 71). However, as this research is situated in the ontological and epistemological position of a constructed reality and uses a narrative methodology, I have employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) adaptations of these concepts: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability and interpreted them through a narrative lens. Additionally, I have referred to the work of Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017) who guide readers (*ibid.*) on meeting Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthy criteria when undertaking qualitative research that employs an analytical framework of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019). I also drew on the work of Rezvani et al. (2024), who in their narrative inquiry study of learners' perceptions, also adapted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthy criteria to their narrative approach.

Credibility aims to establish a degree of confidence in the findings. This is achieved through a carefully constructed research design, including a natural setting and purposive sampling. By natural setting, I mean utilising a space usually occupied by the children and not simply a place where they are made to visit for the purposes of data collection as part of the study. In keeping with the narrative approach, a 'cooperative effect' (Meegan, 2023b: 621) between the participants and I took place over time

'within specific settings, and [was] shaped by social interactions within the surrounding environments' (*ibid.*). This 'collaborative effort' (*ibid.*) became part of the story being retold and relived (Huber et al., 2013). The sampling in this study was purposive (Rezvani et al., 2024) in that the participants chosen were living the experience that was to be investigated (Section 3.5.3). Triangulation is traditionally where 'data collection procedures are applied separately' (Opie, 2004: 72) to support the accuracy and completeness of the data. In considering this through a narrative lens, different sets of participants took part in different stages and methods of the data collection that was ethically considered and which is openly described (Section 3.5). Nowell et al. suggest 'prolonged engagement' (2017: 3) as one way in which credibility can be achieved in qualitative research and Rezvani et al. had close and prolonged engagement with their participants, whereby the 'resulting rapport and trust allowed us to develop a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives, facilitating co-construction of meaning between us as researchers and them as members of the researched context' (2024: 178) Similarly, I had a practitioner relationship with my participants and worked with them further over time as a researcher.

Transferability refers to the applicability of the research in other contexts and can be achieved through thick description (Holloway, 1997; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Punch 2005). The narrative approach is utilised to 'provide rich, in-depth information about the children's experiences' (Meegan 2023b: 619). That this study is context-specific is a strength because 'social justifications go beyond the practical reasons and emphasise the significance of narrative research for addressing larger societal issues. The social reasons for choosing this approach include amplifying children's voices [and] advocating for changes in practice' (Meegan 2023b: 619). Nowell et al. (2017) assert that the researcher's responsibility in this area is only to provide thick description (Holloway, 1997; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Punch 2005) so that those 'who seek to transfer the findings to their own site can judge transferability' for themselves. I would argue that this study has presented this level of detailed, rich description (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 83) (Chapter 4). Additionally for transferability, Rezvani et al. (2024) underline the importance of being clear on the research context and the use of purposive sampling, both of which I have done (Section 3.5.3).

Dependability shows that the findings are consistent and could be repeated. However, Caine et al. remind us that another strength of the research being context-specific is that the aim of the study is not to provide an 'exemplar of experience, but rather to experience and show the wonder of a life lived on a richly storied landscape' (2013: 582). A storied landscape is the social context in which the experience is being lived (Lyons and Skull, 2024). Integral to this is that 'we [the researcher] are in landscapes, part of the landscapes, not objective viewers of the landscape' (Caine et al. 2013: 584). Thus, working within this context, I have ensured that 'the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented' (Nowell et al., 2017) through its description in this chapter. Finally, to ensure dependability and confirmability, Rezvani et al. 'prioritised transparency throughout all stages of data collection, analysis and interpretation' (2024: 178), which is what I sought to do.

Confirmability is usually obtained through 'intersubjective agreement' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 300), 'establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data [and] requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached' (Nowell et al. 2017: 3). In this study, I followed the example of other narrative studies, such as Sikes and Hall, who state that 'as we have a specific focus, we present the data in a thematic fashion' (2018: 596) and I used Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006, 2019) to do the same. Throughout this exploration of the four criteria of trustworthiness of the human instrument, I maintain that in using the narrative approach 'you can't kind of pull temporality, sociality, and place apart – they're always operating all the time'. (Clandinin, 2018: 19) and so my positionality as a researcher, more specifically as a practitioner researcher, requires further attention.

3.4.4 Practitioner researcher

As both a teacher and a researcher, I found myself in a unique position to conduct this research. In fact, it has been suggested that there are disadvantages to being a researcher who is not also a teacher. Brooks et al. (2014) state that researchers in education, who are not teachers, are sometimes afraid to critique teachers and the world of teaching and

learning that they inhabit because the researchers are not in the field themselves. Hopkins adds that another disadvantage of having researchers who are not teachers is that they 'do not conceptualize teaching in the same way; they live in different intellectual worlds and so their meanings rarely connect' (2002: 37). Due to this potential disconnect between the world of the researcher and the separate world of the teacher, there is a strong possibility that both their windows on the world could be different. Thus, the non-teacher researcher would be guided by their own academic discipline and understanding of knowledge (Hopkins, 2002) without the additional insight gained from the professional experiences and knowledge of a teacher. As opposed to this, the teacher researcher is immersed in the 'classroom culture in which they and their pupils live out their daily lives' (Hopkins, 2002: 35). Punch (2005) contributes to this discussion by emphasising the role of ontology and epistemology in the approach taken by the researcher. He states that far from being neutral, styles of research 'embody implicit models of what the social world is or should be like, and of what counts as knowledge and how to get it' (135). Mercer agrees that when it comes to familiarity within the field, 'insiders will undoubtedly have a better initial understanding of the social setting because they know the context; they understand the subtle and diffuse links between situations and events; and they can assess the implications of following particular avenues of enquiry' (2007: 6). Taking this into account, one may be at a greater advantage if the research style of both teacher and a researcher were aligned, as they are with a practitioner researcher such as myself.

Regarding researching one's subject, Oakley revealed decisions she made when carrying out her study involving the repeated interviewing of 55 women four times as they transitioned into motherhood (1981). She identified that the interviewing involved discussion of personal experiences and that the participants asked her, the interviewer, a great number of questions back.

> The pilot interviews, together with my previous experience of interviewing women, led me to decide that when I was asked questions I would answer them. The practice I followed was to answer all personal questions and questions about the research as fully as was required.
>
> (Oakley, 1981: 59)

The implications of this to my own study was that I had to consider how I might navigate my 'dual role' (BERA, 2024: 16) as both a teacher and a researcher. I recognised that I have 'divided loyalties' (Brooks et al., 2014: 6). This had numerous ethical implications that needed considering prior to and throughout the research process as well as in relation to the dissemination of findings. For example, I reflected on what I might do when children asked me about myself and my research. The extent to which I could answer personal and professional questions was guided by my existing practitioner relationship, which was a strength because of the additional obligations that came with it. As a worker in the public sector of education, I am expected to adhere to the Nolan Principles – the 'Seven Principles of Public Life' (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995). These principles are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership (showing leadership through promoting the principles). As a teacher, I am also held to account by the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011), which states the expectations in relation to my job role and for personal professional conduct. Part Two of the Teachers' Standards refers specifically to my responsibilities of 'treating pupils with dignity, building relationships rooted in mutual respect' and 'the need to safeguard pupils' well-being' (DfE, 2011: 14). When planning my research, I was in a strong position to intergrate these public sector worker values and teacher values into my research by using them as a guide for my behaviour. In addition to this, the principles of accountability, openness, and honesty have come together in my written account of this study where I have put forward a detailed and accurate account of the research process, making clear my decision-making and opening myself up to scrutiny by the reader and wider educational community. The qualities of openness and honesty were also reflected in the way I planned to communicate with the children, their parents and the school gatekeeper about the research (Section 3.5.2) In this way, my ethical and professional duties as a public sector worker, specifically a teacher, were kept at the forefront of my mind throughout the research. Through these professional standards to which I am held to account as a teacher, I developed a 'well-informed personal ethical perspective' (Brooks et al., 2014: 20) on how to behave, which in turn supported my role as researcher.

As a researcher, I sought to treat pupils with dignity and respect using a deontological ethical approach (Brooks et al., 2014). By this I mean that acts are inherently good or bad despite the outcomes. Thus, I am always committed to choosing what I believe to

be the good and right course of action, as determined by my interpretation of both teacher and researcher standards. For example, I am aware of local child protection procedures as I have annual safeguarding training at school and I am also bound by safeguarding legislation such as the Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024 document (DfE, 2024). This would guide me with what to do in the event of a safeguarding issue during my research and to always to report any concerns, no matter how small and even if in any doubt to do so.

It has been acknowledged that a researcher can bring to the research their own set of assumptions, beliefs and values and that these can be more pronounced if the researcher has 'a strong affinity with the population under study' (Peredaryengo and Kraus, 2013: 1). As a teacher researcher undergoing research at the school at which I taught at the time, it was certainly the case that I did have an existing association with and responsibility to the population I was researching.

> A relational and transactional ontology precedes narrative inquiry research, because stories are about what happens to and between people. That we are living stories means that the connection between researcher and participant begins long before formal research contact.
>
> (Caine et al., 2013:583)

Thus, an added dimension to the discussion around being a practitioner researcher is the concept of being an insider researcher. According to Mercer, insiderness and outsiderness should not be considered 'as an 'either/or' duality' (2007: 7), but rather 'as points on a continuum' (*ibid.*) with many different characteristics to consider.

> Some features of the researcher's identity, such as his or her gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation are innate and unchanging; other features, such as age, are innate but evolving. These features provide one dimension to the insider/outsider continuum. Other dimensions are provided by the time and place of the research (at both a micro and a macro-level); the power relationships within which the researcher and the researched co-exist; the personalities of the researcher and specific informants; and even the precise topic under discussion.
>
> (Mercer, 2007: 4)

In this way, my being a practitioner researcher becomes more nuanced when other elements of insiderness are considered, such as the fact that the setting of this study was the school at which I worked at the time (Sections 1.9 and 3.5.1). This concept of insiderness is discussed further throughout this chapter.

This was where the researcher aspect of my role also dictated my professional conduct throughout the research process. Like other studies that received university ethics approval, this research had ethical approval granted by Brunel University's Research Ethics Online (BREO) (Appendix B) prior to conducting the research. I had also completed both a university risk assessment and a separate risk assessment from the school at which I conducted my research (this could not be included in the appendices to prevent the sharing of any identifying information related to the setting and participants). As a practitioner researcher informed and held to account by these ethical standards, I also acknowledge that these ethical considerations extend beyond the duration of the project, particularly because my role as a teacher has continued, even though my role as an active researcher has now come to an end.

In summary, being both a teacher and researcher gave me an advantageous perspective that was based on my on-going teacher role with children in primary school and included my involvement with their assessment. Moreover, conducting the study at the school at which I worked at the time meant that I had a greater knowledge and experience of the context within which the children learned and were assessed and also more understanding of the individual children themselves as their teacher, which I drew upon for my analysis and interpretation of the data (Chapter 4). Through remembering that as both teacher and researcher, 'we're characters in that story and we need to be reflective and reflexive about who we are over time in those stories' (Clandinin, 2018:20), a 'relational space' was created:

> The construction of a relational space is not an accidental result of mulling over the plans for a research proposal or an ethics submission. These relational considerations are, by contrast, the fundament of a narrative inquiry. Creating spaces that allow us

> to tell stories of self are one of the ways that we foster development of identity for researcher and participants.
>
> (Caine et al., 2013: 583)

With a deep understanding of my ethical responsibilities and the significance of a relational space, I felt it was imperative to empower the children participating in the study.

3.4.5 Empowering the children

It has been well documented that the very nature of research conducted by adults with children brings with it matters related to power dynamics (Brooks et al., 2014; Fraser et al. (eds.), 2004) and that these power imbalances are particularly pronounced within a school setting whereby adults are in a position of responsibility and authority over the children (Fraser et al. (eds.), 2004); 'power here is understood as overt authoritative power, where those in an authoritative position use their authority to empower or enable others in a less authoritative position to become legitimately involved in, and take forward, an aspect of practice' (Robinson and Taylor, 2012). As a both a teacher and a researcher this was a highly important consideration for me, and I sought to fully understand the implications.

In their 2007 study, Robinson and Taylor identified that 'at the heart of student voice work are four core values: communication as dialogue; participation and democratic inclusivity; the recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic; and the possibility for change and transformation' (Robinson and Taylor, 2012: 32). These were addressed in my study through the following: prolonged exchanges co-created between the participants and I; a diverse spread of participants with different attainment and backgrounds (Appendix O), not just those who possessed cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977); a thorough understanding of the power relations through immersing myself in relevant literature; and genuine attempts to address these concerns and encourage conversations about transformation of existing educational policy and practice. Clandinin reflects on the researcher and participant power relations:

> … the importance of thinking about who I was in that space and how I fitted into [the participant's] story – not only how I was fitting [the participant] into my story… It reminded me of the importance of knowing that all the power doesn't rest with the researcher in narrative inquiry.
>
> (Clandinin, 2018: 21)

To build upon the positive aspects of my positionality as both practitioner and researcher, I therefore made it my responsibility to take every step to redress the balance of power by developing 'an ethos of empowerment of all participants, and aim for participatory research practice which has at its heart an active involvement in promoting the rights of children as citizens with voice and power' (Pascal and Betram, 2009: 251). The primary way in which I hoped to empower the children was by creating a platform for them to share their stories as 'the 'ultimate consumers' of the product of education' (Davie, 1993, as cited in Maxwell, 2015: 84; Meegan, 2023). Mccarthy explains that 'listening to the voices of pupils goes some way to provide an equitable opportunity for individuals whose futures such systems determine' (2024: 1057) and thus, I have not only listened but also shared. In addition to sharing the stories of and from the children, my attention turned to 'how better to support and listen to the voices of young children, who are the most often silenced in the production of knowledge and understandings about their lives' (Pascal and Betram, 2009: 249). Several measures were embedded into the research to empower the children further and these steps are highlighted throughout the later sections in the research design below. This commitment was vital given my choice of study setting and participants, which I will explore first as part of my research design.

3.5 Research design

Table 3.1 Stages of planning, piloting and collecting the data

Stages of research design (in chronological order)	Participants (or others) involved

Negotiating access to the setting	Verbal and written discussion between researcher and gatekeeper (school principal)
⇓	
Inviting participation through consent from parent/carers	Participation sought from parent/carers of 130 children across all five classes in Year 6 - Consent received for 42 children across five Year 6 classes to take part in all stages of the research
⇓	
Inviting participation through assent from children	Assent sought from 42 children (across all five classes) of parent/carers who had given assent - 39 agreed to in all stages - 3 children assented to the questionnaires and pictures/free-writing, but not to being interviewed
⇓	
Piloting the questionnaire	7 children from across four Year 6 in classes other than my own, for whom I had both consent and assent - The same children who went on to pilot the interview questions and create the interview charter
⇓	
Administering the questionnaire (pre-SATs)	Completed by 35 children across five Year 6 classes, for whom I had both consent and assent - Children who took part in pilots were included in this stage, but their data was not included as part of the study
⇓	
First round of pictures and free-writing (pre-SATs)	Completed by 22 children across all five Year 6 classes, for whom I had both consent and assent

	- Children who took part in pilots were included in this stage, but their data was not included as part of the study
	⇓
Piloting the interview questions	7 children from across four Year 6 classes other than my own, for whom I had both consent and assent - The same children who had piloted the questionnaire and who went on to create the interview charter
	⇓
Creation of interview charter	7 children from across four Year 6 classes other than my own, for whom I had both consent and assent - The same children who had piloted the questionnaire and interview questions
	⇓
First round of semi-structured interviews, pre-SATs - Including children's stories of their questionnaire responses and pictures/free-writing, pre-SATs	Completed by 13 children, for whom I had both consent and assent
	⇓
Second round of pictures and free-writing, post-SATs	Completed by 11 children, all in my class, for whom I had both consent and assent
	⇓
Second round of semi-structured interviews, post-SATs) - Including children's stories of their pictures/free-writing post-SATs	Completed by 12 children, for whom I had both consent and assent - Wendy, who took part in the first set of interviews, was absent on the day of the second round of interviews
	⇓
Interpretation and analysis of data	Completed by researcher

3.5.1 Setting

Deciding on the setting of the research and negotiating access to it was the first stage of carrying out the research (Table 3.1). Without this, I would have needed to find a different setting that could have catered for and accommodated all the steps that followed. As discussed in Chapter 1 (Section 1.9) and above (Section 3.4.4), the setting of the research was the school I was employed at during the time of the study (but no longer) and for ethical reasons, it will remain anonymous to ensure that 'all potentially identifying information has been removed' (Levy, et al., 2018: 132). At the time this research is being written up, it is a mainstream primary school academy (part of a multi-academy trust) in Greater London, where teaching, learning and assessment is based upon the National Curriculum in England (Gov.uk Website, 2014). One reason in support of choosing this school is that its location was such that the demographics of this part of greater London are varied and mixed, thus allowing for a diversity of participants (Appendix O), as recommended by other studies into educational assessment, such as Sommer and Arendasy, 2015.

The setting of this school, being the one at which I worked at the time of the study (but no longer do), also lent itself to both convenience sampling (Punch, 2005; Tian and Diamond, 2024) and purposive sampling (Rezvani et al., 2024) in relation to access and participants. Because the setting was the school of the child-participants, I was aware that in my role as a researcher, I did not want to violate the children's space that they were familiar with as part of their everyday usual experience of school (Lewis, Kellett, Robinson, Fraser, Ding, (eds.), 2004). At the same time, being a teacher at that same school meant that the children were used to me being in the same spaces as them daily and so this would have been a more natural shared space compared to a space that they were unfamiliar with, despite the implications in power through authority. To redress issues of power through authority, the specific location of the research within the school was purposefully selected; all aspects of the data collection took place in a small break-out room, which these children did not use for their learning. The break-out room was selected over the classroom 'to create distance between the interview and school work' (Kaplun, 2019: 395), with the intention that the children would not associate the research with doing their school work.

3.5.2 Access

When accessing a setting to conduct a study, 'it is generally presumed that access is more easily granted to the insider researcher' (Mercer, 2007: 6). So as not to take advantage of this presumption, I was careful to follow strict guidelines (outlined below) to negotiate access to the setting. This was for ethical reasons and because relationships with others within the setting had the potential to impact the research.

> For teacher-researchers, who are about to engage in narrative inquiries in their schools, a careful and considered negotiation of relationships and entry into the research field is crucial. There is inevitable coming into relationships with others such as participants, parents and guardians, supervisors, cooperating teachers, and school management in this process. Through this series of experiences, narratives of those relationships emerge and accumulate.
>
> (Meegan 2023a: 1275)

Since this research took place with children in a school setting, I first needed to obtain consent from the institution gatekeeper (BERA, 2024; Hopkins, 2002; Moss, 2022). In this case, this was the principal of the school (Maxwell, 2015). I used a template from the university's Research Ethics Committee (REC) to ensure all the necessary information about the proposed study was communicated to the principal in a written form and that he/she had the opportunity to discuss the study with me and ask any questions either in writing or verbally. The conversation included discussion around the use of my teacher knowledge of the children and access to and use of pupil data and other documents held by the school, such as class timetables. This resulted in a signed agreement from the principal and I (this could not be included in the appendices to prevent the sharing of any identifying information related to the setting and participants). Having obtained consent from the gatekeeper, I then needed to gain legal consent from the parent/carers of the children who were under the age of 18 years old and thus under the care and responsibility of their parent/carers. Seeking permission from parent/carers is in line with the requirements of the UNCRC (Unicef Website, 2025a), which has been used to inform the BERA guidelines (BERA, 2024). Information was shared with parent/carers both verbally and on a participant

information sheet (Appendix C). Along with a consent/assent form and information on the right to withdraw, the participant information sheet also included information on the project and 'a declaration of membership… to make explicit the fact that members are expected to follow BERA guidance as part of the association's code of conduct (which contains a complaints procedure)' (BERA, 2024: 14) and a statement confirming that I have undergone university Research Integrity Training and also received permission to go ahead with the research from the university's REC. To enable this ethical approach to be fully realised, I provided my university contact details to both the school and parent/carers should they have any further questions and concerns.

In addition to parental/carer consent, children's assent was also sought despite it not being a legal requirement to do so. The research was explained to the children and they also were given the opportunity to ask questions (Kaplun, 2019). Children were then offered the opportunity to opt-in or out of the research. At this point, it is possible that children may have felt they had a relative lack of power to decline to take part. Children may also have felt they had to respond in a certain way to try to please me because of my relationship to them as both a teacher and an adult in a school setting (Creswell, 2012). This was an additional ethical issue that arose due to the sampling strategy and choice of participants: I taught in the same year group of children (Year 6) that made up the participants in this study and one class of participants was my own class. Children in other classes also knew me as a teacher within the same year group. In some cases, I might have taught some of the children at an earlier point in their school life too. Due to an existing relationship, Mercer states that 'conducting insider research is like wielding a double-edged sword' (2007: 7). On the one hand, children might not wish to share certain information for fear of being judged (Mercer, 2007) by someone they already know as their teacher, but they may still feel compelled to take part. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest the children may have felt reassured because they knew me and were taking part in the research with a person and in a place that they were already familiar with and may had developed a relationship based on trust (Moen, 2006; Murray, 2019; Pascal and Betram, 2009). Thus, at this point, I made clear to the children that no one should feel forced to participate because of my role as a teacher, particularly with teacher expectations, and so I made sure to 'reassure potential participants that non-participation is entirely acceptable.' (BERA, 2024: 17). It was also made clear to the children that they could withdraw at any time without any

consequence (Rodríguez-Carrillo, Mérida-Serrano and González-Alfaya, 2020). Indeed, not all children chose to take part in all aspects of the research (Section 3.5).

If the parent/carer consented to the research but their child did not agree, I did not include that child in the study, as it would have been unethical to go against the child's wishes. If the child wished to take part, but the parent/carer did not allow it, I was unable to go ahead with the research because the children's assent alone is not enough due to the age of the children involved. In this instance, I managed these cases sensitively as I would in similar matters as part of my teacher role, for example when some parent/carers choose to opt out of their children taking part in particular subjects such as RE or RSE lessons. These 87 children were invited to take part in a similar activity, which they did at the same time as the other children. However, what these children produced was not included as part of the data collection, interpretation or analysis. After having completed the data collection and as suggested by the literature (Creswell, 2012), I wanted to express my gratitude to the participants. All the children received a postcard to thank children (*ibid.*) for their contribution to the study. Similarly, for those children who did not have parental/carer consent and were not part of the research, I gave them a thank you postcard for taking part in the alternative activity.

3.5.3 Sampling strategy and participants

The setting, access and choice of participants in this study are all related. Convenience sampling has become increasingly popular (Punch, 2005; Tian and Diamond, 2004), particular with teacher researchers such as Boon (2015), who also did research with his own class in a primary school setting. Yet, despite the convenience of access to participants, I also used a purposive sampling strategy (Rezvani et al., 2024). Regarding the level at which the data was gathered, I used one year group, Year 6, within this one school as a 'unit of analysis' (Creswell, 2012: 141), or 'example' (Flyvbjerg, 2001) to explore the issue of high-stakes primary school assessment. I decided to work with Year 6 (10-11-year-olds) because this is the primary school year group that up to 2019 and from 2022, have consistently had to take the SATs at the end of mainstream primary school. However, as explained in Chapter 1, the SATs did not take place in 2020 and

2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite this, some Year 6 children were still assessed nationwide at the end of the academic year and data from these assessments were, in some cases, still provided to secondary schools (Bradbury et al., 2021).

There were 3 stages to the data collection: questionnaires; pictures and/or free-writing; and semi-structured interviews (Section 3.5). The number of participants who participated in each stage was different. Across five Year 6 classes, 130 children were asked if they wished to take part in the initial questionnaire element of the research. This was to encompass as diverse a range of participants and as wide a breadth of perceived experiences as possible within this setting. Because the children in the year group were split across five different Year 6 classes, they had different teachers and support staff and were subsequently subject to variations in styles of teaching and learning, which may have affected the perceived experiences of each child and added a wider range of experiences. I administered the questionnaire to the total number of children who agreed to take part and for whom I had timely parental/carer consent and child assent: the final number of participants who took part in the questionnaire was 35 children.

For the interviews, I ensured that I had a sample representative of the make-up of the year group by using the children in my own class (for whom I had parental/carer consent and child assent); this was both convenient and purposive. It was representative because when these children were at the end of Year 5 in the previous academic year, the children across the year group had been split again into the five different classes in advance of Year 6. This split was made by school leadership according to children's particular attributes. These attributes are reflective of the government system used to analyse school assessment data across schools in England (Gov.uk Website, 2024f). The attributes are described as 'pupil characteristics' (*ibid.*) on the government portal: prior attainment (based on KS1 data); English as an additional language (EAL); Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND); girls and boys; non-mobile pupils (those who were at the school for the duration of Year 5 and Year 6) and 'disadvantaged pupils'. Disadvantaged pupils can be defined as 'those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: 'pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route' (Ofsted, 2023: 4). Because of the school data comparisons across schools through the

school performance tables, much of the internal school assessment data is also analysed taking the same characteristics into account (Appendix O). However, key to the narrative approach is that the experiences of one participant cannot be the same as another despite similar characteristics. Although in one respect this study may seem small, Punch (2005) advises that 'it is better to have a small job done thoroughly than a large job done only superficially' (36). Thus, I am as explicit as I can be about the individuals in the study and their own circumstances within their group. A smaller study allowed me to dive deeper into the rich description (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 83) when exploring meanings and understandings during the data collection, analysis and interpretation and I was able to capture a 'wide spectrum of viewpoints and perceptions' (Rezvani et al., 2024: 178). The final number of participants for the interviews were 13 children for the first round of interview and 12 children for the second round of interviews.

3.5.4 Multiple methods

My choice of methods was linked to my methodological framework and choice of settings and participants. With the diversity of participants, I aimed to create a 'rich dataset, tracking a range of perspectives' (Moss, 2022). As a result of the relatively more recent interest in combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research and to avoid an over-reliance on one method (Punch, 2005), I decided to use multiple methods in this study as this matched well with my research questions, theoretical perspective and the narrative approach (Creswell, 2012). The Mosaic Approach (Clark, Kiorholt, and Moss, 2005), has been promoted by Pascal and Bertram as a way to empower children in research conducted within settings where there are children. It involves the use of data collected through multiple 'participatory tools for children' (2009: 253); 'Mosaic' refers to the drawing together of pieces from different sources to create a complete picture of children's perspective' (*ibid.*). It is also highlighted by Pascal and Betram (2009) that using an approach of multiple methods can utilise the multiple intelligences explained by Gardner (Gardner and Hatch, 1989) (Section 1.5). Other well-established research that combines multiple methods includes the national cohort studies (Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS), 2025), which was

the information source used by Jerrim (2021) in his study of national tests and the wellbeing of primary school pupils in England. In the national cohort studies, the quantitative data was used to construct a narrative of people's lives alongside qualitative data to produce detailed insights into participants' experiences (Elliott and Shepherd, 2006). Similarly, the Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives and Effectiveness (VITAE) project (Day et al., 2006) combined quantitative and qualitative methods for their study as did the Cambridge Primary Review (Cambridge Primary Review Trust website, 2025), which included research with children, amongst other key stakeholders, from 2006-2010. I was inspired by Day et al.'s (2006) with teachers in education and the Cambridge Primary Review Trust's (2025) work with children in education to use multiple methods in my own study.

I began by using a quantitative method, which took the form of a 10-statement questionnaire that I designed and which is discussed in the next section (3.5.5). This enabled me to take standardised measurements and make systematic comparisons through the use of a Likert scale. Whilst one could argue that this particular method is reductionist in its approach and shows only a simplified part of the picture, the data was considered alongside qualitative methods in the form of the semi-structured interviews and also pictures/free-writing.

> For us, listening to young children is an active process of receiving, interpreting and responding to their communications. 'Listening' includes using all the senses and emotions and accessing children's range of communication is clearly not limited to the spoken word. As researchers, we see it as necessary to ensure the participation of young children and an approach which allows us to tune in to all young children as individuals in their everyday lives. Understanding listening in this way is key to providing an environment in which all young children feel confident, safe and powerful, ensuring they have the time and space to express themselves in whatever form suits them.
>
> (Pascal and Betram, 2009: 255).

As my research questions sought to explore the experiences of children in their own words, a qualitative approach was also required. In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef Website, 2025a), also referred to by BERA (2024) 'Article 12 says that every child has the right to express their views,

feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously' (Unicef Website, 2025b: n.p.). In support of this statement, Punch (2005) describes interviews as 'one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others' (168). Linked to this freedom of expression, the UNCRC (1989) suggests that these contributions are particularly valuable regarding matters relating to education. Thus, I decided to seek these contributions through giving the children the opportunity to do their pictures/free-writing and through interviewing them both before and after their end of year assessments.

It has been argued that qualitative data produces thick description (Holloway, 1997; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Punch 2005) that then requires researcher interpretations, which can result solely in researcher-constructed meanings. However, I have addressed this by choosing to showcase the pictures and exact words of the children themselves (Chapter 4). Use of multiple methods (questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and pictures/free-writing) helped to establish validity through checking that data produced from each of the methods led to a similar understanding of the children's meaning of their experiences. I verified the validity of my interpretations using children's own explanations. Consistency in the accounts was used to illustrate the 'accuracy' of my interpretations, adding rigour and reliability. Thus, I aimed to understand and offer plausible explanations by collecting different types of data. Where data appeared to point in different directions, I considered reasons for this. However, in line with the narrative approach I also acknowledged that 'sometimes people want to smooth storied experience over and make it "first this and then this" as if there's some smoothness. There's no smoothness—it's always messy'. (Clandinin, 2018: 19, 20). Thus, I did not force stories to fit my own narrative and argument.

> Maybe these are unfitting stories, stories that resist the easy telling, that are awkward and jagged (Raoul, 2007), but unfitting stories are also stories to live by and a relational ontology requires that we do not turn first to the inquiry as a way to make these stories fit. Representation, as the act that arises from our relational ontology, necessitates our living with the unfitting story rather than with attempts to tame, sanitize, or analyze. As narrative inquirers we attend to difficult stories and

> experiences, we stay with them; we dwell alongside participants in possible ways of retelling them.
>
> (Meegan, 2023a: 581)

Keeping this in mind, the data gathered from multiple methods, even when it pointed to unfitting stories, still added value to the discussion (Chapter 5).

Through the qualitative aspect of the questionnaire and the interviews, children 'often shared short story snippets, with no discernible start, middle or end… Using small stories in narrative identity research changes the focus from how narratives construct the self to how we create a sense of self and others' (Meegan, 2023a: 1273). In this way, I was able to 'gain insight into how people understand and make meaning of their experiences and how they use these experiences to construct and negotiate their identities' (*ibid.*). Thus, through the collection of data, children were not just telling me about assessment but also telling me about how they see themselves. Each of the individual methods used are described in more detail below. Prior to using multiple methods to collect data, I conducted a pilot of both the questionnaire and interview as a means of 'testing the nuts and bolts of the research' (Lewis et al. (eds), 2004: 24).

3.5.5 Designing and piloting the questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to generate quantitative data to create an overall picture of the children's perceptions of assessment. I aimed to get an overview of the general thoughts and feelings on assessment, before narrowing down to explore individual stories. There were several considerations that had to be taken into account when designing the questionnaire. Opie (2004) suggests the following regarding the creation of an inviting layout for the questionnaire: have it typed rather than hand-written for legibility; ensure sufficient spacing between questions for clarity and make sure response boxes are neatly aligned. I took this advice into account before creating the pilot questionnaire (Appendix G). As it was children's thoughts and feelings that I wanted to elicit from the questionnaire, it was essential that taken together, the statements remained neutral and value-free. Although the subject of the questions stemmed from the literature review, I phrased the questions in a way that was balanced

and unbiased, so as not to be suggestive. The statements were presented in an age-appropriate based on my teacher experience.

Children stated how far they agreed/disagreed with statements relating to testing at school. I used a 4-point Likert scale offering the following options: 'agree strongly, agree, disagree' and 'disagree strongly'. The Likert scale itself assumes that the distance between each choice or option is equal. But this does not mean that the children interpreted it in that way. I used this structure and these terms as the children were already familiar with them from previous questionnaires that they had completed in school. I also offered a neutral option, 'unsure', as a small tick box underneath the main scale. This was so that children who really did feel uncertain about their thoughts and feelings could reflect this in their response, rather than feeling forced to make a choice. However, the aim of this questionnaire was essentially to record some degree of feeling and opinion and that is why I kept this box as an aside to the main scale. The data from the questionnaire was then used to inform the interview questions, during which children had the opportunity to explain their meanings more fully.

To check the research methods were fit for purpose, I first administered the questionnaire to a pilot group consisting of 7 children from other Year 6 classes (not including my own class). These were children for whom I already had parental/carer consent and child assent. I chose these children from the other classes as they were ones who I had taught in that academic year, for example through the setting of children in Maths, but who were not in my class all of the time. For this reason, they had more of a relationship with me than the other children in different classes in the year group. In this way, our existing relationship made these children more similar to those in my own class, with whom I had planned to conduct first the questionnaires and then the interviews. I did not choose children from my own class to pilot the questionnaire because I did not want to reduce my sample of participants for the actual questionnaires and interviews that were included as part of the study. Although the children who participated in the questionnaire were in other Year 6 classes and subsequently this slightly reduced the number of participants in the actual study, I felt it was of more value to pilot the questionnaire on this age group, rather than Year 5 for example. This

was because the questionnaire was more relevant to Year 6 children about to take their SATs than to any other year group.

During the piloting of the questionnaire, I checked to see if children could access and respond to the questions. I went through the questions and the options for answering them with the children and we discussed them together. This enabled me to see what meaning the children ascribed to each question and the choice of responses and then to compare this with my intended meanings (Punch, 2005). In addition to this, I was able to consider how long it took for the questions to be answered (Opie, 2004), enabling more effective planning for carrying out the study. Going through the questions and answers in this way also allowed me to check that the questionnaire facilitated responses that were relevant to the research questions identified at the beginning of this chapter. Following the piloting of the questionnaire and in discussion with my supervisors, I amended the questionnaire accordingly. For example, in the pilot version of the questionnaire (Appendix G), the wording of Question 6 initially read 'How I perform in a test matters to me', but the wording was inconsistent with Questions 7 and 8, which read 'My test performance matters to…' teachers and parent/carers respectively. Thus, in the final version of the questionnaire, I amended this to read 'How I perform in a test matters to…' for all three questions (Appendix H).

3.5.6 Final questionnaire

Following the piloting of the questionnaire to check that it was fit for purpose, I administered the final questionnaire (Appendix H) to all children for whom I had obtained consent and assent (other than those 7 children who took part in the piloting of the questionnaire). In administering the questionnaire to all five Year 6 classes, I read out the statements to the children across all classes myself. This enabled me to stay in control of the data collection procedure for ethical reasons and stress the importance of children's honest answers. It also meant that I could make sure that clarification of meaning was consistent and support children who may have found the questionnaire more difficult to access, for example if some children needed questions repeated or more time to write an answer. There was a potential issue here regarding children

perhaps not wanting to admit that they had not listened or that they did not understand and so I used my professional practice to help children feel more at ease. Guided by my professional standards and ethical principles, I wanted this research to be equally accessible to all participants. Other researchers have also made a point of stressing that their research should not be interpreted in any way as a test (Lewis et al. (eds), 2004) and so I avoided this by reminding children of the purpose of the questionnaire and overall study. Analysis of the questionnaire was used to adapt and enhance the interview schedule (Section 3.5.8). The resulting proposed interview schedule (Appendix I) was used in combination with children's pictures and/or free-writing to enable children to explain their perceived experiences and share their opinions more fully.

3.5.7 Pictures and free-writing

Narrative researchers including Andrews et al. (2008) suggest that expanding the type of materials used within the study creates a more rounded narrative. Additionally, Hayes states that 'to hear young children's voices, adults need to attend to the non-verbal modes of communication as well as the verbal' (2024:831) because there exists an over 'reliance on language-based methods, such as questionnaires and interviews, as a means of eliciting children's views' (2024: 833). With this in mind, it has been claimed that 'an image is worth a thousand words' (Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020: 505). More specifically, some children appear to put a lot of care into creating meaningful drawings (Coates, 2002) and in some cases, 'children's drawings speak a thousand words' (Kaplun, 2019: 392). Based on this premise and in keeping with the narrative approach and qualitative aspect of the research, children were invited to draw their own pictures and/or write about what assessment means to them. Here I used the term 'pictures' to suggest that children depict assessment in a way that is meaningful to them with the available materials in school. Pictures were a long-established form of visual expression that children were familiar with and in their everyday school lives, they often requested the opportunity to create pictures themselves even if it was not a requirement of their learning task. Thus, I asked children to create a picture, rather than do a drawing, to help empower those children who might be uncomfortable with their 'drawing' abilities. During my review of literature, I noted that research such as the

study by Boon (2015), who investigated peer assessment amongst Year 6 pupils, included photos of text annotations on post it notes and more lengthy writing by the children themselves. In Maxwell's study (2015), Year 5 children did drawings of their primary school experience and some of these were included in his research article, as was the case with D'Addezio and Besker's research (2024) into primary school children's changed perceptions of Science and scientists and also Kamarudin and Noor's research (2024) into primary school children's understanding of photosynthesis. I found these to be a powerful way to depict and do justice to the children's perceptions. In a similar way, I was striving for the following:

> … make techniques meaningful and worthwhile, inspired by a flexible, playful, open-ended approach… arts-based, not literacy-based, since children perform masterfully in the arts (drawing, singing, dancing) before acquiring reading and writing skills. As the arts are children's first literacies, research methods should be imaginative, practical and performative, involving use of familiar tools and materials.
>
> (Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020: 505)

For children who did not wish to do a picture, or in addition to their picture, they were offered the opportunity to do free-writing instead. Free-writing was an activity the children in my class were familiar with whereby they could put their thoughts and feelings on a subject down on paper without worrying about the technicalities of writing (such as spelling, punctuation or grammar), or have the writing 'marked' by the teacher. In this way, it was unlike the subject of Writing they studied in Year 6. This was also designed to reinforce the idea of ensuring the research did not seem like a test (Lewis et al. (eds), 2004). It was hoped that through using techniques that the children had enjoyed in the past and that they could access with familiar tools, it would help the children feel at ease and encourage them to communicate their meanings in a more vivid way. Along with the results of the questionnaire, this more creative and free form of expression was used to inform the interview questions, during which the children could go into more detail about the what they had depicted in their picture/free-writing if they chose to do so. This reflects one of the strands of the Mosaic Approach whereby 'children [are] reviewing their images' (Hayes, 2024: 834) as an additional method of participation in research. Kaplun states that 'drawing activities are a way of reducing power differentials that exist between children and adults' (2019: 393). Subsequently,

the method of pictures/free-writing was also chosen to empower children and reduce power disparities within the research.

From an additional ethical perspective, children were informed at the end of the questionnaire and picture/free-writing stage of the research that it was their choice whether they wished to add their name to the questionnaire and picture/free-writing (Opie, 2014). They were reminded that everyone's responses (with or without a name) would form part of this initial collection of data, however if children in my class wanted to take part in the interview stage, they would need to write their name on their questionnaire and picture/free-writing so that I could further explore their points of view. Thus, I hoped the children felt they were empowered to decide whether 1) they wished their questionnaire and picture/writing to remain anonymous, 2) whether they wanted to opt-in to the interview stage of data collection. For those children who had chosen to write their names on their work, I replaced their names with pseudonyms for anonymity purposes when interpreting, analysing and reporting the findings of the research. From a separate ethical perspective, following the example of other researchers with children using a pictorial method, I asked children for their permission to share their pictures/free-writing with other people (Lewis et al. (eds), 2004). I followed this up by taking pictures of the pictures/writing and storing them electronically (Appendix M) so that the children could keep their original picture/writing.

3.5.8 Piloting the interviews

After conducting the questionnaire with the participants, I used the data from this and from my review of literature (Rezvani et al., 2024) to create the proposed interview schedule (Appendix I). It was then necessary to trial interviews with the same focus group of children who had piloted the questionnaire to check that the interviews were also fit for purpose. The aim of this was twofold. Firstly, as with the questionnaire, I wanted to check that the questions enabled children to engage with the aims of the research and to give answers to the specific research questions stated at the start of this chapter. The interview questions and prompts also had to be value-free and open-ended

so that the participants could share their experiences without feeling constrained by my questions and influence. Additionally, I wanted to ensure that by using carefully constructed questions, the children understood what I was asking them and that I was, in turn, able to understand what was meant by their responses.

> Narrative research which is based on conversations between people is invariably a process of ongoing negotiation of meaning. People answer the questions which they think we are asking them, and we respond to the answers with which we think they have provided us. Our understanding of their words is always contingent upon our ability to imagine the worlds they are trying to convey.
>
> (Andrews et al., 2008: 14)

In keeping with the narrative approach described, piloting the interview schedule was a necessary step to determine whether or not the questions enabled me to imagine the 'world' of each child through their responses and through their references to their pictures/free-writing. During the piloting of the interview, I was checking that the questions were sufficiently open-ended enough to allow children to express themselves freely. At this stage, I also sought the children's contributions to the research design.

3.5.9 Children's contributions to the research design

As children are key stakeholders in primary school assessment, I encouraged them to contribute to the study in a way that was separate and distinct from their role as respondents to the questionnaire and participants in the interviews. This was based on an appreciation that research with children respects their rights and that they are the insiders and the experts on their own experiences (Kaplun, 2019); 'children's experiences and knowledge should not and cannot be interchangeable with those of adults' (Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020: 504). Writing in 2000 on the new sociology of childhood, Mayall suggested that 'perhaps in years to come, it will be common for children to design their own research, and disseminate it, perhaps in partnership with adults' (2000: 253). Along these lines, I facilitated the children's involvement in the research design itself (Hopkins, 2002), enabling them to add an 'insider's perspective on their unique experiences and viewpoints' (Rezvani et al. 2024 :176).

Children had already contributed to the methods through piloting the questionnaire, which had been amended accordingly. The next step was to seek the same 7 children's suggestions in relation to the design of the interview. I chose to use the same children for both consistency and to not lose any further potential participants from the actual study. Opie (2004) advises against using the same children in both the pilot and the actual study because the participants in the pilot would have become familiar with the questions and so their answers in the main study might be different than they would have been otherwise. The 7 children were interviewed based on the proposed interview schedule (Appendix I). They were then asked to make suggestions for how the interview questions could be improved. Their suggestions were as follows:

Table 3.2 Interview question suggestions from the children

Do you enjoy them or not?
Do you feel anxious/worried/stressed about taking them?
Do you enjoy some tests more/less than others?
Do you think you have the same chance at doing well in your tests as everyone else? Why/why not?
Are there any questions in tests that you may not have learnt about in class?
If yes, how do you feel about them?
What goes through your mind when taking the tests?
Would you like to have tests in any other subjects?
Are there any challenges or distractions during tests?
How do you feel about sitting next to other children during tests?

These valuable contributions were all included in the final interview schedule (Appendix K) and helped add to the rich description (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 83) produced during the interviews.

In addition to the interview question suggestions, I asked the pilot group to create an 'interview charter', which were guidelines for children to agree to follow during the interview process. In my role as teacher, I knew that the children were familiar with the concept of charters to keep children safe as they were often used in school, examples being class charters and online safety charters. In the context of this research, the charter included standards such as respecting the speaker and not discussing what other children say outside of the interview group (Appendix J). By including children's contributions to the research design I enabled a more 'child-centred and contextually located piece of research, resulting in illuminating children's views and empowering participants with a more authentic 'voice', rather than the potential tokenism sometimes inherent in researching with young people' (Maxwell, 2015: 92). In doing so at the interview stage in addition to the questionnaire stage, I acknowledged that 'the convention of interviewer-interviewee hierarchy is a rationalisation of inequality; what is good for interviewers is not necessarily good for interviewees' (Oakley, 1981: 54) and I sought to address this through the children's input into the design of the interviews. Thus, the children's contributions at this stage was vital in addressing the balance of power within the research by further empowering them.

3.5.10 First round of semi-structured interviews

> We feel that listening well to children can make a difference to our understanding of their priorities, interests and concerns and how children feel about themselves and their lives. Listening is also a vital part of establishing respectful educative relationships with the children we work with. We have found that listening can challenge assumptions and raise expectations. Seeing and hearing children express their interests and priorities can provide unexpected insights into their capabilities.
>
> (Pascal and Betram, 2009: 254, 255)

Semi-structured interviews were used for this study because it has been argued that most *experience*-centred narrative interviewing is of the semi-structured kind (Andrews et al., 2008). Levy, et al.'s, (2018) study that drew upon narrative inquiry also used semi-structured interviews for participants to present their stories of experience. The

semi-structured approach enabled me to guide children to talk about assessment whilst also being responsive to what they said; children were able to draw on their own perceived experiences of assessment and what it means to them. At the same time, they could add in their own interests and concerns. Using the pictures/free-writing as a prompt, the interviews enhanced the qualitative and narrative dimension of the research. The children having their pictures/writing with them enabled them to decide for themselves how to present their story. This approach 'actively involves the participant in the inquiry as it unfolds' (Creswell, 2012: 512). The children decided what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it and I was able to probe the children to amplify, expand and seek clarification on what they said. At the same time, I had to be aware that sometimes 'topics reveal themselves not in what is said, but in what cannot be said, or cannot be expressed coherently' (Andrew et al., 2008: 16). Thus, despite my interview schedule and prompts, I was still sensitive to children who chose to remain silent in their response and I did not push for further clarity from them if they did not wish to elaborate. At all times, I made myself aware of the children and the effect of the interview on the children, using my experience as a teacher to decide when it was the right time to end the interview.

The interviews were conducted with small focus groups of 2 to 5 children. Groups are appropriate for interviews with children for a variety of reasons: they bring to light consensus views to check generalisability of individual data (in this case collected from the initial questionnaires and pictures/free-writing); children can prompt and extend each other's ideas and group talk flows more naturally and allows thinking time for some children whilst others are talking (Lewis, 1992). One might argue (Lewis, 1992) that confidentiality is an issue when children are discussing things within the group, but the interview charter (Section 3.5.9 and Appendix J) addressed this. One might also suggest that in a group scenario, stronger opinions might drown out more moderate ones (Lewis, 1992) but I tackled this by managing group interactions effectively, as I explain in more detail below. The use of groups was also suitable as the preparation for and taking of assessments were a shared experience amongst the children within the year group.

Friendship groups were used for the interviews because the children already knew each other and might therefore be more comfortable expressing their opinions (Lewis, 1992). Additionally, my experience as a teacher also made me more inclined to allow children to be interviewed in friendship groups. Children had the opportunit to request friendship groups themselves with the understanding that their choices would be met as far as practically possible.

Measures were put into place to help manage interactions within the group. Firstly, the semi-structured nature of the interview provided a focus for children to discuss. Secondly, groups were kept small consisting only of 2 to 5 children to encourage the participation of each child. Thirdly, we sat in a circle formation without a desk between us because this is what the children have come to recognise in school as a more informal discussion where they are encouraged to share their own opinions more freely without being 'right' or 'wrong'.

Finally, my experience as a teacher enabled me to prompt some children to either speak freely or wait their turn if required (Creswell, 2012). At the same time, I acknowledged that 'some of the experiences will never be told. As narrative inquirers we understand that people also live their stories in what they do not say' (Caine et al., 2013: 578). I was aware that some children may choose not to be heard and that 'silence may also be a way for the child to exert power in a situation' (Hayes, 2024: 834) and so I respected children's choices if they wished to remain silent. Subsequently, children took turns to speak if they wished, enabling me to capture all the shared experiences within the group.

During the interviews I was acutely aware that 'narrative researchers are crucially a part of the data we collect; our presence is imprinted upon all that we do' (Andrews et al., 2008: 17). Children may not always have said what they really thought or felt in my presence as both a researcher (Creswell, 2012) and as their teacher, but this is still part of their lived experience. Through these group interviews, I gained insight into the students' personal learner knowledge. During moments of sharing, this knowledge is

being made while at the same time, being remade and constructed anew in relation with others' (Meegan, 2023a: 1280).

I audio recorded the interviews, which were then professionally transcribed afterwards (Bradbury et al; 2021; Creswell, 2012; Tian and Diamond, 2024). This allowed me in the moment to focus on the children, listen fully (Punch, 2005) and prompt during the interviews themselves. This was explained to the children by reassuring them that the recording was because I valued the importance of what they said in their own words rather than rely on my own notes and views of what they said (Creswell, 2012). With the transcriptions, I was more easily able to refer back to the children's actual words at a later date.

All the interviews lasted between 27 minutes to one hour. These differences in length of time were similar to the experience of Levy et. al who state that in their study 'the length of the interviews varied substantially; we very much took our lead from the participants in this respect as some participants clearly wanted to talk more than others' (2018: 132). To an extent, this is reflected when I present my findings (Chapter 4) as some children shared their stories a lot more vocally than others.

3.5.11 Second round of semi-structured interviews

A second set of semi-structured interviews took place after children sat their end of year SATs. This second round of interviews was conducted because part of the narrative approach is that words and stories take on a different meaning when told each time (Andrews et al, 2008). Thus, it was important to understand how children's second re-telling of their perceived experiences of assessment compared with their first re-telling and also how completion of the SATs might add to their story. During the second interview, children were asked about their experiences and opinions having taken their SATs and received their results. Again, the interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow me to focus more fully and prompt during the interviews. As mentioned in

relation to the first round of interviews, having transcripts also allowed me to refer back to the actual words of each child, rather than rely on my own notes.

From an ethical perspective, it is also of importance that there was a second round of interviews with the children:

> Repeated interviewing is not much discussed in the methodological literature: the paradigm is of an interview as a 'one-off' affair. Common sense would suggest that an ethic of detachment on the interviewer's part is much easier to maintain where there is only one meeting with the interviewee…
>
> (Oakley, 1984: 57)

For this reason, I sought to empower the children further by carrying out the second round of interviews because 'reinterviews and other post-interview interactions can also be viewed as ways to give interviewees more power over the materials; to enable them to 'look back' … or to continue the conversation' (Andrews et al., 2008: 49). I felt an added responsibility to do this given my practitioner researcher relationship with the participants (Section 3.4.4). I have explained the different methods of data collection that were used to gather information: a 10-statement questionnaire and pictures/free-writing by the children themselves that acted as a prompt for the children during the semi-structured group interviews. Once collected, the data had to be stored confidentially and securely.

3.5.4 Pseudonyms

To maintain an ethical approach, pseudonyms were ascribed to the participants (Levy, Hall and Preece, 2018; Sikes and Hall, 2018; Tian and Diamond, 2004) as soon as the data had been collected. In McCarthy's (2024) study she chose to have the children decide on their own pseudonyms, which I feel was a thoughtful approach and one which was encouraged in other literature on pseudonyms (Allen and Wiles, 2016; Lahman, Thomas and Teman, 2023). However, Mccarthy's data was collected from four children, which was comparatively small compared to my 35 children. Using this approach in my study may have resulted in a lengthy back and forth if children either within the same class, or across different classes, had chosen the same pseudonyms. It

might also have led to issues regarding power relations between the children themselves. Thus, I gave children pseudonyms myself using an online random name generating tool (Name Generator Website, 2021).

3.5.13 Storage of data

A confidential approach was taken to the collection and storage of data throughout the entire research process. (Hopkins, 2002, Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). Firstly, the children were unidentifiable through use of their pseudonyms. However, because I used a narrative approach where children discussed their own experiences, I needed to be aware that other children or indeed adults may be implicated or identifiable by what the children may have said in their own re-tellings so those names were changed too.

As per the BERA guidelines (2024) and BREO, all electronic data was kept on an encrypted memory stick and transferred immediately for storage and on a secure location on the university computing drive. Original recordings of the interviews were deleted once transcriptions were made. All paper data was scanned and stored electronically, with the original paper documents shredded by a professional shredding company.

3.6 Data analysis

Here, I have made my analysis as systematic and as transparent as possible to allow for and audit trail' (Punch, 2005) through the data thereby enabling reproducibility of this study if required. Lustick (2021) recognises that, as researchers, regards for our thoughts and feelings run counter to academic culture because their presence during coding could make the interpretation and analysis 'susceptible to the blindspots, values, and perspectives with which we were raised' (2021: 355). How we think and feel affects the data we perceive. However, Lustick (2021) goes on to argue that bracketing our emotions and excluding our thoughts and feelings from our overall analysis prevents researchers from learning about our emotional reactions to the data and what that tells

us about our participants' experiences. Through accepting her emotions throughout her own research process she felt she made meaning of her interview in 'a deeper, more human way' (Lustick, 2021: 364). Analysis of the questionnaires and interview are explained below. The pictures and free-writing were explained in the children's own words, rather than my analysing them.

3.6.1 Analysis of the questionnaire

The first step to this was the analysis of the quantitative data, whereby I counted individual Likert scale responses to each question one-by-one. This enabled me to calculate how many children selected 'agree strongly, agree, disagree' and or 'disagree strongly' for each of the statements. I then calculated this information into percentages to indicate strength of feeling for each question. Percentages have been calculated to one decimal place (rounded up where necessary), in line with how percentages of children are presented in studies that inspired my own, such as the findings of D'Addezio and Besker (2024) into primary school children's changed perceptions of Science and scientists between 2011 and 2021 (Section 1.5). The next step was to analyse the qualitative comments some children provided with their questionnaire. I did this question by question using the same coding technique (Bradbury et al., 2021; Rezvani et al., 2024) as I did for the interviews afterwards (Section 3.6.2): Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006). Based on both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the questionnaire, I produced data headlines (Appendix L) that I could use in conjunction with the themes revealed from the analysis of the interviews: the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 82).

3.6.2 Analysis of the interviews

Rezvani et al. used a narrative inquiry approach for their study and advised that 'the transcribed data underwent qualitative thematic analysis, which is widely recognised as the most popular qualitative analytic strategy in narrative studies' (2024: 178). Thematic analysis was also used by Tian and Diamond (2024) with their interview

transcriptions, Mccarthy (2024) and Moss (2022). Thus, I used Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis (2006) for the interviews, which was also used and summarised by Rezvani et al. as: '(1) familiarising ourselves with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing and revising themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report'. (2024: 178). As a starting point, Rezvani et. al (2024) chose to use the interview data to uncover patterns and identify recurrent themes. Similarly, in my own study, when analysing the interviews, coding was used (Bradbury et al., 2021). I assigned labels to elements that occurred repeatedly throughout the data and these were then categorised allowing meaning to be attached to the data. Codes were both descriptive and inferential but always based on what the data suggested (Appendix N). These codes and grouping of codes into categories helped me to define the themes. I underwent an in 'iterative process' (Mccarthy, 2024: 1060) of close reading and re-reading and interpreting of the interview transcripts repeatedly (Meegan, 2023a, Sikes and Hall, 2018) 'to gain a thorough and nuanced understanding of the data' (Rezvani et. al, 2024: 178).

3.7 Dissemination of findings

Having completed the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data, it was necessary to then communicate the findings of the research. One way I am doing this is through this thesis. In addition to this, it is expected that the findings will be presented in journal articles and at conferences. These retellings of experience would reflect the idea that 'each story is always partial and contextual and offers new possibilities as the stories are retold' (Caine et al., 2013). This makes it accessible to a wider audience and encourages discussion amongst practitioners and invites critique that can lead to an improvement in practice (Hopkins, 2002).

Drawing inspiration from previously mentioned literature involving educational research with children such as Boon (2015), I was keen to include children's own writing and pictures for the reader to see for themselves. I felt that these original versions of the children's work were a powerful depiction of their experiences and that including examples of these materials in the dissemination of findings did justice to

their stories without their experiences getting lost in my narrative report (Creswell, 2012). Through the dissemination of my findings, I have contributed to the dialogue about primary school assessment with new knowledge that put the children's perspectives into the spotlight using multiple methods. I have also shown a commitment to action by sharing these findings with the school and by putting forward recommendations for further study on a wider scale.

It is advised by BERA that researchers have the responsibility of 'informing participants about the outcomes of research in which they are or were involved' (2024: 12). Thus, I chose to share the data headlines (Appendix L), the main findings of the data presented in a clear and concise way, with the children verbally. I used my experience as a teacher to deliver the findings in a sensitive way by emphasising that every participant's contribution had been included through informing the children that their stories would be carefully thought over by the teachers to see how we might make the assessment preparation and processes better for them. The data headlines were also shared in as a summary with the gatekeeper who, as the principal of the school, has some freedom over the preparation for and implementation of assessment in the school.

3.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has reminded the reader of the research aims:

1) What did children say was the impact of assessment on their experiences of a) the curriculum; and b) their mental health and well-being?
2) Did children have any recommendations about assessment?

These aims were stated within the conceptual framework of a constructed reality, talking an interpretive and qualitative stance. The reasons for using a narrative approach were explained starting with an interest in children's perceived experiences of their school assessment. This reflected an appreciation that life and education are intertwined. Thus, I sought to bring together the children with their stories of assessment as an experience-centred work: contextual in time and meaningful; how

children make sense of their world; reconstructed stories of experience; and with the aim to be transformative in some way. Central to this narrative approach was the understanding that as a researcher, my interaction with and interpretation of the stories was significant. Children's stories were told and retold and relived as I continuously interacted and interpreted them in a three-dimensional space. An experiential narrative inquiry approach was chosen as best fit to answer the research questions because it enabled me to share how the participants make meaning of their perceived experiences in a particular historical, societal and cultural context. This resonated with my literature review which highlighted the importance of such a context.

My positionality as a practitioner researcher was situated alongside the ways in which the research was devised to empower the children. I explained how the relational ethics of being a narrative inquirer guided my interactions with the children and how I drew established ethical guidelines to support this, such as from BERA and BREO. Having identified myself as a human instrument of the research, I sought to establish trustworthiness and reflexivity as a researcher. Following in the footsteps of narrative enquirers such Rezvani et al. (2024) and guided by the work of Nowell et al. (2017), I did this through adapting Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Following on from this, I explored the implications of being a practitioner researcher and how it was advantageous to be both a practitioner in the field and a teacher who had an existing relationship of trust with the children. Most importantly, I highlighted why and how I sought to empower the children throughout the research process, for example through their contributions to developing the tools of the data collection and their involvement in creating an interview charter.

Beginning with a visual summary, I then set out a thorough explanation of the research design. Both convenience and purposive sampling was used to decide on the setting: one mainstream primary school (academy) in London, England. For ethical reasons, the specific location of data collection within the school was a break-out room, rather than a classroom. Access to the setting and participations was negotiated through dialogue with the gatekeeper, parent/carers and the children, from whom consent and assent was

obtained prior to commencing any data collection. The sampling strategy and participants were explained as a diverse group of children from across Year 6 who were about to take their SATs. Following examples such as the national cohort studies (CLC Website, 2025) and VITAE project (Christopher et al., 2006), I used a multiple method approach to collect the data. I detailed the multiple stages and chronological stages of the data collection, involving the pilot and use of multiple methods: questionnaire, pictures/free-writing and two rounds of semi-structured interviews. Finally, I discussed the dissemination of findings to a wider audience and my intention to invite critique and suggestions for improvements in practice. In Chapter 4 I will communicate the findings of the data interpretation and analysis before their discussion in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4: INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

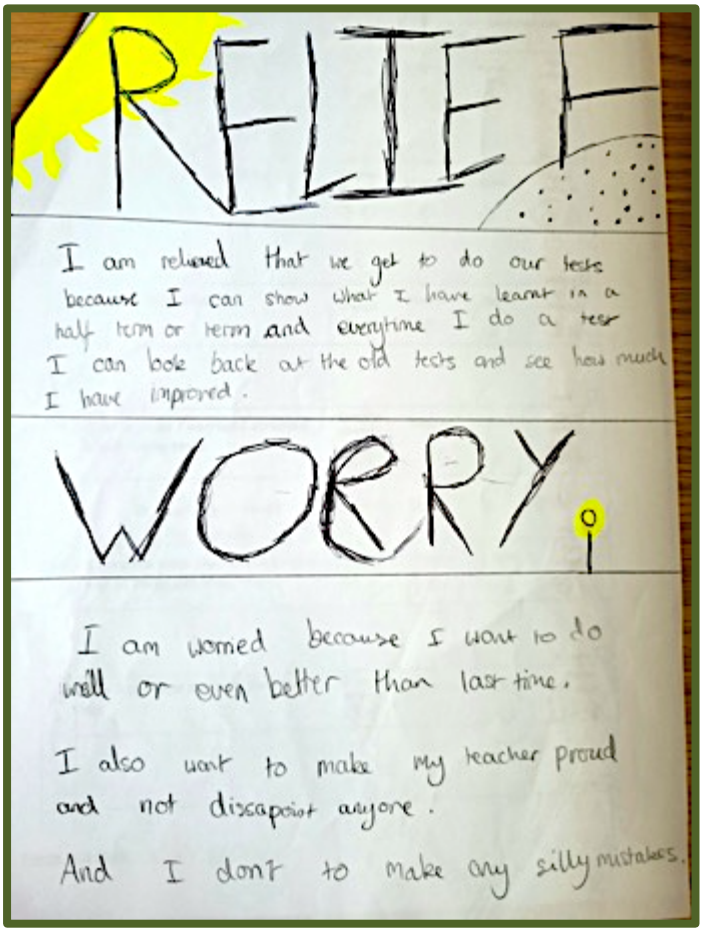


Fig. 4 Keiran's free-writing, pre-SATs

4.1 Introduction

Throughout this chapter, is not my aim to resurrect children's experiences of assessment (Meegan, 2023a), but instead to 'offer interpretive ways to make sense of and understand the past in the light of the present' (*ibid.* 1278). In this study, children perceived that assessment, and more specifically testing, had an important impact on both the curriculum and their mental health and well-being, which elicited a mixed response (Keiran, Fig. 4) and led them to make some alternative recommendations for assessment. A high majority of 91.4% of children agreed or agreed strongly that tests were important and of consequence to them, suggesting that they were perceived by the

children to be high-stakes; this chapter seeks to find out why. The possible reasons for this were revealed through the interpretation and analysis of the different sources of data collected: questionnaires completed before children took their SATs; the creation of pictures by the children both before and after the SATs; and semi-structured interviews with small focus groups, also conducted both before and after the SATs. When presenting this data from multiple methods, I have chosen to use percentages for the numerical data questionnaire data to indicate strength of response, which is an advantage of this form of quantitative data collection. As was explained in Section 3.6.1, percentages have been calculated to one decimal place (rounded up where necessary), in line with similar studies concerning numbers of children who expressed strength of feeling towards various options. Alternatively, I have chosen to use the number of children and/or children's names when referring to questionnaire comments and data from the pictures and interviews as this reflects both a qualitative and narrative approach. Written comments from the questionnaire and narrative excerpts extracted from the interviews are presented verbatim and without corrections to spelling or grammar, thereby helping to establish trustworthiness (Section 3.4.3).

Following the example of the narrative study of Sikes and Hall (2018) because some children spoke at great length and a large amount of data was collected, I chose story extracts that I interpreted as being best suited to the point being made regarding themes being discussed: they most fittingly capture the essence of the lived experiences of the children (Meegan, 2023a: 1275). Although this does mean that 'some participants are quoted more than others' (*ibid.:* 596), I have endeavoured to include a balance of different children's perceived experiences where possible. This has been possible in so far as which children took part in different stages of the data collection in differing ways. For example, all children took part in the questionnaire, but did not necessarily leave additional written comments. Despite this, I still included experiences from each child in some form.

In retelling children's stories and as with Chapter 2, which was presented as a chronological order of events, I have endeavoured to write about test experiences of the children in the order in which they would typically occur: the preparation that occurs

before the tests; the taking of the tests; the completion of the tests; awaiting and receiving the results and thinking ahead to children's own futures, before giving their recommendations for assessment going forward.

In seeking to answer my research questions and understand why assessment, particularly testing was significant to most children, I have interpreted a number of themes and sub-themes from the data, which resonate with my earlier review of the literature and which also add to it. My first research question asked: what did children say was the impact of assessment on their experiences of a) the curriculum; and b) their mental health and well-being? The themes identified in relation to impact on the curriculum were: enjoyment of different subjects; status given to different subjects; teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing; setting and interventions; life outside of school and potential improvements in learning. Themes identified in relation to mental health and well-being were the feelings of anxiety, worry and stress, followed by concerns about the following: being judged or labelled; anticipation of test results; test accessibility; distractions; copying of work; forgetfulness; fatigue; and time constraints. Children's self-efficacy was also impacted because of perceptions of teacher feedback, equal opportunities for all, children's experiences during tests and the importance of test results. During the taking of the test, children were explicitly concerned about test performance, then felt brief relief that tests were over until the next time and were then concerned over future opportunities. Despite the two separate strands of curriculum and mental health and well-being in my first research question, it was clear from my literature review that these were both linked and this comes across in the data too. My second research question asked if children had any recommendations about assessment and these perceptions can also be separated into two strands: recommendations relating to tests and recommendations for alternatives to tests.

As will become apparent from the analysis, the children perceived subjects in way which, on the whole, separated the subjects into two groups: non-test subjects, comprising of the core subject of Science and the non-core or foundation subjects; and the test subjects of English reading, English writing and Maths (Section 1.4). Thus, for the sake of clarity and consistency, I have used the same language to describe these

groupings of subjects: non-test subjects and test subjects. Where I have used 'English' it encompasses both reading and writing, unless otherwise specified.

Additionally, where I refer to children's different abilities and standards, I have used the terminology that matches the spreadsheet used by the school to record assessment attainment data (Appendix O): working towards the expected standard (WTS); working at the expected standard (EXS); and exceeding the expected standard (EXC) as this was the terminology the children at the school were familiar with. This is also summarised in the table below for ease of reference.

Table 4.1 School assessment gradings for children's attainment

WTS	Working towards the expected standard
EXS	Working at the expected standard
EXC	Exceeding the expected standard

When a child is described as a high attainer, this means they had attained EXC in a specified subject or in some or all of the subjects that were assessed as part of the SATs and subsequently the school described them as such. Although the children were familiar with this specific terminology, it was used by adults and children interchangeably with other similar terms, for example 'greater depth standard' (GDS) to signify EXC.

Another layer to my interpretation and analysis was my positionality as an insider practitioner researcher (Hopkins, 2002; Mercer, 2007; Punch 2005) (Section 3.4.4). This gave me an added insight which enabled me to interpret and attach more meaning to what the children were telling me because I had insider knowledge of the setting and the children. For example, I had knowledge of the class timetables and pupil characteristics including a history of children's attainment and achievement according to data held by the school. The information I have utilised has been done so with the permission of the gatekeeper, who had also granted me access to draw upon data and other documents owned by the school (Section 3.5.2).

4.2 Curriculum

4.2.1 Enjoyment of different subjects

At the beginning of the interviews, the children were not asked explicitly about assessment or testing; they were asked about the subjects they enjoyed at school, curriculum time allocated to different subjects, how they felt about sets and interventions and what made them feel successful at school. Iman spoke excitedly about his enjoyment of specific subjects:

> *Science and RE because they're really cool… there's astronomy which I really like about Science… black holes and stars, because there's lots of mysteries about them and I like solving mystery. And RE… a way to like raise awareness of people and different type[s] of people and that all people are different and although you have different beliefs, different stuff they can do [sic]… everyone's the same...*
>
> (Iman)

Iman's enthusiasm for the subjects he enjoyed was matched by children who spoke about their own favourite subjects, which included Science, history, computing and PE '*because I love sports and running around and in PE, I get to do my favourite sports*' (Haider). The subjects that children said they enjoyed were either Science (a core subject) or foundation subjects, but not subjects that children were assessed at in any depth or tested on as part of their SATs, leading one to wonder what the appeal of Science and these foundation subjects might have been compared to the core subjects that children were tested on (Reading, Writing and Maths). One suggestion given was that '*I enjoy Art and DT [because] there's no right and wrong to it, so that's … that's why I really like it, because I can never be wrong*' (Charlie). Charlie's perception that Art and DT were subjects that have '*no right and wrong*' to them implies that he was contrasting them with other subjects were marked as right and wrong, including the test subjects.

There were four children who said they did like the test subjects. Hila liked reading and writing because *'English makes me like imagine the story and it makes me feel like I'm in a different place,* and three children all enjoyed Maths. However, Maths was mentioned alongside other foundation subjects such as Music and Art, showing that these children enjoyed a range of test and non-test subjects, rather than a test subject in isolation. As I was aware due to my being an insider practitioner researcher, all four children who said they enjoyed test subjects were high attainers in all subjects across the curriculum and consistently attained EXC in classwork and in tests. In fact, the three children who were all in the top set for Maths were working on content that exceeded the expected standard and so it could be that their high level of attainment in Maths, including tests, enhanced their enjoyment of that subject. This idea of children enjoying the subjects they are good at and enjoying a test subject if they perform well at it in tests, can be illustrated further by examining children's perceptions of subjects, which in contrast, they did not enjoy.

Out of the twelve instances of children naming individual subjects they did not enjoy (across both questionnaires and interviews), eleven of them referred to test subjects: Reading, Witing and/or Maths. Reading and writing were perceived as taking a long time and taking both mental and physical effort and so '*when you write a lot your hands hurt… you don't want to write anymore'* (Kelly). Maths was perceived as having many topics and many methods '*so how do you like remember them all and how to do everything?*' (Ira) and '*I get confused with different numbers and different ways to do it… and I overthink one single question which is super easy but I overthink it*' (Iman). In summary, most children perceived greater enjoyment of non-test subjects compared to test subjects and children specifically named test subjects as ones which they did not enjoy. This prompted me to consider the importance and status of test subjects in schools given that the children appeared not to enjoy them and how this might contribute to assessments, including tests, being perceived as high-stakes or not. Indeed, the children perceived test subjects as having a higher status in school compared to the non-test subjects they enjoyed more.

4.2.2 Status of different subjects

Two children described all the subjects across the curriculum to be '*equally important because it doesn't really matter about your job because through your life you're using all of those subjects that you've learnt*' (Hila); *'you all need to use something different each day, you never know what's going to happen'* (Inka). For the two children in my study who perceived all subjects as equally important, they appear to have perceived no difference in the status between different subjects. In contrast to this, many of the other children in the study did perceive differences in the status of subjects.

The non-test subjects (Science and the foundation subjects) were perceived by some children to be important for specific purposes or careers: *'computing's important because we have the online classroom now and we need to know how to do that*' (Kelly) and '*if you want to be a professional athlete, you need to do lots of sport, that's why PE is important*' (Haider). However, these non-tests subjects were often mentioned alongside English (Reading and/or Writing) and Maths, such as '*if you like want to become a doctor or a pharmacist, you need Science and Maths*' (Safa). Additionally, for Kelly, the significance of the non-test subjects was determined by their relationship to testing. Kelly identified Music and Art as being important solely because they were '*calming*' and '*peaceful*' and '*during exams it's important because it [the exams] will be a lot of stress on people'*. Thus, the non-test subjects and Science were not perceived to be important as standalone subjects in their own right. Some children were unclear on the importance of non-test subjects at all. When discussing the importance of subjects she enjoyed, Wendy stated '*I know reading is, I don't know about music'*, showing that she was sure that the test subject (Reading) was important, but unsure of the importance of the non-test subject (Music). Thus, the non-test subjects were not perceived as being as high-stakes as those that children were tested on: English and Maths.

English and Maths were perceived as '*both equally important [to each other] because if I didn't know how like to write, no one could understand what I'm saying and … Maths is important too because I need it to help me like when I'm older for some jobs*' (Wendy). Similarly, English and Maths were perceived as useful because '*to read a passage in the classroom, you need to really be good at reading the words and if you*

go into a shop and you're buying something, you need to know how much change you need to receive, so you don't like get your calculations wrong' (Iman). A second child also agreed '*Maths is important because if you go to the shop you don't know if you're overpaying or underpaying. And you don't know if you've got the right amount of change'* (Kelly). The reason Iman and Kelly gave for Maths being important was of note because of the school's focus on the relevance of subjects to real life, something I was aware of an insider practitioner researcher. As an example of its importance to life, teachers in the school often told children that they must learn Maths because it would help them work out the right change when buying something from a shop. This was so often repeated by teachers in Maths lessons to encourage children to engage in the subject, that it appears to have become embedded in Iman and Kelly's own perceptions of the importance of Maths. This could be interpreted as suggesting that Maths was a matter of high-stakes.

From children's comments, it could be interpreted that children perceived that because English and Maths were more important than other subjects, they were therefore tested in English and Maths more than in other subjects. For example, when asked if there should be tests in other subjects too, Safa said '*no, because it's not that important, it's like … Maths, English and reading are really important and grammar*'. On the other hand, it could have been that because tests were only given in English and Maths, children came to perceive these subjects as being more important and more high-stakes than the other subjects. The emphasis on the relationship between teaching and learning and tests came through prior to the children being asked about tests in their interviews. In spite of no explicit mention of testing in the initial interview questions, three of the children referred to tests of their own accord when answering questions. For example, Paavi said that '*if it's like a reading test, there's lots to read*', resulting in her not enjoying that subject. Additionally, when asked about teaching and learning time allocated to different subjects, she stated that '*usually we give more importance to subjects like Maths, Comprehension and English because they're the main subjects and the ones that we do in our test papers*'. Thus, not only did she recognise that more time was spent on the subjects she would be tested in, she also perceived Maths, Reading and Writing to be the '*main*' subjects because of the way in which the children were tested in them compared to other subjects. It is also of note that Paavi thought immediately of testing when asked about teaching and learning. Indeed, many of the

pictures created by the children included either the word '*test*' or depicted a test paper, indicating that tests were at the forefront of their minds when considering school assessment (Appendix M). Thus, one reason why children might have perceived English and Maths to be more important than other subjects was not only because they were test subjects, but because, as Paavi suggested, the time spent teaching content required for the tests was more compared to time spent on other teaching and learning outcomes, indicating teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing.

4.2.3 Teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing

The Year 6 school timetable prior to the SATs being taken (Appendix Q) reveals that a lot more teaching and learning time was dedicated to English and Maths. The children also commented on this: '*…regularly every day, the same lessons, we do different topics that will come in our tests… we get time to understand how we got those questions wrong or how we have to do those questions if it comes up on a test'* (Paavi); and '*the subjects that we do get tested in we usually… look at it regularly and we like keep doing it again and again so that we remember*' (Hila). The emphasis appears to have been on teaching of curriculum content to learn test topics and practise test questions and continual repetition of this information. At the same time, it was perceived that '*we have a fair amount of time on everything that we have to learn*' (Wendy). One interpretation of the use of the word 'fair' could be that the time spent on the test was perceived to be equal for all subjects but this is unlikely as it was factually incorrect and the children would have been aware of this given their exposure to the school timetable. Thus, another interpretation of '*fair*' could be that it was a different and justified amount of time on each subject because there was '*a good time for each [subject] because more of the main subjects have more time which is good because… more of our tests are on more of those ones'* (Hila). In this way, it could be interpreted as being perceived by some children as '*fair*' and necessary that more time was spent teaching and learning curriculum content related to tests subjects compared to other subjects. Simply put, there was a shared understanding that '*we need to practice so we can pass*' (Maria), further supporting the idea of test subjects and tests being perceived as high-stakes.

The impact of narrowing of the curriculum to spend more time on test subjects was perceived as limiting learning in other areas '*since primary school focuses a lot on Maths and English… you might know more about that but like less about like Art or Science*' (Abdul). Thus, learning in other areas was limited by the emphasis on test subjects at the expense and enjoyment of other curriculum subjects, arguably another high-stakes consequence.

There was a connection between the impact of teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing on both the curriculum (research question 1a) and children's mental health and well-being (research question 1b). The majority of time being spent on teaching test subjects meant that '*most of the time we get to do Maths, English and then all the afternoon topics. So on Mondays it's really nice just to have a change'* (Kelly). The '*change*' mentioned was one I was aware of as the children's teacher regarding the consistent daily routine of test subjects for most of the day followed by either Science or a foundation subject at the end of the day on Tuesday to Fridays. However, on Mondays the children had PE, computing and music in the mornings followed by a shorter afternoon of only two test subjects. Thus, Mondays was a variation to their usual routine, which was more English and Maths heavy Tuesday-Friday (Appendix Q). The change to the daily curriculum being covered was meaningful enough for Kelly to perceive it as something she enjoyed and looked forward to. The desire for a change to routine and the reason behind it was also expressed by Charlie in the context of what he would have wanted:

> *I want, at the end of the timetable, art every day. Sometimes you need a bit of art. Because otherwise school's just going to be bland and boring and you're going over the same things every day, and then you'll be sitting there at the same timetable. Every Monday is the same and every Tuesday and every day of the week.*
>
> (Charlie)

For Charlie, the slight change in routine on Mondays was not enough to combat the repetition he felt was present due to the school timetable. Building on this, Inka also desired a change in regard to specific subjects and time allowed for breaks:

> *I feel like some subjects should be shorter. So we have time to do other things. Different things like every day… then you can do more non-core subjects. I think like one hour's enough for English so then we can have a longer break time because we've been in the classroom for a long time [doing English].*
>
> (Inka)

In keeping with this, it was perceived that '*reading is longer than it needs to be*' (Charlie) and in regard to writing, '*there should be like less time for English, because English is like really long, it's an hour and fifteen minutes long'* (Abdul). Given the children's desired change in routine, a break from test subjects or a shorter time spent on test subjects, it is of note that all children who did not show evidence of daily reading homework (practise work for reading tests) were made to miss their break times to stay in and do their reading homework during this time, resulting in no break at all until lunch time. This reflects a key finding of Baines and Blatchford (2023) whereby in over a fifth of 933 primary schools in England (a combination of both state-funded and independent schools) children were made to miss their breaktimes in order to catch up with homework. The authors stated that 'this results in children missing out on time for socialising with peers and friends, play and physical activity, and a break from the pressures of the curriculum… [which] may have implications for children's wellbeing, enjoyment and engagement with school' (2023: 939) In addition to this, children who were not attaining EXS in their practice tests were often made to miss out on Monday's PE (signalling an added reduction in physical activity), computing and music lessons, which might also have contributed to children's reduced well-being, enjoyment and engagement at school. Furthermore, children also missed out on Science and non-test subjects in the afternoon due to their having to attend interventions in test subjects,. This was an added insight I had as an insider practitioner researcher, which enabled me to more fully understand the implications of teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing.

4.2.4 Setting and interventions

In this study, I had an added understanding of the way setting and interventions worked at this particular school due to being a teacher there. This helped me to provider further context to what the children told me about settings and interventions. Having defined setting and interventions in more detail in the literature review (Section 2.4.4), I will summarise here. The setting of children describes when they were grouped by ability for a particular subject, which was only for Maths at this school. Alternatively, interventions were when children received extra teaching and learning sessions through 1) arriving at school early or staying after school late in small groups, or 2) were taken out of the classroom either 1:1 or in small groups during the afternoon during non-test subjects. When setting and interventions were carried out within usual school time, children had no choice but to take part or to work in the set or group in which they were placed. When interventions took place outside of usual school hours, children were strongly encouraged to attend and their parent/carers were also encouraged to permit their children to take part, with both children and adults being told they were unlikely to pass the tests if the child did not attend the interventions. Early or after-school interventions could potentially extend a child's school day from 6.5 hours to between 7 to 8 hours a day and were available in all test subjects. Children were placed in a particular set or intervention according to their results in tests on entry into Year 6 and these places were flexible depending on ongoing performance in subsequent tests. Both setting and interventions were either to support children who were WTS to attain EXS, or children who were EXS to attain EXC, or to ensure that EXC children got their highest possible mark to maintain and guarantee their EXC status (Table 4.1). Although setting and interventions were two different types of support, they both involved children moving in and out of their usual class at different times of day, leading the children in this study to refer to either or both at the same time when they described their own perceived experiences of that of their peers related to setting and interventions.

My findings build upon that of Bradbury et al.'s (2021) study where they gave 'evidence that testing encourages grouping by 'ability'' (149) and headteachers expressed concerns about the negative impact of setting and interventions on children.

There was an association perceived between settings and interventions and assessment. For example, when children were asked in what ways they were assessed at school, Wendy replied that '*they put us in different classes and it could be a higher class or it could be a lower class, it depends on how different subjects are for you. And they might put you closer to the front to see you and talk to you or they might put you like where the back is*'. The distinction she made between different sets was referred to when children spoke about setting and interventions in relation to both the curriculum (research question 1a) and their mental health and well-being (research question 1b). References were made to the disadvantages of the physical act of moving from room to room for setting and interventions: '*people coming in and out of class… they might get a bit tired, always moving around, might just want to stay in one place*' (Inka). Whereas Inka talked about the impact children moving might have had on her peers, Zayna commented on the impact children moving around had on herself: *'…it might annoy me … if they're like making noises on their way out. Because some people might be talking around you*'. Abdul talked both about others and about himself in relation to the daily movement of children for setting in Maths by acknowledging that '*when they move around, they have less time doing Maths*'. He later added that '*it doesn't really affect me and my work, so I'm fine with people coming in and out of class*'.

The impact of physically moving around for setting and interventions also had an impact on children's mental health and well-being. Some children might feel '*sad that they're going to a different class*' (Ira) and '*they might feel a bit awkward, like shy because they don't know how things go in that classroom*' (Kelly). Safa spoke about her weekly intervention which took place at the same day and time each week during her computing lesson: '*Ms Brown comes and like we do some Maths together… But like that's [computing] like one of my favourite subjects*'. Thus, Safa regularly missed one of her favourite subjects to practise content for tests, thus missing out on the computing curriculum, which for her may have been a high-stakes consequence.

Some children's experiences contrasted with those of the children above: '*Well when I go outside of class when you guys are doing Maths in class, I go to Mr Ferguson*, *which I really like. Because he's taught me a lot throughout the year'* (Haider)' and '*I go to*

Ms Jordan for Maths… I don't mind it' (Ahmed). However, unlike Safa, Haider and Ahmed were referring to setting, rather than interventions; Safa was leaving a computing class she enjoyed to attend a Maths intervention, whereas Haider and Ahmed were leaving one Maths class to go to another Maths class. This may explain the differences in perception and why the experience may have been perceived as somewhere along a spectrum of high to low-stakes for different children.

There was some positive feedback about settings and interventions. Speaking from her own personal experience of being in the highest set for Maths since Year 2, Kelly perceived the advantages of setting in Maths to be that '*if you're at a high level or lower level, you can get to be around people with the same amount of knowledge on that subject as you… if you're in a class that's lower level, you'll spend most of your time just learning and writing things that you think are easy'.* Thus, she felt the level of challenge was better matched to children's needs through the setting system. Interestingly, she perceived that there was a set *'amount of knowledge*' that children could have rather than considering the way in which knowledge might be retained, used or grown.

Describing both the perceived experiences of others and her own experience, Wendy said that she was '*okay*' with it because '*I know like one of like the teachers are probably talking to them or helping them or they're trying to talk to me or helping me… it's not just oh I'm brilliant at everything or I'm bad at everything because I could be good at some subjects and bad at the others*'. Hila agreed, stating that *'I think it's good for them for the same reason [helpful to the children], but also for more advanced people, because they might like already know what we're learning. There are just some people that might need a bit more help in some subjects, and other people [are] more advanced in other subjects*', which resonates with what Kelly said. Kelly, Wendy and Hila appeared to have described children as having fixed abilities in certain subjects through their language such as *'you're at a high level or low level'* (Kelly) '*good as some subjects and bad others*' (Wendy) and '*more advanced people*' (Hila). At the same time, Wendy and Hila's perception that setting and interventions could help children to improve is indicative of more flexible abilities, as was exemplified by Paavi

who stated that *'different people need different things they need to learn on, or improve on. And some people might need to go to different places for that because it's not the right place in that classroom'.* This emphasis on the possibility of ongoing improvement reflects more of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2000, 2006), which may indicate that assessment performance is not pre-determined.

Further evidence from the children that they did not see abilities as fixed, came from a perception of the continuous nature of the fluidity of movement between different Maths classes and subsequent opportunity for improvement in learning; children would move in and out of different classes depending on how they performed in regular practise tests. It was described as '*good because sometimes like you might be in a higher class where they do like hard Maths or something. If they move into another class, they can get used to doing less harder Maths and then they can go back to doing hard Maths, so that they can get better at the subject*' (Abdul). Additionally, this movement between classes may have impacted children's mental health and well-being. Iman commented that '*if you think you're not as good as the other students who are going to like greater depth classes … you would feel like they know more than you and that they're better than you at that subject, so you might feel like pressure to do better*'. Despite Iman's perception of children feeling 'pressure', he argued that '*it doesn't affect anyone and it just helps you on your learning, so it doesn't really matter, doesn't hurt anyone, doesn't make anyone feel bad'*. Although this may have been what some of the children in this study perceived to be the case, there is a possibility that they were repeating what, as a teacher at the school, I am aware the children were often told by teachers, which was that this is how they should interpret any extra support they were receiving. As it was common practice in Year 6 for children to be placed within sets, to be offered interventions and to be provided with additional work, including during missed break times, I know from my practice that teachers often said this was in the best interests of the children. The distinction made between different groups of children through setting and interventions was also perceived to extend beyond primary school with the potential of impacting children's future opportunities.

4.2.5 Setting – continuity and progression

Four children linked setting in primary schools to what they perceived would happen in secondary schools, which resonates with Bradbury et al.'s claim that 'SATs results are passed on to secondary schools, where they form the basis of an expected 'flightpath' through to GCSE exams, based on the calculations used in the Progress 8 measure of secondary school success' (2021: 159). Haider stated that '*maybe you guys are trying your best to like teach us and you want us to get like higher sets in Year 7*. Here, Haider explains his thinking that setting and interventions were put in place for the children's benefit going forward and that the short-term goal for teachers and their children was to get into a higher set for learning. Abdul added more detail to his response:

> *In Year 7, you get put into certain classes by like what mark you get on your tests, like if you're like getting like a lower mark/amount then you might get put in a specific class with people with like really low marks and for people who have high marks, they might get put in a specific class as well. I think like there are two ways they might either feel like happy because they are, for example, like they might be getting like more learning about whatever they got wrong on their test. But others might not feel like happy because they might feel like a bit like discriminated because they're getting put into groups like as if they're like one person … as if one person is better than the other.*
>
> (Abdul)

When discussing this topic, Abdul used emotive language including the feeling of happy and the feeling of discrimination, indicating a strength of feeling for children attached to setting and interventions. The distinction between different ways of feeling was also made by Zayna, who perceived that children would feel either' *okay with it because like they know the teachers are going to try and help them to get higher marks' or 'might be sad*', the reason being the children would compare themselves to their peers. These expressions of feeling reflect what Bradbury et al. identified as 'generating awareness of hierarchy and feelings of shame' (2021: 157).

In addition to affecting mental health and well-being, the idea of children being compared to one another in secondary school was also perceived by participants to have practical implications on the teaching and learning of curriculum content:

> *…many people could be smarter than me because if they go in higher classes then they can achieve much more higher things than us… because like say for example Maths, because they're in the higher class, they're going to learn like much higher things that we would have learnt in secondary school, and then they would have a chance to take a higher paper, unlike us… For me, it's that if I'm in a higher class, I get a chance to go get a higher grade, like because some people get like tests like in the lower set I've heard about in high school that you only get a chance to get Cs and Ds but then in the higher set you can get As, Bs'.*
>
> (Charlie)

Perhaps through his older siblings, who were already at secondary school (something I knew as his teacher), Charlie had an awareness of children in higher sets being exposed to higher-level content enabling them to either do better in a test or, in the case of setting in secondary school, take an altogether higher-level paper allowing the possibility of better results. This same issue was identified by another child who also had older siblings already in secondary school: '*some students, they go to like different classes and they might learn like more things that kind of are like better for them, like their level in that subject. So like the tests might become harder for them because they've been learning things that like are a bit simpler*'. (Iman)

During headteacher interviews regarding setting and interventions an explicit link between testing and ability grouping was identified:

> All of these practices of division were driven by an assumed need to push each child as far as possible in order to maximise SATs results. The need to ensure each child was 'moving on' resulted in a desire to tailor teaching to different levels by simply dividing children into different rooms, despite the clear

> concern about the impact on their self-esteem and attitudes to learning.
>
> (Bradbury et al., 2021: 154)

In my study, in some cases, a direct link was perceived by the children between testing and setting and interventions too. This affected them not only in a practical sense, such as moving around from class to class, but invoked a mixture of feelings amongst them, contributing to their attitudes to learning. They perceived the placing of children in groups for setting or interventions as having important consequences on their experiences of the curriculum both in primary school and in secondary school. The testing directly impacted setting and interventions and at the same time, setting and interventions were perceived to have an impact on children's chances in tests, making both the setting system and the tests themselves high-stakes for these children.

4.2.6 Life outside school

As a Year 6 teacher I was aware that the only written homework given to children on a consistent weekly basis in Year 6 comprised of English (reading, writing and spellings) and Maths. Kelly perceived there to be no regular homework in other subjects '*because they are not tests. I don't work on them because I don't get tested on them*'. This exemplified that children perceived the teaching and learning of the curriculum (as they experienced it) to not only be impacted by assessment, specifically testing, but for this to extend beyond the classroom into their home lives too.

4.2.7 Improvements in learning

The findings so far suggest that children perceived the curriculum to be impacted by assessment in relation to content taught and when, where and how it was taught. Children were also asked whether they thought assessment contributed to improved learning and 65.7% or children agreed or strongly agreed that it did. Despite this, children spoke at length on the impact of assessment on children's mental health and well-being.

4.3 Mental health and well-being

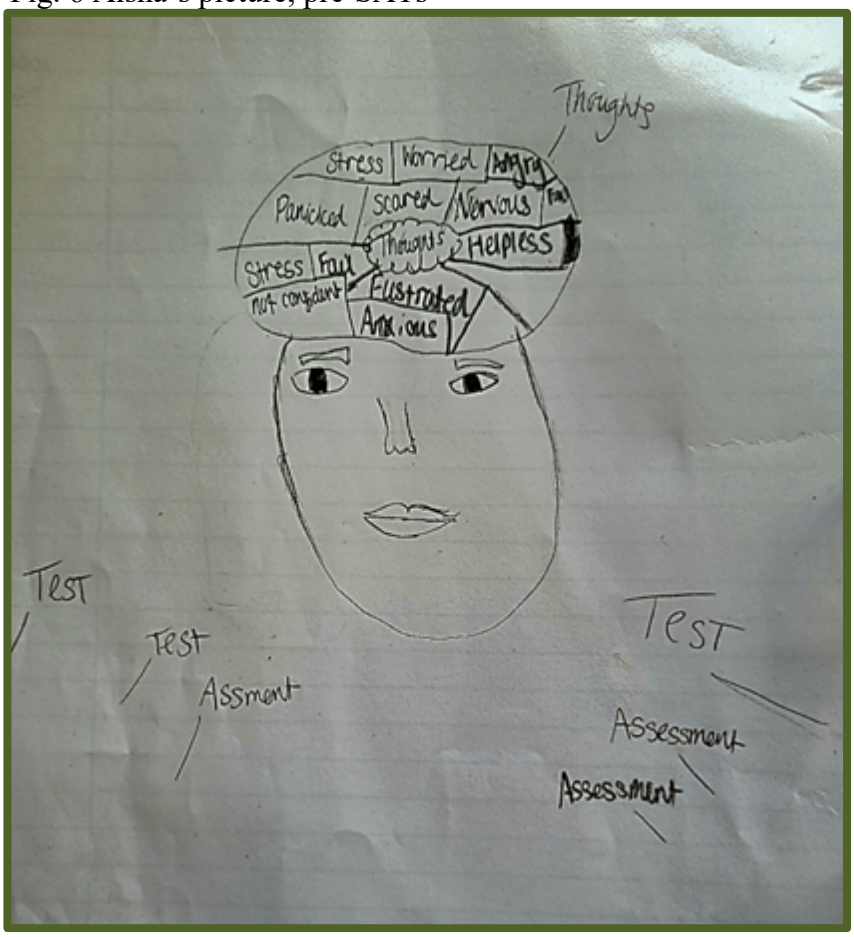
4.3.1 Anxiety, worry and stress

I have explored children's perceptions of the impact of assessment on their experiences of the curriculum (research question 1a) and already touched upon children's mental health and well-being because the two are interrelated. However, I will now focus more closely on children's mental health and well-being (research question 1b), which I defined in Section 2.5.1. More than two-thirds (68.5%) of children agreed or agreed strongly that they got anxious, worried, or stressed about taking tests, 51.4% of children reported they did not enjoy taking tests, and a further 14.3% indicated they were unsure whether they enjoyed tests. These specific words were included in the questions (Appendix H) of the questionnaire because as a teacher at the school, I knew they were words the children were familiar with through teaching in PHSE and also through the trust-wide adoption of Zones of Regulation: an international curriculum on emotional regulation (Zonesofregulation.com Website, 2025). In my study the children appeared to have used the words '*anxious, worry*' and '*stress*' either individually, or some or all of these words at the same time and sometimes interchangeably, suggesting that they may not have understood the different definitions and also reflecting the way in which these terms were used at school: '*when I'm doing tests and stuff, they make me anxious and then I get worried and stressed about it'* (Wendy).

Fig. 5 Wendy's picture, pre-SATs

Wendy's picture of assessment and subsequent explanation (above) illustrated that tests were central to her understanding of assessment, surrounded by feelings of '*anxious[ness], worry*' and '*stress*'. Similar perceptions were shared by other children such as Abdul who explicitly linked these feelings to tests, suggesting the tests were high-stakes: '*some people will have anxiety or something like that, like when they have all of their SATs*'. Along with the words 'anxious, worry' and 'stress', children also used similar words, or their own words, for feelings associated with assessment such as: '*it's nervous-wracking*' (Paavi); '*annoyed*' (Inka); and '*pressure*' (Maria and Ganga). Anay added '*I personally get pressured a lot when taking so many tests',* explicitly linking pressure to tests, further reinforcing the idea that tests were perceived as being high-stakes. In addition to the words '*anxious, worried*' and '*stress*', Aisha portrayed a range of other 'thoughts' through her picture of assessment.

Fig. 6 Aisha's picture, pre-SATs

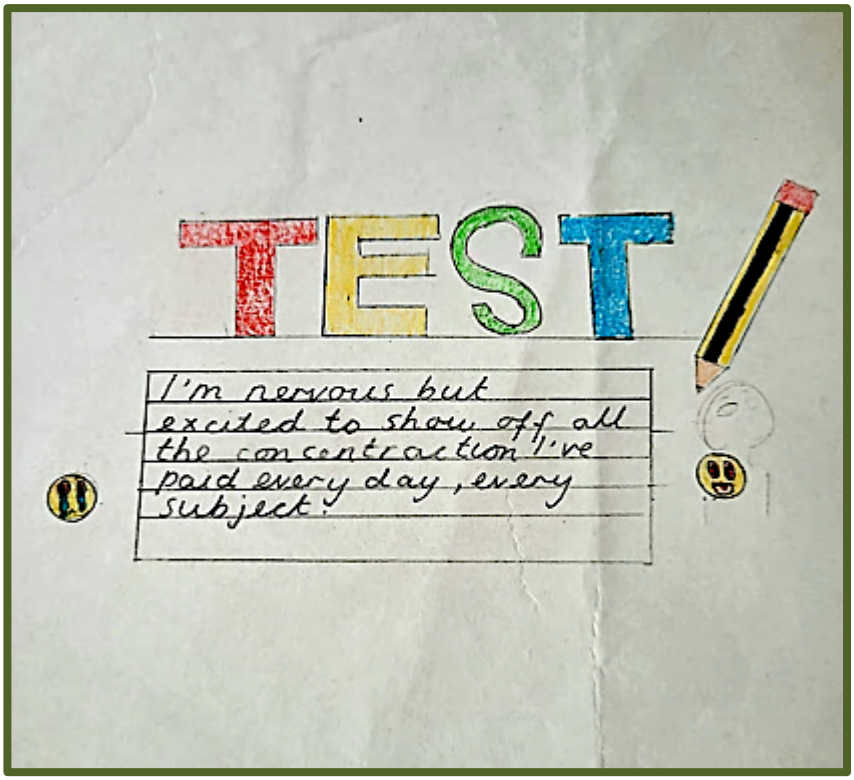


Aisha's range of words (Fig. 6) indicates multiple feelings linked directly to assessments and more specifically, testing: '*angry, panicked, scared, nervous, stress, fail, helpless, not confident'* and *'frustrated*'.

Like Aisha, Mark also chose to include a variety of other feeling-related words in his free-writing before the tests (Appendix M). However, in contrast to Aisha's picture (Fig. 6), Mark included the more positive words, '*relieved*' and '*happy*', alongside the other words: '*anxiou[s], worried, stressed*' and '*sad*'. It may be interesting to note that according to the school data that I had access to as an insider practitioner researcher, Aisha, who included no positive words in her picture, was a child who historically attained EXS (Table 4.1) in all her KS1 tests and in her Maths, Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar and Writing tests at the end of KS2. She attained EXC (Table 4.1) in KS2 reading, although she would not have known this at the time of the data collection but would have instead known that she was targeted for EXS in reading. This is contrary to

Mark who attained EXC in all KS1 tests and KS2 tests and may, therefore, have been more likely to experience more positive feelings in relation to assessment through tests, at which he excelled compared to Aisha. Nevertheless, Mark still chose to include the two positive words alongside the four other more negative words, indicating that assessment invoked some degree of negative feeling for him, as with other children. A similar mixed perception was shared by another consistently high attainer, Paavi:

Fig. 7 Paavi's picture, pre-SATs



Discussing her picture (Fig. 7), Pavvi explained '*I feel nervous when doing a test, but excited to show how hard I've worked for the past years and how much I've concentrated every day for each subject*'. This range of feelings, some of which appear contradictory, depicted by Aisha, Mark and Paavi was also identified by Daniella who summarised that '*I feel a mix of emotions'*. Thus the children used a variety of feeling-related words to encapsulate a wide range of feelings but all of which indicated that assessment and tests did impact their mental health and well-being in a way that can be associated with feelings of anxiety, worry and stress, indicating that the tests were perceived by the children to be high-stakes enough to cause such feelings. I have

explored the terminology used by the children to describe their mental health and well-being and also considered how this terminology was used by them in their spoken and written comments and also their pictures/free-writing. I will now discuss why children said they felt these ways, beginning with their perceived experiences prior to taking the tests, moving on to their perceived experiences during the tests and finally, after the tests were complete.

4.3.2 Being judged or labelled

The reason for children's feelings was seemingly related in one way to being judged: *'you feel you will be judged*' (Hila, Appendix M). When explaining her picture (Appendix M), she said '*I've writ [sic] about how I feel anxious in some tests, in some subjects I feel like I'm bad in the tests*'. She appears to have been anxious about being judged and/or labelled as '*bad*' in subjects, despite then adding that this would enable the teacher to help her and requesting tests in additional subjects. Perhaps she felt that if she was tested in other subjects, she would get a better result meaning that she might be judged in a more positive way. Charlie also shared a similar concern about being judged: '*I think they [test results] would go in our reports and then we would get judged on them, but then … but then I don't understand why we get judged… because you can never judge a book by its cover, we can be smarter than they seem*'.

4.3.3 Anticipation of test results

Concern over test results was expressed in advance of taking the tests, rather than at the time of the tests themselves. In her free-writing before the tests (Appendix M), Aisha wrote that test performance was affected by the worry and panic experienced by children before and/or during the tests and she felt that subsequently test results did not accurately reflect children's learning because of the pressure felt by children over their results. Concern over tests results was also expressed by other children for whom the feelings of anxiety, worry or stress, continued beyond the taking of the tests to after the tests were taken: the release of the test results. Richard (Appendix M) explained that he felt nervous on the day of the test but that this was because he was focused on his results

that would follow and Keiran explained in his questionnaire that he was '*focused on keeping a high score so it makes me really stressed*'. Adding to what Aisha, Richard and Keiran said, children revealed their concern that '*I might not pass the test*' (Wendy) and '*I'm going to get low scores*'(Ahmed), and that therefore they wanted to do well in the tests (Sarah and Abdul). According to the school data, these children spanned the attainment range from WTS to EXS and EXC (Table 4.1), revealing that concern over test results was a perception held by different children regardless of their attainment.

There also appeared to be some anticipation over being humiliated. It is interesting to note that in his free-writing before the tests (Appendix M), Keiran – who was a consistently high attainer – linked his worry *'to do well or even better than last time'*, to a desire of not wanting to *'make any silly mistakes'*. According to the school data, another consistently high attainer, Meena, explained that '*since if you get low marks or don't know something, it can be humiliating'*.

4.3.4 Accessibility

Turning now to the perceived experience of taking the tests, the accessibility of tests was identified by the children as having an impact on their mental health and well-being and comments were made along three lines: the format and layout of the test; the wording of the questions; and the perceived difficulty of the test whilst taking it. Paavi, Charlie and Inka all spoke about the format of the test, specifically the length of tests. Regarding the reading test, Paavi said: '*I don't like to read solely a huge passage, I usually like to cut it out and read a little part of the text and then answer the question from there. But then if it's like a reading test, there's lots to read…*'. Similarly, Charlie, speaking about tests more generally, said '*maybe instead of having like a big piece of paper to do it on, maybe if you make it shorter but with the same exact type of like number of questions, they might think it looks shorter*'. To add to this, Inka felt '*some tests are … like if they're short you're like less stressed because the test's really long*', suggesting that shorter tests might be less stressful.

Charlie made an additional comment that '*if there's no colour, then I feel like it's very boring*', suggesting that the physical appearance of the test was something he disliked about it. Charlie also commented on the wording of the questions sometimes being difficult to comprehend: '*I find reading long because of the way that the words are phrased, they're sometimes quite tricky when they could just like use normal words, like … 'circle this', not 'circle it' in fancy words*'. Ira suggested that '*you get those questions wrong because they were a bit trickier than what you've learnt… you'll get annoyed because you know the simple questions but when you've got one more step to it, you get a bit confused because you never learnt it*'. Thus, these four children of different abilities and backgrounds (Appendix O) perceived issues with the accessibility of tests and test style questions, which may have impacted their test performance and what was at stake.

4.3.5 Distractions

Another element perceived to have an impact on mental health and well-being during the test was distractions: being distracted by words and questions within the tests; being distracted by objects and people during the tests; and thoughts turning to outside of school. Alongside exploring each of these in turn, I will also give attention to what children perceived to be the impact of these distractions.

> *I overthink every single word … like look, for example, 'Samsung' [points to word on audio recorder], leave it to me to get 'Samsung' and overthink it, like 'Samsung', what's 'Sam', what's 'sung', oh my God what's 'sung' … what's the 'sung', where does the sung come from? [whispering] I'm like what's the 'Sam', what's the 'sung' … what's … what does the 'sung' mean, what does 'Sam' mean … 'Sam' … what does the 'sung' mean? Yes, I overthink it, I overthink too much.*
>
> (Iman)

Being distracted by the words of the test was also spoken about by Abdul who said '*I have a lot of distractions, that's why I don't get to finish the tests. Like sometimes I get*

distracted by the next question when I haven't done one … and I'll get distracted … and fidget… sometimes I just think of playing games and like sometimes I just daydream'. This was similar to Ahmed when he explained his pictures (Fig.s 8 and 9): '*I tend to get distracted a lot in tests because if I stop at one question, I just stop for a long time, for like ten minutes or something, and I'm like in my own little world. I sketch a lot of all like random stuff sometimes*'.

Fig. 8 Ahmed's picture, pre-SATs

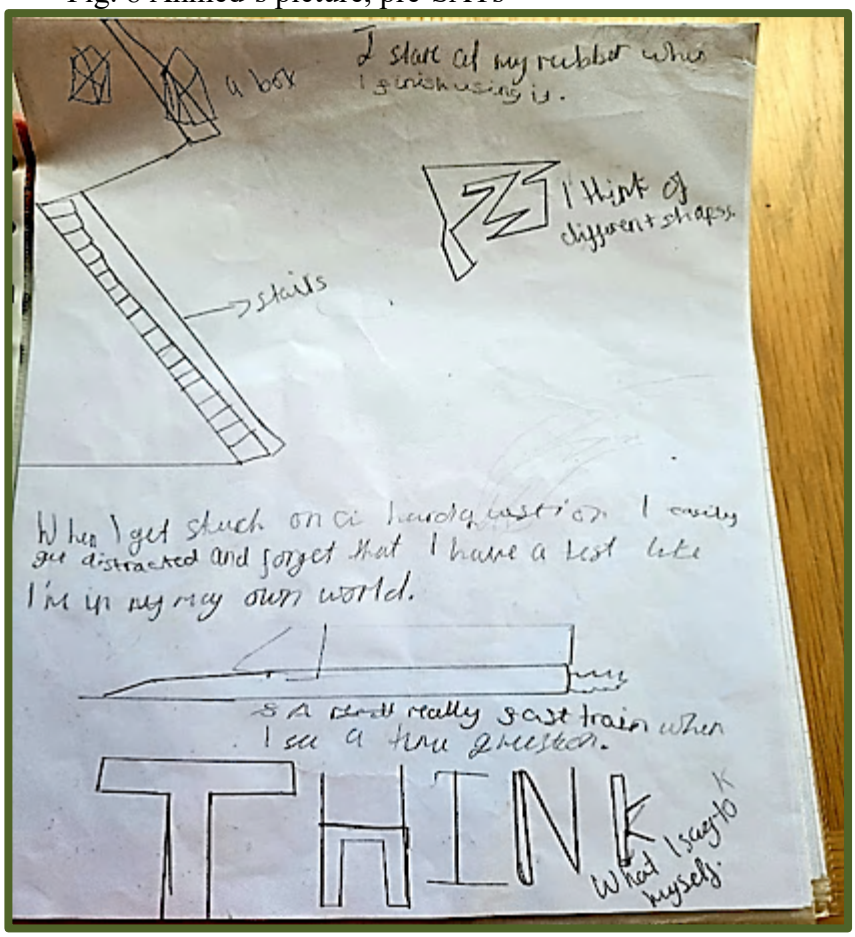
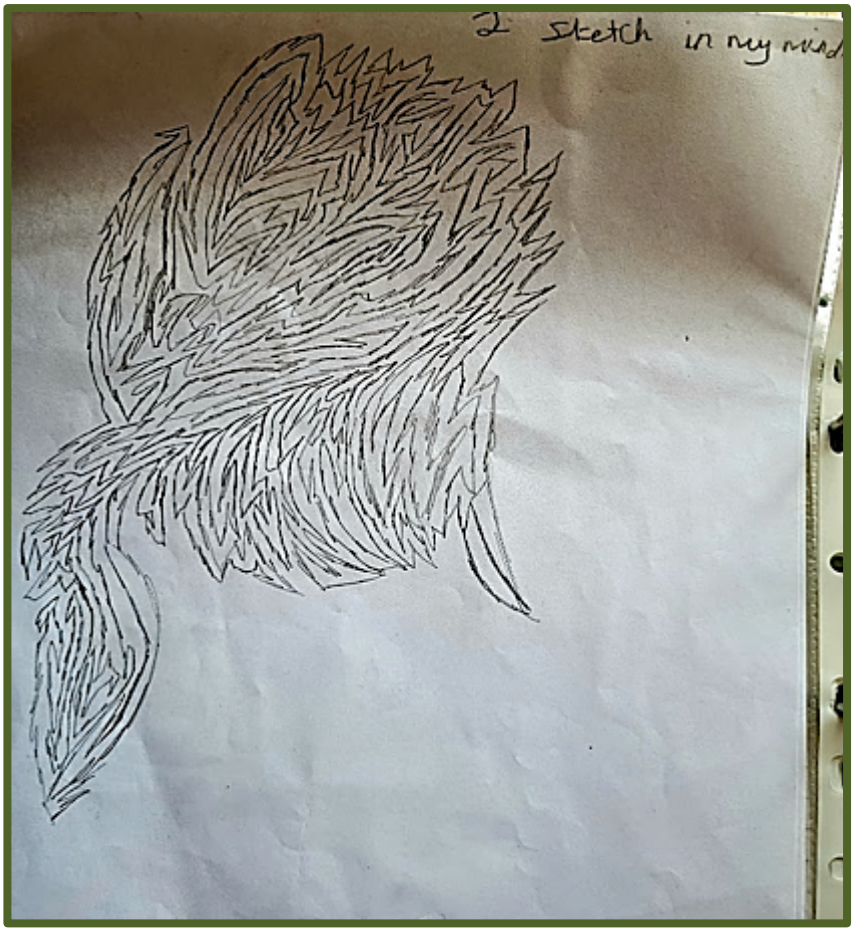


Fig. 9 Ahmed's picture, post-SATs



In his pre-SATs picture (Fig. 8), Ahmed described staring at his rubber and thinking of different shapes during his test, when he was in a '*different world*'. He specifically associated a '*really fast train*' with questions about time. From my experience of teaching Maths in Year 6 at the time, this may have been because during test preparation for the concept of time in Maths, the children were repeatedly given questions related to transport timetables, including trains (Appendix O) and it could be the case that this became so embedded in Ahmed's mind, that it was all he could think about when he saw a question about time. His post-SATs picture (Fig. 9) also illustrates his perception that '*I sketch in my mind*', suggesting that whether it was before or after the tests, he still linked the taking of tests to being distracted and thus, being distracted during tests was of great importance to him.

Some children also spoke about other distractions in the room, such as objects and other children. When explaining his pre-SATs picture (Fig. 8), Ahmed gave the detail that '*I get distracted a lot, like when I stare at my desk, I imagine what's happening, my rubber having legs or arms*'. Similarly, Safa said that sometimes she fidgeted with '*protractors and mirrors'.* Paavi gave an example of a practical problem involving an object, whereby *'your pencil's not sharpening or it's like your pencil's not working well for example, it could annoy you*'. Something as specific as a pencil not working properly being the cause of annoyance is suggestive of the high-stakes nature of being distracted by objects.

Paavi also highlighted distractions by children making noises and '*asking for your rubber… when you're concentrating on something'* and both Paavi and Inka said this would '*annoy*' them. Kelly pointed out the impact children might have on other children whereby '*someone might sneeze or cough but that's not their fault, it's just because they're a bit sick. But that does distract you and it might just shock you because it's always silent when you're doing tests*'. Charlie explained the impact other children had on him: *'… when people look around, I wonder what they are looking at and then I start turning round, like what are they looking at, why are they [sic]?*'. Hila described her discomfort in more detail:

> *…. when people are like moving stuff and being a bit fidgety next to me and stuff, I just feel a bit nervous when they move the table… I don't mind, but when they talk to you or point something out like what the teacher's doing and like when they look at your work too much, it makes me feel uncomfortable and like scared. Because it makes me think that they've finished the whole test and I'm still doing it and they're just looking at what the teacher's doing and stuff like that.*
>
> (Hila)

Hila added to what Charlie said about distractions making them wonder about others, by saying she felt '*uncomfortable*' and '*scared*', which would suggest a high-stakes consequence to this aspect of testing.

Ahmed spoke about being distracted by thoughts outside of school, namely *'… my house, my family*'. Paavi, also spoke about distractions outside of school that could then

have an impact on children's tests: '*there could be a reason why the person maybe hasn't got the score they usually should have got… Maybe something happened in their family or personal problems could lead them not to study as much as they usually when there's a test coming up'.* Inka built on this by referring to the impact of distractions that '*could like take over your mind and you might not be thinking straight because you'll be thinking too much about something else. Because if they would just not think about anything, they could have got a higher mark.* Inka made the link between distractions, performance during the tests and eventual results, adding *that 'if that like happened, I think like people should get the option to like redo a test'.* These words suggest that the distractions were so impactful and the tests so high-stakes, that children should have the option to retake them.

Two children referred more specifically to time being lost through distractions: '*when somebody makes a noise, I just like stop and like look around and see what the noise and that like makes me at a slower pace when doing the test'* (Wendy); and '*like when there's a sudden noise or like … or somebody comes into the room … like a pencil dropping. It's really sudden and it might slow us down for a couple of seconds*' (Ira). Ira's mention of possibly being slowed down for two seconds might suggest that the tests were high-stakes enough for her to acknowledge a matter of seconds as being vital time lost in the test.

For Ira and Zayna, the distractions led to them wanting to sit alone: '*if something small, just like somebody dropping a pencil or like somebody sneezing, it sort of distracts me. So I'd like rather sit alone*' (Ira). Zayna explicitly made a point of wanting to discuss distractions and sitting alone:

> *I wanted to say like some children, they don't want to be like in a class, so they want to be like by themselves, so that might distract them as well because there's so many people in the classroom. So some children would prefer to be on their own when they take a test because they get distracted by other children. It depends if they're like focused on their work and they're silent or they're like… they're just kind of like being annoying! Meaning like some people in like tests, they like… they do stuff and they make … like do you know when they're*

> *doing a pencil, they make noise with their pencil, like flicking it back and forward like that … like stuff like that, it just annoys me. I just feel like I want to be alone.*
>
> (Zayna)

The children above talked extensively about distractions having an impact on their experience of taking tests and how this affected their mental health and well-being.

Ahmed also claimed that he disliked sitting next to others during the test because '*I don't have much space when someone is sitting next to me*'. Ahmed's comment on space in the classroom, although relative and subjective, did draw to attention to the changed arrangement and tighter layout of tables and chairs during tests compared to usual learning time (which I knew of in my role as a Year 6 teacher) . However, Ahmed's justification was given in addition to his perception about not wanting to be distracted and so both should be considered as reasons why he preferred not to sit with others and suggests a strength of feeling towards sitting alone. In contrast to this, despite perceiving that she did get distracted during tests and that this slowed her down, Wendy said that '*I feel OK sitting next to other people… because then I know I'm like … I'm not alone taking the test and somebody's next to me and they're taking the same like test as me*'. Wendy suggested that knowing her classmates were sitting around her was a source of comfort to her during the test.

4.3.6 Copying of work

The desire to sit alone was also expressed by other children but for a different reason to distractions and space: the copying of work and subsequent teacher response. Five children spoke out against the copying of work, for example: '*if two people are sitting down and like you're doing a test and the other one's copying you, you wouldn't want someone to copy you and like I feel like everyone feels that kind of way because you don't want people copying*'(Zayna). Abdul's comment differed from this as he identified two traits he perceived as negative and linked them together: *'they should make everyone sit alone because like people might be able to copy off of [sic] other people's … like their partner's answers. And like … if that person's finished their test, and they don't check and they just like do nothing, then they might distract you instead*'.

He may have been speaking from experience or he may have been speculating based on a perception that a child who copies might also engage in distracting others, indicating a degree of feeling about children who copy in tests and the impact of this. Indeed, he revealed the extent of his concern: *Sometimes like if the teacher sees that they have like the same answers, … there's a chance like the teacher might think the person who isn't copying the answers might be the person who might be copying the answers… they might like fail you, like they might fail the wrong person.* (Abdul). For what appears to have been for a similar reason, Charlie acknowledged '*I'm actually happy that I sit alone because I don't want to get in trouble for someone else copying my answers when they haven't gone home and learnt and we have and that we put all the hard work in and for them just to copy it and they would just put like a minute in practising',* highlighting the perceived benefits of him sitting alone, or perhaps justifying the fact that he did sit alone unlike most of the other children in the class. Kelly also acknowledged that copying could happen but gave a slightly different explanation:

> *I feel like it's better to sit on my own. Because if you're sitting next to someone, they might have a fear that you're going to copy them… if they don't want you to be copying them, they might just hide their paper. And then just be focused on hiding their paper, they don't do as well. It's because they don't want anyone to copy them, it's their answers and if someone copies them it's cheating and they don't want anyone to cheat.*
>
> (Kelly)

Kelly explicitly uses the word '*fear*' in relation to copying as *'cheating'*, suggesting a more high-stakes consequence to the act of copying work during tests. Unlike the other children in this study, Inka spoke about copying but said it did not really affect her:

> *They [child copying] would show what they can do and they're just trying to copy so they can get a higher mark, because maybe they might be struggling but they don't want to get a low mark so they're trying to copy. It doesn't really affect me; it affects them because they're not showing what they can do…*
>
> (Inka)

This reflects what I know upon reflection in my role as teacher, that children were told by adults in school about the act of copying from one another, to try and deter children

from doing so. It also shows that Inka is trying to explain why a child might need to copy from another child.

4.3.7 Forgetfulness

Test forgetfulness was put forward as having an impact on mental health and well-being, with Hila having explained that '*for my picture* (Appendix M), *I wrote question marks around the test paper because … your mind just goes blank*'. Charlie suggested this might happen because *'when you do a test, you have much pressure to get high [sic]… in a normal lesson you have no pressure, you're just sitting there learning, but when you have pressure on you, it sometimes get hard and you start forgetting things that you normally wouldn't'.* He connected the pressure felt on tests to forgetting things he had learnt and to build on this, one example given of something that could be forgotten was the various methods used in Maths to work out the answer (Inka). Zayna discussed the uncertainty she perceived around forgetting information: '*I feel like we might have learnt about it but I might have forgot it. So then I'd feel like … I'll try to remember when we learnt it*'.

Forgetfulness during tests caused Haider to feel '*worried… I feel sad because I feel like I've learnt about it but I haven't and I get scared. [I feel] kind of left out because when that happens, some people … I feel like they know it because they've been paying attention, but I don't know it because I don't remember…*'. Kelly added that '*you've got many topics… you might forget something. But then after the test you might remember it. And then when you're going through your paper, you're just like, oh I forgot. And you'll just be kind of sad you didn't do that question because you remember it but at that time you didn't*'. As suggested by these children, forgetting information in this way could lead to test results that do not accurately reflect children's knowledge and what they might have potentially remembered if it were not for test conditions.

4.3.8 Fatigue

Test fatigue was highlighted as impacting mental health and well-being and four children talked about feeling both physical and mental effects. In Charlie's case, his mental health and well-being was impacted to the extent that it had a physical impact on him. The last thing that Charlie said in his interview prior to taking his end of year tests, was '*when I do a test, there's like so much pressure that sometimes I get dizzy. I get dizzy and headaches from it*'. He did not wish to discuss this in any more detail at the time but here Charlie has described physiological effects on his body as a direct result from taking tests. Wendy felt that her body being physically tired affected her mental health because '*if we're doing a test at the end of the day, I've been running for the whole day and stuff, I get tired, so I might not like get the right answer, and so that's why you might think that I'm doing badly, even though I know the answer but I'm putting the wrong answer because of my mistakes'.* In agreement with primary school aged children in another study who 'expressed frustration about having to speedily write up' (Hargreaves et al., 2021: 87), Kelly said her hand hurt when writing (Section 4.2.1) and this resonated with Abdul, who said in his interview after the test was over that he felt '*happy because like … you don't have to like write as much, I can put my hand to rest. Because I write so fast. Because I want to finish like before the time ends*' Here, he spoke of physical tiredness that came with having to meet the time constraints of the test.

4.3.9 Time constraints

Time constraints were highlighted when asked in the interview how teachers would know how well children are doing in a particular subject and Ira replied '*your pace of the questions*'. The pace at which children completed questions in a test can be interpreted as having been important enough to Ira that she immediately associated it with success in subject. The '*tension of the time limit*' (Meena) was important to other children who perceived that '*I get very worried in tests because of the little time there is*' (Aaliyah). Safa explained that she felt that '*we should get more time because like we need to like check our work and like sometimes we do silly mistakes and we need like more time to check… we should check like … while we're doing the question, just double check'*. Her repetition of the word '*check*' could be interpreted as possibly

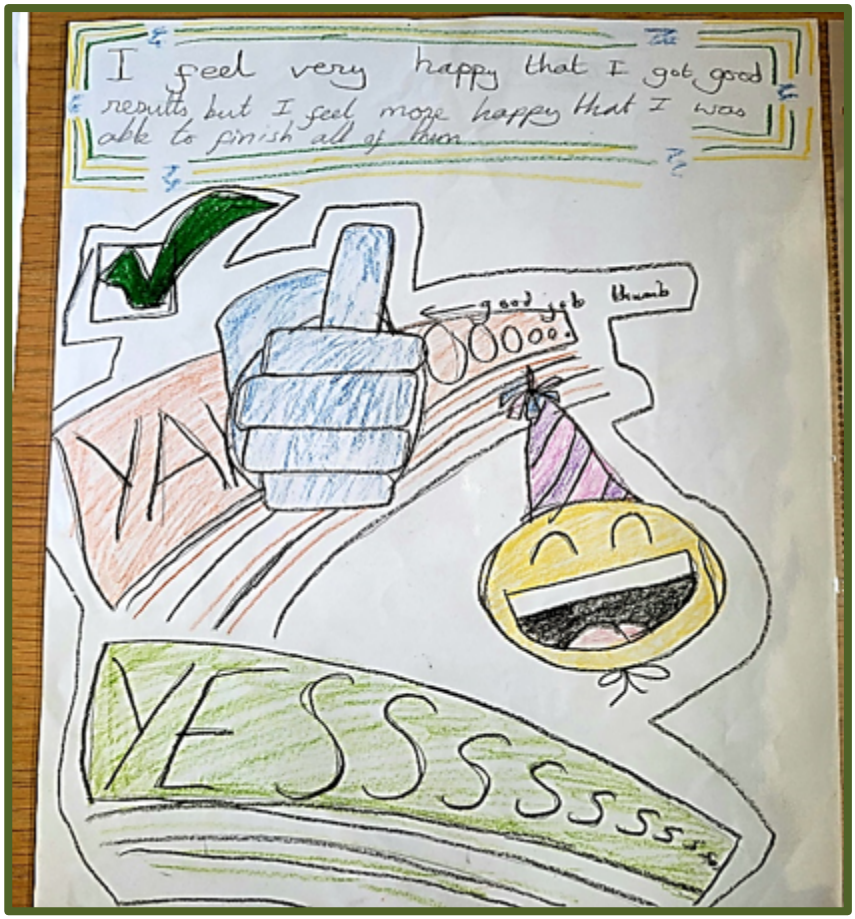
signifying how vital she felt it was for children to have enough time to read over their work in a test, indicating its high-stakes nature.

Abdul felt there was not enough time for children to finish their tests, much less enough time to check their work:

> *Some questions might be very hard and you can't do them, and then there's the time where you start losing … you start losing this time, you start getting more worried… when you get more worried, you try… it's like sometimes stay on the same question, keep on doing it until you get it right, but then at the end you just have less time to finish off.*
>
> (Abdul)

Haider added to this in his interview before the tests were taken by explaining the perceived impact of time constraints: '*I also stress about the time that I don't finish and I get low scores*'. He had also written about this in his free-writing (Appendix M) and reiterated it in his interview after the tests were over: '*I like it that it's over because sometimes I don't get to finish the questions and I can't do many questions, they're hard. Trying to get a lot of questions done*'. His repeated references to the time constraints of the tests show how important an issue time was to him. This was also exemplified by Jayesh's picture that he did after the tests were over:

Fig. 10 Jayesh's picture, post-SATs



In his picture, he was '*more happy*' that he was able to complete all the questions in time, rather than about his '*good results*'. This is similar to the findings of Hargreaves, et al. who noted that 'speed seemed to become a virtue in itself, leading to some children prioritising completion over learning which potentially denied them access to deeper understandings' (2021: 87). Although the children above were concerned that the time given to take tests was not adequate, Adina felt '*tests are boring and I don't like staying quite so long*', suggesting that she would have preferred less time. At the same time, she gave an indication of why she perceived that time was needed: '*pupils have to be serious with their answers and take their time*'. Her response here indicated that despite finding tests '*boring*', she understood the seriousness of tests and the time required to complete them, reinforcing the idea that tests were 'serious' enough to be perceived as high-stakes.

4.4 Self-efficacy

I have showed that children perceived the impact of assessment on the curriculum (Section 4.2) and their mental health and well-being (Section 4.3). Taking into account these perceptions of the children, a connection can be made between the teaching and learning of the curriculum taking place prior to the test, to the experiences of taking of the tests, through to the receipt of the test results and the impact of those results. In relation to this connected journey, the association between assessment, particularly tests, and perceived success or failure can be linked to Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy that explores an individual's belief in their own capacity to succeed at specific tasks (Section 2.3.1). I will discuss this before moving on to children's perceptions of assessment in relation to the future, including secondary school and beyond.

Taking as an example two children who expressed doubts over their ability to attain well in assessments (Wendy and Kelly), one can understand how assessment might affect children's self-efficacy and further impact their mental health and well-being. Wendy stated that she was '*not really good at*' Science and Kelly spoke of her self-doubts in more detail.

> *I'm not really good with spelling… I'm not really good with the grammar part. I'm good at the Maths but when it's Roman numerals I only know the basics of Roman numerals. And then you've got English … I'm not really good at reading. I enjoy reading but when I summarise, I do enjoy that. But when answering the questions, I'm not that good. Because I get confused at most questions.*
>
> (Kelly)

It is interesting that these similar doubts were expressed by both Wendy who, according to the school data, mainly attained EXS and Kelly who consistently attained EXC, because the self-doubt appears to have affected children from a range of different attainment levels and also from a range of backgrounds (Appendix O). For example, one aspect of Wendy's background, that I know of as her teacher, was that she was a disadvantaged child (Appendix O) with almost no parental engagement in school whereas Kelly, I know, was not a disadvantaged child (Appendix O) and the

engagement of her parents in school was very high. Self-efficacy appeared to play a part in the narratives of the children in this study, regardless of their background and their experiences helped them develop a sense of self around testing, specifically focused on four areas: teacher feedback; perceptions of other children's opportunities; experiences during the test; and eventual test results. I will now look at each of these areas in turn, considering their impact on self-efficacy, beginning with the relevance of teacher feedback.

4.4.1 Teacher feedback

Validation of classwork through verbal feedback from the teacher was sought in the classroom: '*I just read through my work and double check and see if there's like anything I need to improve on. I can ask like the teacher, so she can see like if it's good or if not, if there's like any mistakes*' (Zayna). This idea of work being '*good*' based on feedback from the teacher, then transferred to how children felt about themselves: '*you can tell when you need to improve that when there's like features that need to be inside, we don't have a lot of them, and when you don't get something … when you don't get something right, you have to try and help yourself to get better*' (Inka). Inka began by talking about the necessity to include more features in her writing, but then went on to assert that improving on this would make '*herself get better*', suggesting that better work might have meant a better child, or learner. In support of this, Wendy said she felt successful when '*my teachers or you or somebody else says that, wow that's awesome or that's great and stuff like that*' and similarly, Haider said '*in Mr Ferguson's class, sometimes I'm the only one who gets the question right and then he starts saying well done and giving me all compliments*'. Haider then built on this when talking about success in interventions by stating that '*a lot of the time when I go outside, Ms Brown always like compliments me and she says I've been like very mature*'. His responses might suggest he sought affirmation from the adults in school and this is of particular interest given that, as I was his teacher, I know that there was almost no parental engagement from Haider's parents with the school regarding his learning. I also know that there was also little parental engagement with Wendy's parents, which might have led to her valuing more what adults in school said about her learning. Adding to this, Charlie indicated a reliance on what the school adults said to motivate him:

> *I have a[n] image in my head and that image in my head is what I try to aim for in every lesson, so like if I have a paragraph in my head for English, I would try to write that paragraph. But sometimes it gets stuck, yeah, and then I forget it and then … and then you compliment me and then I'll remember where … where it was again and where I was.*
>
> (Charlie)

Like Wendy and Haider, Charlie came from a similar background of low parental engagement with school and in his learning. That is not to say that their parent/carers did not care about their children's learning, but that they were not supporting with some or all aspects of school life, such as getting to school on time, completing homework and attending parent evenings and workshops. This may be related to why he seemingly wanted a positive '*compliment*' from the teacher but when he received constructive feedback on how to improve his work, he received this more negatively often comparing himself to his peers.

> *…when the teacher gives me more to work on, I feel like I'm falling behind, if that makes sense because … when a teacher comes up to me and says you have to work on this… and no one else, I feel like I'm falling behind and it's just me, and I'm going to get stuck behind and there's going to be a massive gap between me and other people.*
>
> (Charlie)

Comparing himself to other children affected his self-efficacy.

In contrast to feedback given in person, written feedback in the form of teachers' marking in books was also discussed.

> *[Teachers decide] how you're doing inside class, if you understand it or not. From your book because when they take your book after you've done a lesson, then they look at your book and see the marks and they mark and they like… They like know how you did in this one exact subject, so then they help you in that subject.*
>
> (Paavi)

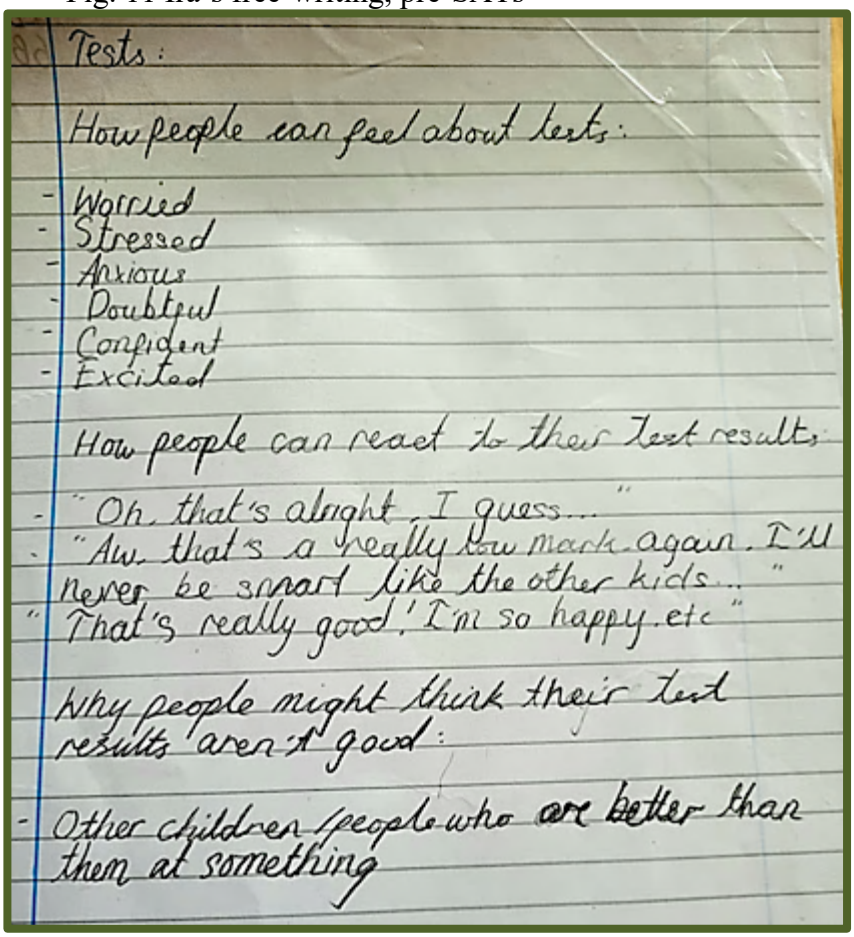
Children discussed how they perceived their success in relation to the marking in the books: '*if you get lots of marks on your work, in your books, you come along, you tick our work… So if you get lots of ticks then that will mean you did good*' (Iman). Iman's way of understanding that he did well, that he was successful at learning in a subject, was to see how many ticks he had received in his book. This was also described from the slightly different perspective of not getting too many things wrong (rather than lots of things right): '*if I get like good marks, like if Mr Lee sometimes, he marks my work and I … if I see that I don't have much … I don't have much questions I've done wrong, then I can see that I've done good*' (Abdul). As per the school's pupil data spreadsheet, Iman and Abdul were of different attainment levels (Appendix O) and, as per my teacher knowledge, whereas Abdul's parent/carers were very engaged in his learning, Iman's parent/carers were not, suggesting that teachers' marking in books might have impacted children's self-efficacy regardless of attainment and parental engagement.

One child explained how teacher feedback, both verbal and written, '*will make you successful because the teachers will write reports and they will include those things*' (Hila). Thus, through both written and verbal teacher feedback about learning based on the taught curriculum and tests, children's self-efficacy was impacted.

4.4.2 Equal opportunities

Children had mixed perceptions on whether they had the same opportunity as other children to do well in tests; this was the questionnaire statement where 'unsure' was selected with the highest percentage out of all the other questionnaire statements (17.4%). The percentage of children who either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement was 54.3% and 28.5% of children either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. These three results reflect a degree of uncertainty and mixed perceptions on whether children had the same opportunity as others and this was also supported by the other data collection methods. Ira's free-writing, before she took her tests, show contrasting feelings related to tests, followed by a variety of children's possible reactions to their test results.

Fig. 11 Ira's free-writing, pre-SATs



Ira's writing suggests that some children might think that other children are '*better than them at something*' and that '*I'll never be smart like the other kids*'. She put forward the idea that children compare themselves to their peers and may feel some children are '*better*' than them or than others. As exemplification of this, Adina wrote that '*some people are very smart (smarter than me)*' and Charlie wrote *'many people are smarter than me*'. Reflecting these perceptions and building on her free-writing pre-SATs, Ira's post-SATs picture depicts '*two different people and how they like felt about tests. One feels it's quite difficult for her. And one feels it's not that hard*' (Ira).

Fig. 12 Ira's picture, post-SATs

To further illustrate ways in which way children were perceived as different in their ability to do well, Iman stated that different children '*can be ahead of you or behind you*' because people '*are different in different ways*' and so '*you should never assume that someone's smarter or not smarter*'. As explained previously, Iman was a child who was very knowledgeable in many ways and who was engaged with number of themes and sub-themes in his interviews, but I know from having been his teacher that he did not often pass practise tests in the lead-up to the SATs so it might have been that he was talking about himself here, amongst others. This perception was supported by two other children who said that '*we're all different, and some people are stuck on different subjects, and not everyone's the same*' (Safa) and '*some people may need like help or some people may not*' because '*…in certain subjects some people can be better at certain subjects. But other people can be better at different ones or could be smart in their own way*' (Abdul).

The perception that peers were different in their potential to do well in tests was attributed to several reasons: being placed in different sets in school; being unwell and off-school; being new to school; different IQs and mindsets; having a special educational need; and attitude to learning. I will discuss each of these in turn. Like when I considered the continuity and progression of setting in secondary school (Section 4.2.5), being placed in different sets was perceived as evidence that children did not have the same opportunity as others in primary school because '*some of us are lower and higher in different subjects. So the people who are lower in subjects have less of an advantage than the higher people*' (Iman). As a teacher in Year 6 at the time, I am aware that it was the case that the children in higher sets for Maths at school, were taught a wider range and more high-level content than the children in the lower sets. The fact that children in the lower sets were not exposed to the same content put them at a disadvantage as all children were taking the same test and so those in the lower sets would not have the opportunity to do as well as the others.

Being unwell was perceived as another reason why children would not have the same opportunity to do well because children '*may skip a day of school because they're sick*' (Ahmed). This would mean that they '*they miss out on their learning and they can't be able to practise because they're like sick*' (Zayna). Conversely, Aaliyah, who I know through having been her teacher, had low attendance wrote '*you get the same learning and the same work. If your [you're] not in that's your fault*'. Perhaps this is what she might have been told by some of the adults in school as a way to encourage her to be in school more of the time.

Being new to school was identified as important by Iman, who said '*some people are new and they don't know what we've been learning on the curriculum… some people have been here for years and they already know what's going to happen in the curriculum*'. It was interesting that he pointed this out because as with when he discussed being smart in different ways, he might again have been talking about himself, based on what I know of him through my existing teacher relationship with him. He was new to school having joined mid-way through Year 6 and having come from a school in Somalia rather than England, where the curriculum would have been

different. Perhaps he perceived that he was at a disadvantage compared to other children due to his unfamiliarity with the English curriculum.

IQ and mindset were also given as reason by one child as to why all children would not have the same opportunity to do well:

> *I'm not judging anybody, I'm not saying, oh he's smart, he's dumb, they're too dumb… I'm just saying some people in class, the higher the people or the lower the people … you don't know what IQ is, IQ is the type of knowledge that you have, and it's something natural, you don't raise your IQ by studying, but fifteen years of studying will only get your IQ to increase by five. The only thing that matters about the IQ is about how you're born. People could be born with murder minds, people could be born with a normal mindset. So really people have different mindsets, different ways to study, different life experiences, so we all have different advantages at it, so we all don't have the same advantage.*
>
> (Iman)

Iman appears to have perceived both IQ and mindset as fixed attributes that children are born with and that put children either at an advantage or a disadvantage in tests. He spoke at length about this and used the example '*murder minds'* [people who are capable of committing murder], which could be interpreted as him feeling strongly about this topic given the extremity of the example he used.

Explicit reference to special educational needs, specifically dyslexia, was made by only one child throughout the data collection process:

> *Some people have a type of disability where they can't learn properly because like say dyslexia, when they read, the words go off the page! If I had dyslexia and I was trying to read a problem, I'd spell poblem [sic]… I'd spell it like that, spelling tests would be hard for them, writing would be hard for them, reading would be hard for them, wouldn't it*?
>
> (Iman)

As with the previous sub-themes interpreted from Iman's interviews, there is a possibility that what he perceived was related to his own experiences, based on what I

know of him as his teacher at the time. Although not formally diagnosed with a special educational need, Iman was a child for whom the teacher had sought this diagnosis. As per school policy, Iman would not have known that a diagnosis was being sought, but he may very well have been aware that he was a child who found reading and writing challenging, particularly compared to his three siblings, all of whom Iman's mother described to me as having academic success compared to Iman. Indeed, Iman's Reading, Writing and Maths in class was significantly below age-related expectations which may have led him to perceive that he was at a disadvantage compared to other children and that his learning and test performance subsequently suffered. This is despite him eventual attaining WTS in his final Maths test and writing assessment and EXS in Reading and SPaG tests (Table 4.1). It is of note that both Iman and Charlie, another child for whom I, as his teacher, was seeking a diagnosis of special educational needs, spoke at great length and in most detail compared to other children during the interviews in this study. Expression through speech, rather than through writing, is commonly a strength and preferred method of communication for some children who have the special educational needs that I believed Iman and Charlie to have. Iman went on to discuss ways in which a child with dyslexia might maximise their chances of doing well, which if he was thinking of himself, makes his words even more meaningful in relation to his self-efficacy:

> *I think no one's less capable than anyone in any way because they [children with dyslexia] always try hard in their own ways and if they keep, keep trying, they could maybe improve by reading more or maybe even using any type of device to help them with their reading. Maybe they could do some tests like Maths, it might be easier for them to like read numbers than reading letters, so they could pass in Maths and maybe they won't do as good as they do in Maths, in reading and other subjects like that.*
>
> (Iman)

If Iman or Charlie had received the diagnoses I sought, they would have been entitled to special provision during tests, such as extra time, covered overlays and bigger font size, which may have enabled them to either increase their self-efficacy and/or perform better in the tests. However, both children took the SATs and left for secondary school with diagnoses still being sought.

In contrast to these perceptions where children believed they did not all have the same opportunity to do well, it was conversely perceived that doing well was related to children's own attitude to learning because '*they all get the same education and we all have the fair education, so we usually learn the same things, and we get the same tests to do, so if we all learning properly and concentrate in class, we will get what we want and do well on our tests*' (Paavi.) This was perceived to require listening because '*if you don't listen, then you don't get such a good score, where I do listen then I will get a good score*' (Abdul). For Jayesh, this appeared to be a matter of children choosing to listen or not: '*we all learn together and that it depends on the student to listen and learn or ignore and not learn*' and Inka perceived that '*everyone studies for it, I know everyone studies for it, they can all do well*'. It is interesting that all four of these children were, according to the pupil data, consistently high attainers and perhaps this made them more inclined to lean towards the idea that most children could choose whether to engage in their learning, rather than be limited by lack of opportunity.

For two children, however, although they said *'if I practise I will get it right*' (Wendy), there was a suggestion that '*if they get a low mark, you never know if they practise or if they didn't practise, because some children, they find it hard like to remember the stuff in the tests*' (Zayna). Unlike the four children above, Wendy and Zayna were both WTS in most subjects (according to their pupil data) and when asked if she thought that all children have the same opportunity, Zayna said '*yes and no*', indicative of the uncertain and mixed responses received in relation to whether children perceived they had the same opportunity to do well compared to others. Indeed, when looking at the questionnaire results, in one class 7 out of 9 children who took part within one specific class (77.8%) held the perception that '*miss [sic] explains things the same way as [to] everyone*' (Dante) and '*we are getting the same treatment and learning*' (Ganga) so therefore there was same opportunity for all to do well. Perhaps that teacher had some input into the perception of these children that it was entirely possible and/or they were all expected to do equally well regardless of anything else.

Having explored the perceptions of the children in relation to why children did or did not perceive that all children have the same opportunity to do well in tests, I return back to the idea that all children are different. Thus, despite all the children sitting '*the same*

paper' (Meena), Mayra put forward that the children '*will not get the same score in the tests we'll do*', which she perceived to show that all children did not have the same opportunity to succeed, because if they did then they would all get the same results in their tests. This would support the idea that children are different to one another and do not have equal opportunity to succeed in the same way or to the same extent because of several variables. The impact of this on children's self-efficacy was further reinforced by their perceived experiences during the taking of the tests.

4.4.3 Experience during tests

The experience of taking the test contributed to children's perceptions of how successful they were as a student. Iman stated that '*in my mind I always feel… in my heart I feel … my heart tries to say you're going to… pass but my mind says you haven't studied enough, you're going to fail, you're going to be disappointed*'. As with perceived opportunities of peers prior to taking the tests, some children compared themselves to other children during the taking of the test. When speaking about the reading test, Wendy explained '*it's like when you're reading and you're trying to find it out, I get kind of stressed because I can't find like where it's at and then people kind of like around me says [sic] oh I found it, I found it but I just can't find it*'. Charlie did the same: '*I feel that when I see other people, I feel like they're smarter than me because I don't know what I'm working with and I don't know what they actually know and what they don't know*'. These comparisons to other people provoked a response within Wendy and Charlie during the tests that impacted their self-efficacy

4.4.4 Importance of test results

In response to receiving test results throughout the year, children often made judgements about themselves and how successful they were: '*sometimes I get good scores, but sometimes I get bad scores, so I'm in the middle*' (Mark). Iman stated '*I feel like disappointed if I get questions wrong'* and Charlie said the results told '*about how smart I can be and how maybe bad I could be if I fail at everything*'. Not only did children define their success through their test results, in some cases they then compared themselves to other children, as Haider did: '*the test results, I worry that if I*

get bad scores, I'm like … if I get the lowest score in the class I feel like they're all smarter than me'. These comparisons with peers impacted children's self-efficacy.

It was felt that children's test results impacted other people's perceptions of them, which in turn may have impacted how they see themselves. Indeed, when asked how teachers decide on what makes a child successful in their learning, Hila said '*they use your test scores and see if you need to improve on anything else or you're struggling on any subject*' and Abdul agreed '*and if you do lots of working out, you get lots of marks, then that's a way*'. Charlie explained how he would be perceived if he did not get good results: '*then to them… I look like a person that never listens … and you always look like the class clown. That's if, that's if I had low grades*'. For these children, test results were associated with making children appear successful or deficient in some way in the eyes of others and it is clear in Charlie's case, for example, that this affected his self-efficacy as he then perceived himself to look like the '*class clown*'.

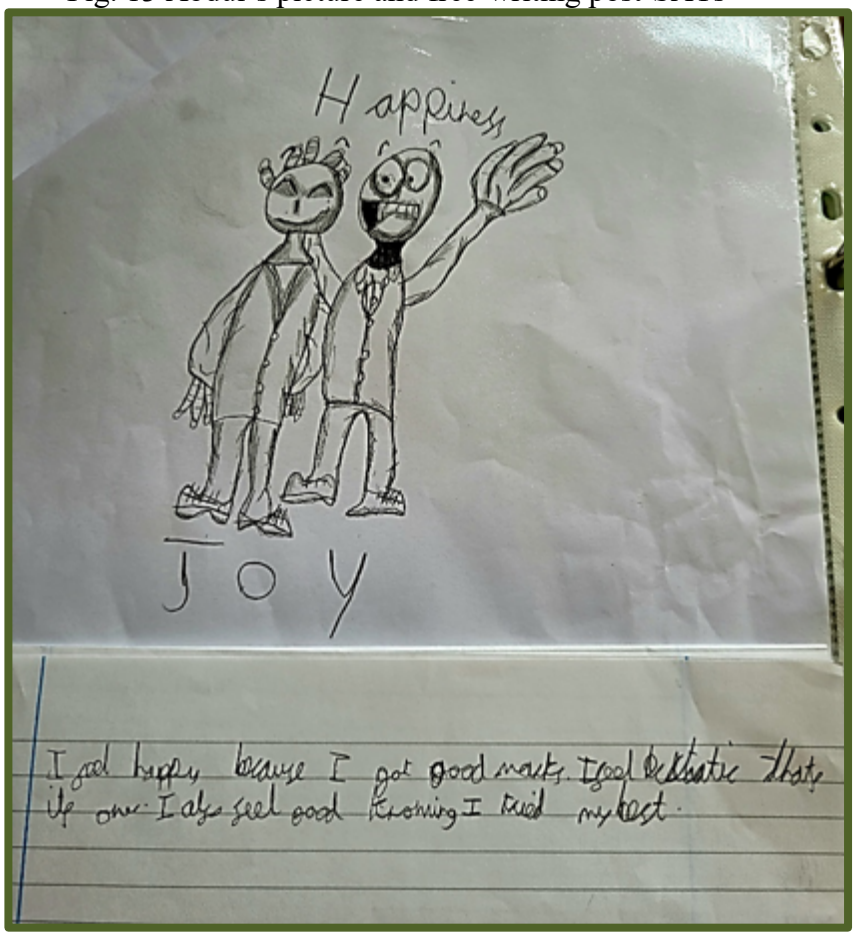
Paavi touched on how children might be judged on their test results and highlighted the possibility of improvement: '*some people might be like judged in different ways, thinking that if they get a lower score in Maths that they might not be as well in doing in Maths, but they could improve at times as well*'. Paavi perceived the judgement of children on test results as a negative and the potential for improvement in the scores as a positive. However, the possibility that children could have improved on their test results was also interpreted as negative by Hila: '*when I get stuff wrong that I think I might get right, if I practised it, I just feel a bit like … I don't feel proud of myself and I get a bit sad*' (Hila). Additionally, Abdul used his past test performance as a measure of how successful (or unsuccessful) he was in the next test. In this way, test results could be perceived either positively or negatively and further impacted children's self-efficacy.

4.5 The aftermath

4.5.1 Tests being over

I have explored the impact of assessment on the curriculum, children's mental health and well-being, and more-specifically their self-efficacy, from the point in time prior to taking their tests, through to the taking the tests and considered the importance of test results in relation to children's self-efficacy. I will now look at children's perceptions after the tests were over. When children were interviewed after the tests were over, they expressed that they were '*happy because all the tests are over*' (Zayna). This was also reflected in pictures created after the tests, such as the one by Aaliyah (Appendix M), who depicted relief at her score because she had been worried about her tests. Similar to Jayesh's picture (Fig. 10), Abdul's picture (Fig. 13) also depicted '*happiness*' and *'joy'*:

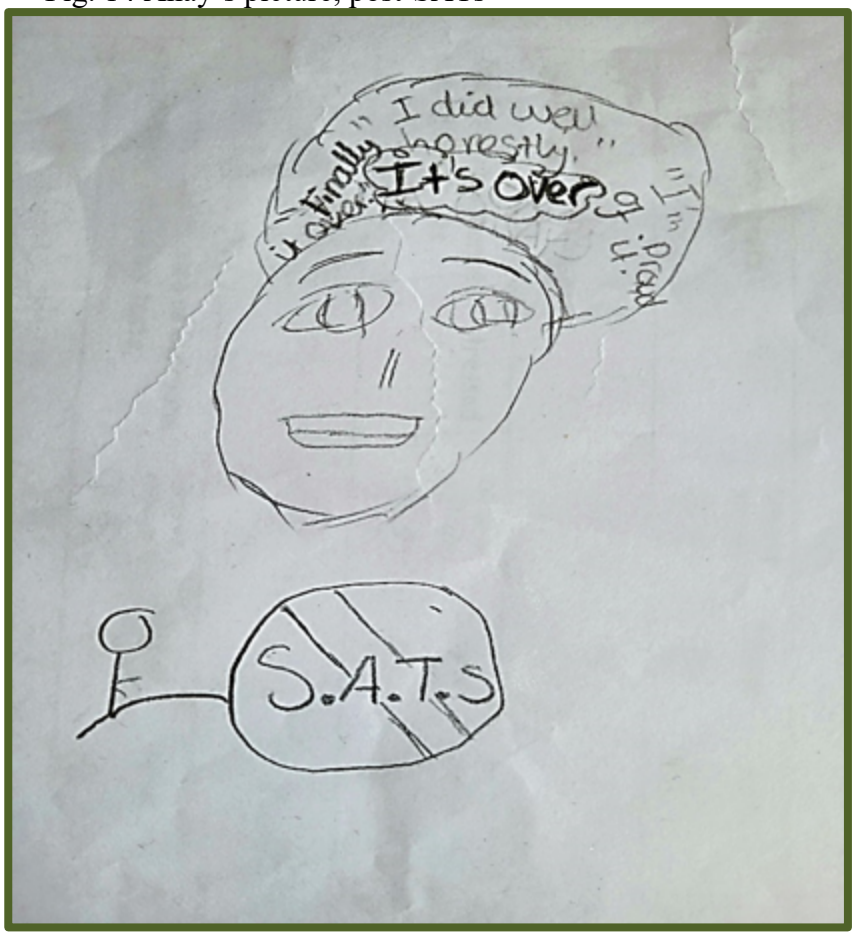
Fig. 13 Abdul's picture and free-writing post-SATs



Abdul related his '*happiness*' and '*joy*' to his '*good marks*', leading one to consider if his picture would have been any different if his marks had been different. This is

unknown, however despite his positive language in his picture, he chose to use the stronger word '*ecstatic*' to describe the feeling that the tests were over, compared to his happiness at his results. This indicates a sense of relief that the tests were at an end, confirmed by his interview post-SATs, during which he said that he felt '*thankful because I know I don't have to do any [more] tests*'. This is similar to what was depicted in Anay's picture post-SATs:

Fig. 14 Anay's picture, post-SATs



Anay, in his picture also used positive words and phrases including '*I did well*' and '*I'm proud*'. At the same time, his picture also included a sign showing '*SATs*' crossed out, perhaps indicating that there would be no more SATs or that he did not think there should be any SATs in the first place. In any case, what he did make clear in his writing on his picture was '*Finally, it over'*, indicating the sense of relief that could be interpreted from Anay's picture (Fig. 14). There was the similar perception that '*I feel happy because like before there was still more tests, so you still have to worry about …*

those tests and now you don't have to think about any more tests because we don't have anymore' (Ira). Indeed, there was a consensus amongst some children that relief and happiness had finally been felt following a period of being '*stressed out and doing lots of learning… now that it's not there again, I feel really relieved and happy'* (Paavi) and '*you can have more time to yourself now you aren't practising over and over again*' (Kelly). Inka suggested '*we can have more fun. Party! Party! Celebrate*', indicating a strength of positive feeling. Therefore, for all these children of different attainment levels and backgrounds (Appendix O) they perceived mixture of feelings that included a sense of relief that the tests were over.

Despite a sense of relief for some children who were either glad that the tests were over or pleased with the results they had got so far, for other children the relief was perceived to be only temporary. In his interview after the tests, Charlie said *'I feel relieved and very ... very happy but also a bit worried in case I failed*'. Although Charlie had completed the last of his test at primary school, he was still in anticipation of the results.

Looking further ahead beyond the point in time where children would have received their results, Wendy said '*I feel happy because that means I don't have to do any more tests until I go to secondary school*' and Hila agreed, stating that she felt '*relieved'* for the same reason. Thus, although they acknowledged their happiness and relief at the tests being over, they perceived that this situation would be temporary. These two children were already thinking about the next set of tests in their following stage of education at secondary school. Despite the tests being over, children's mental health and well-being continued to be affected by anticipation over the future: secondary school and job opportunities.

4.5.2 Future opportunities

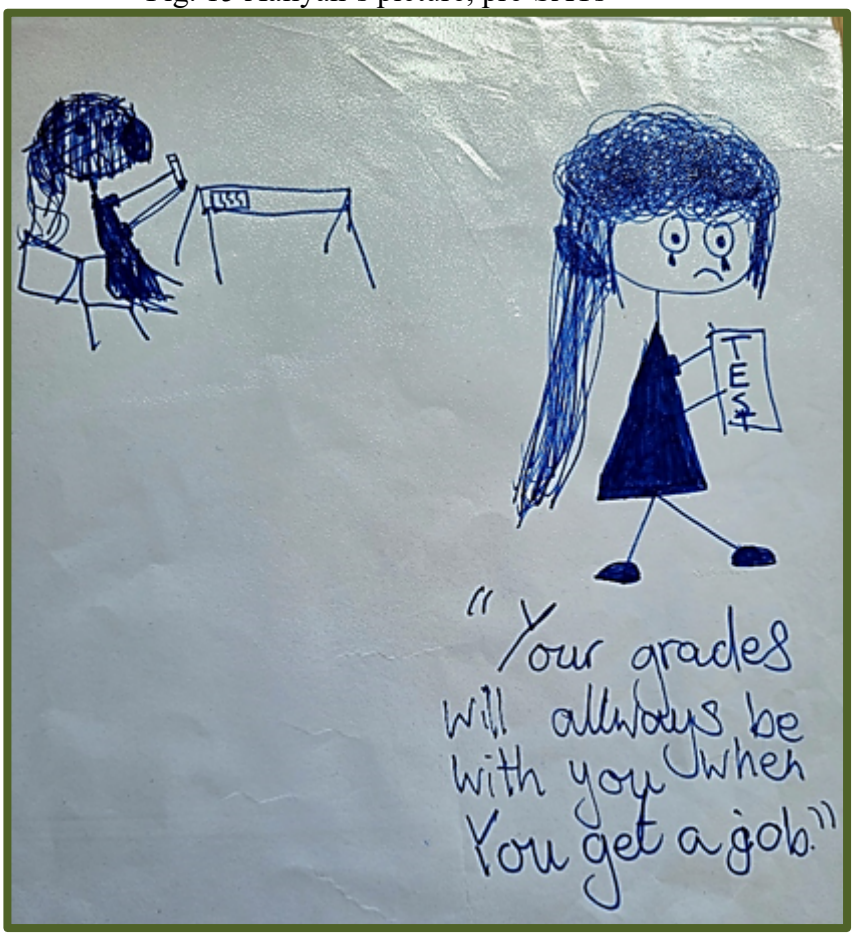
Children perceived that assessment would impact their future, beginning with setting and/or streaming in secondary school and home-learning. Kelly said '*it [the test] does matter because that will affect your life ahead*', explaining that '*they let our secondary school know our grades and then see what we need help on…. So when you go to*

secondary school, you'll get your grade and you will be in a class and that will help you with that subject'. Kelly made a link between tests taken in primary school and their impact in secondary school – her '*life ahead*'. This idea of tests impacting secondary school was built on by Ahmed who said '*I feel like it's [test result] going to be sent to your Year 7 school. And it's important because it shows that if you don't do that good you should go home and like revise*'. Here he talked about the practical implications of receiving tests results – that it may require further teaching and learning beyond the classroom, which indicates a continuation of the home-learning discussed in Sections 2.4.6 and 4.2.6. Children's perceptions of the practical impact of assessment on their experiences of the curriculum thus appear to have gone beyond their immediate primary school experience to what they imagined their experiences of secondary school would be like. This had an impact on Pavvi's mental health and well-being: she agreed strongly that the impact of assessment on her future gave her a sense of anxiousness, worry and stress '*because I know these final assessments impact a lot in my secondary school life too*'.

Concern was also expressed by four children (Charlie, Hila, Wendy and Zayna) over tests they believed they would be taking in secondary school. Referring to the tests he had already taken, Charlie said that '*finally the terrible thing is over but there's much more harder coming … they're coming back stronger and bigger*' and Hila added '*I feel a bit scared because I think the tests might be a bit harder*'. Thus, although Hila, Wendy, Zayna and Charlie felt initial relief that their primary school tests were over, their comments suggest just how high-stakes tests were to them given that they perceived their relief was only temporary until they had to take tests again at secondary school. In contrast to this, when Ira was asked how she felt about taking tests in secondary school, she replied that she was '*happy … I want to see what's next*'. In response to Ira, Abdul said that '*I'd also feel like nervous because like high school actually, kind of work gets harder than SATS, it eventually gets harder than SATS. So I feel nervous but I still feel excited*'. This difference in attitudes towards tests in secondary school is of note because unlike Charlie, Hila, Wendy and Zayna, Abdul was a consistently high attainer, as was Ira who exceeded at all her subjects from the point of her Key Stage 1 tests onwards. This may explain the difference in perception.

The impact of assessment on opportunities beyond secondary school was also discussed, specifically in relation to jobs and careers:

Fig. 15 Aaliyah's picture, pre-SATs



Aaliyah makes a direct link between test results and jobs and the crying child in her picture would suggest that this was a source of sadness to her. This link was also highlighted by Hila who said that '*wherever we're going to go next will know about our test scores and our job will matter about those test scores*' and Eliza who agreed strongly that test results mattered to her parent/carers explaining that '*my parents want to hear my scores so that I will end up with a good job in the future*'.

I have interpreted children's perceptions about the impact of assessment on a) their experiences of the curriculum and b) their mental health and well-being. From this, it

appears that the children in this study did perceive tests to be impactful in a variety of ways and arguably also high-stakes in nature. This led me to explore the answer to my second research question regarding children's recommendations about assessment.

4.6 Children's recommendations

4.6.1 Recommendations relating to tests

My second research question asked whether primary school children had any recommendations about assessment. Children made firstly, recommendations relating to tests (this section) and secondly, they recommended alternatives to tests (next section). Recommendations relating to tests were made a) about the administration and physical formatting of the tests and b) the suggestion there should be tests in other subjects. Turning first to the administration of the tests, Iman recommended that the tests be carried out without children's prior knowledge of the test taking place:

> *… they would be able to think properly and they'd be able to write it… you give them the paper but they wouldn't know that it's a test, or maybe you give them it in a way where like they write it in their books and they just think it's an everyday work and then they're going to get all the questions… because they're not worrying about the results… they wouldn't know that they're doing a test… they would be calm and they just think it's everyday work and they do it right.*
>
> (Iman)

In his argument for testing by stealth, Iman appears to have addressed some of the sub-themes that came up during the interviews: being able to focus without distractions; the feeling of worry and how this affected test performance and results; and the benefits of remaining calm. Paavi agreed with Iman, stating that:

> *When people hear the word test, they get more anxious and nervous about what to do when it happens… and feel like they're not going to do well. So if we make them think that it's not a test but tell them to do as well as they can, they will be*

> *able to answer the questions as they know [sic] and not worry too much about what the score would be.*
>
> (Paavi)

Both children said that through taking the tests without knowing, children would worry less and subsequently perform better at them. The argument for testing by stealth would suggest that tests are high-stakes enough to warrant this requirement.

In response to a scenario where children unwittingly take their tests, Abdul made two related but distinct arguments against this recommendation: a) children would be afraid, and b) they would no longer trust their teacher. Firstly, Abdul stated that children '*would get scared because they wouldn't know when their tests would actually be, and they wouldn't have time to practise, so even though they'd think it's just a normal work, they'd be a bit scared because they wouldn't know when they're going to get their test*'. His argument here was that children would prefer to know when their tests were rather than be tested without their prior knowledge, possibly because of the tests being perceived as high-stakes. However, in the scenario where children might be '*a bit scared'* because tests would be administered without children knowing, as Iman and Paavi suggested, perhaps taking them in this way would mean children '*think it's not too much of a big of a deal*' (Paavi) and therefore no longer something to be scared of. Abdul's second argument against testing by stealth was that '*the students won't trust the teacher as much'*. Here he referred to the teacher as someone who should be trusted and he suggested that this would be in conflict with someone who would ask children to unknowingly complete a test. As with Abdul's other argument about children being afraid, this could be interpreted as evidence that the tests are indeed perceived as high-stakes by children and that the teacher would also be aware of this and therefore try to counteract this through testing by stealth.

The option to '*redo a test*' (Zayna) if children were distracted and did not perform as well as they could have done was another recommendation given relating to the administration of tests. This suggestion could be interpreted as further evidence that the

tests are perceived as high-stakes, thus resulting in Zayna holding the perception that children should have the option to retake tests in certain circumstances.

In addition to recommendations about the administration of the tests, children made various suggestions for changes to the physical format of the tests, both to a) the appeal of the test and b) regarding its practical use. References were made to the size, or length, of the test paper and Charlie explained that '*on a bigger one, we think oh no and stuff like that, like it's too big and so maybe if you form it a different way, we might think it would be a way easier*'. Subsequently, his recommendation related to this was to make tests '*a normal piece of paper instead of a big massive one*' (Charlie) and Wendy's was to '*make it shorter*'. One recommendation related to the length of the test paper was to have more time given to complete it (Safa). Also in regard to the appeal of the test paper, Charlie noted that '*what really stands out to me is the colour, if there's no colour, then I feel like it's very boring and it don't look nice*'.

Regarding the practicalities of completing the test paper, Zayna requested that in Maths, there should be '*just a bit for like, a bit more space*'. Abdul suggested that the test papers should have '*key words like black [bold text]*, *just to like make them stand out, like maybe they should do that more or most questions of the test to like help people*'. Inka wanted tests to have more than one question on the same topic within a test '*so like the people who like mark the [test] can make like a more accurate assumption*'. She gave the example of how one might get a question on long division incorrect in a Maths test simply '*because they might have just forgot like a simple times tables [sic]*'. This might mean that they do not know their times tables beyond thirteen, but not necessarily that they do not know the correct method for long division. These recommendations put forward by the children were to '*help people*' (Abdul) in a practical sense, indicating that the children collectively perceived they or their peers needed further help with the tests in the format as they were and because of the perceived importance of the tests as being high-stakes.

Given that children's recommendations relating to the tests showed an acceptance of testing in some way, almost all children suggested tests in additional subjects, often the

ones they had said they enjoyed or were good at earlier on in their interviews. For example, Ahmed would have liked tests in Science and RE because '*in Science I like them because it teaches us a lot of things about the world and in RE, we learn about religions, cultures*'. Charlie wanted tests in Art because '*I would like to draw for six hours straight!*'. On reflection he added '*this one is going to be really hard to turn into a test because in Art there is [sic] no rights [sic] and wrongs [sic], so technically if you draw, then you get the whole paper correct, because there is no wrong answer*'. His answer could be interpreted as revealing more than simply his enjoyment of Art; he wanted a test that allowed him the opportunity to be correct. Like Charlie, Kelly also perceived that Art offered a freedom of expression that was open to interpretation: '*…it's Art and there's many different types of beautiful work you see in Art, so one person's opinion is different from others*', hence there would be no right or wrong as with other tests.

Other children gave different reasons for suggesting testing in additional subjects to the ones they were already tested in. Paavi was in support of testing in all subjects '*so we know that we're getting better at it*' and Zayna also expressed what she perceived as the value of in testing in other subjects '*if they [children] want to be an artist or a scientist, so that would be good for them, so in primary school they know like a few things*'. Iman questioned why there were '*lots of tests [in other subjects] that should be a thing but aren't for some reason… Oh yes, I'd love to have a History test, I'm really good at History, I'd love to have like some DT, Astronomy tests... I'd like to have some Science tests, that would be really fun'.* He then went on to state '*Yeah, the other tests just no, I'll be honest, I hate them, I hate the other ones.*' Here, Iman made it clear that he would very much prefer to have tests in subjects he enjoyed, believed he was good at, or that he was interested in, rather than the subjects he was tested in. In all these responses, however, there remained the idea and the acceptance that testing, in some form or subject, was the way to determine children's knowledge and skills.

4.6.2 Alternatives to tests

The percentage of children who agreed strongly or agreed that they wanted to show their learning in a different way was 42.9% and 14.3% of children selected unsure. Of these children, five children gave a reason along the lines of '*tests give you so much pressure and make you forget what you have learned*' (Ila) and so '*when we do tests it can worry many people including me and because we are worried, we don't do as well*' (Anay). Ganga personified the tests by writing that '*tests are just something that are my enimies [sic] and just don't go well because of how scared I get*'. Her response, along with the others, made it apparent why these children might have wanted to show their learning in a different way. The one other reason given for a child wanting to show their learning in a different way was by Adina, who wrote '*because it will be fun and not as boring as tests*'. Although these six children gave reasons why they wanted to show their learning in a different way, they did not offer any alternatives to testing. Indeed, over half the children who either strongly agreed, agreed, or were unsure that they wanted to show their learning in a different way gave no comment, perhaps as an indication that they could not think of what might replace testing and so were unable to offer any further information or ideas. The shortage of alternatives to testing was supported by the pictures and was also reflected in the interviews.

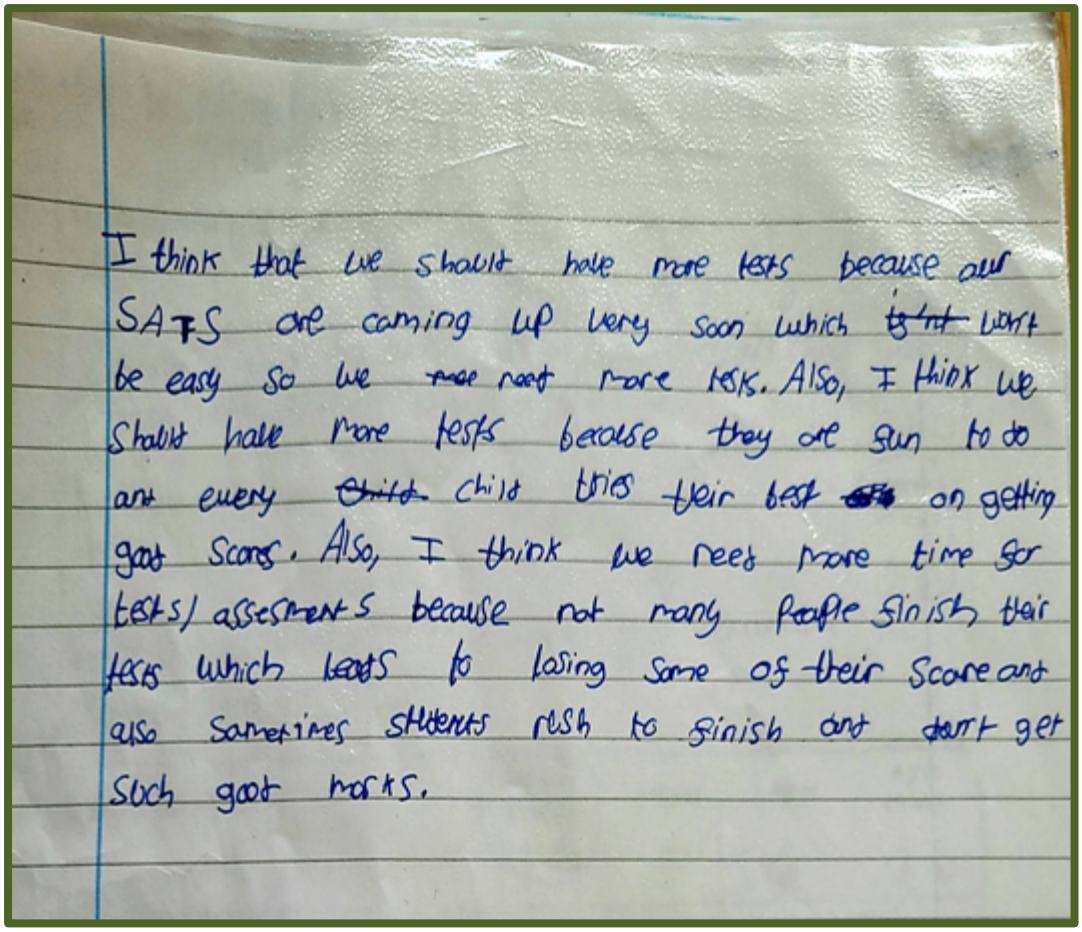
It is of note that so many recommendations were given that centred on how to adapt, improve and build on the existing tests, rather than what might be an alternative to replace testing. There appeared to be an inability to imagine alternatives that would altogether replace testing. This was exemplified in a single comment by Ira who wrote that '*there are different ways to show what we've learnt'* but she did not give any examples. She added, '*I'm unsure because I can't think of anything else we can do instead of test*'.

There were, however, three recommended alternatives to tests made by other children. Firstly, Zayna suggested completing short quizzes to be taken online or in books. Secondly, Inka proposed '*just like doing questions in your book*'. Thirdly, there was a case made for '*instead of tests, how we're doing in class should be our results*' (Hila). This third recommendation was as Iman suggested, the '*everyday work*', when children

'*write it in their books, you take out the papers from the book and then you put them and print onto them as a result*'. Paavi responded to this by saying '*maybe we should do that because some people might be nervous on doing tests because they might feel like they're not going to pass but if we do it ['everyday work'] in class then they would do what they can and try their best every day*'. Thus, the '*everyday work*', rather than testing (even by stealth) would form the assessment.

In addition to the perceived lack of alternatives to tests, despite 57.2% of children having either agreed strongly, agreed or been unsure about wanting to show their learning in a different way, there was still 42.9% of children who either disagreed or disagreed strongly with this statement and their reasoning also warrants attention. Eliza wrote '*I love tests and don't want it another way*'. On examination, this could be attributed to the fact that she was consistently a child working at the expected level or above it and attained above the expected level at the end of the year in all her SATs tests, apart from Maths, in which she attained the expected level. It could have been that consistently having done well in tests, led to her appearing to favour them. Another favourable response to tests came from Haider who wrote in his questionnaire comment '*I wanna do more tests except for reading comprehensions*'. His free-writing on the topic of assessment, written pre-SATs, also appeared in part to support the taking of tests:

Fig. 16 Haider's picture, pre-SATs


I think that we should have more tests because our SATS are coming up very soon which ~~is not~~ won't be easy so we ~~are~~ need more tests. Also, I think we should have more tests because they are fun to do and every ~~child~~ child tries their best ~~at~~ on getting good scores. Also, I think we need more time for tests/assessments because not many people finish their tests which leads to losing some of their score and also sometimes students rush to finish and don't get such good marks.

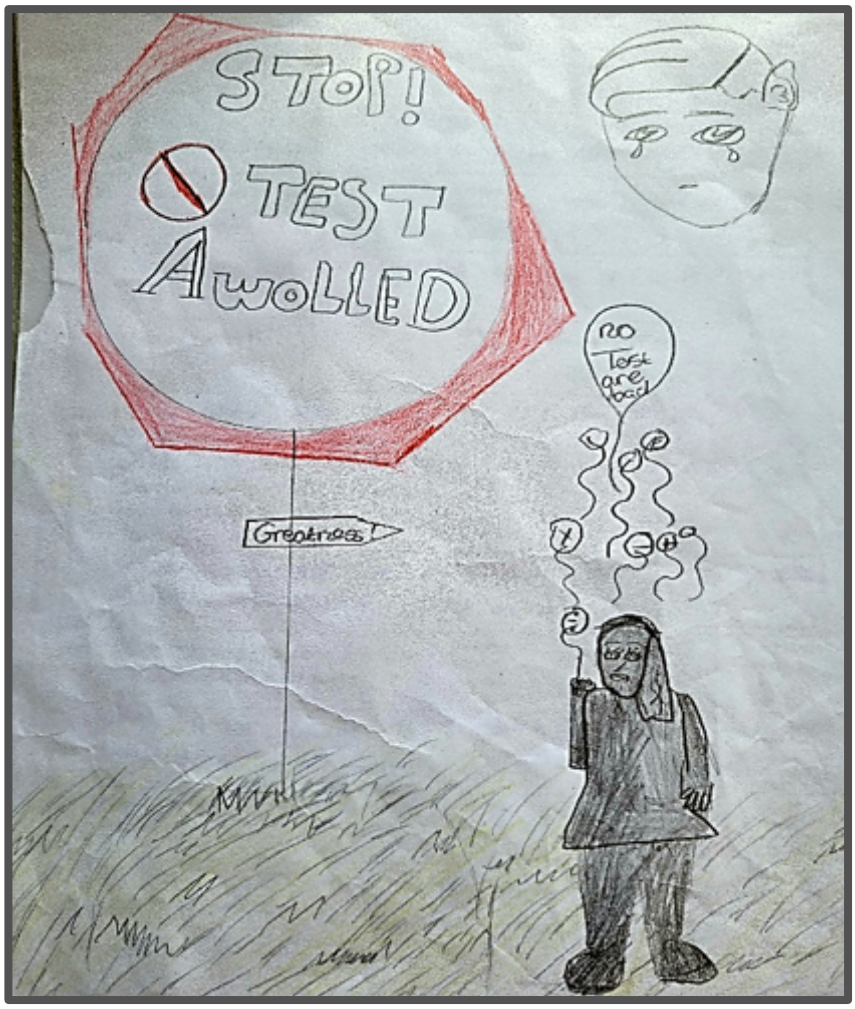
Haider appears to be favourable about tests (with the exception of reading comprehensions) and when he wrote he wanted more tests, he explained that this was because he perceived that practise would be needed for the more difficult SATs that were coming up and then added that they were *'fun'* too. At the same time, he also emphasised that children do try their best and made a request for more time being given in tests because lack of time resulted in children not getting good scores. Thus, despite his writing in the questionnaire that he did not want to show his learning in a different way, his more detailed free-writing revealed that he felt more time was required to be successful in tests. In this way, what initially appeared to suggest that he was simply in favour of tests could be interpreted as a request for support. Perhaps he wanted me, as not only the reader/researcher but also as his teacher, to know that he tried his best at tests but would like to have had more time.

I will now turn to why other children said that they did not want to show their learning in a different way. Abdul and Daniella perceived that '*tests sum up everything*' (Daniella). Dante might have provided one way to interpret Abdul and Daniella's perceptions when considered alongside them: '*tests make sure you remember things you did in the past*'. For Dante, tests appear to have aided her in remembering her learning and this could have also been the case for Abdul and Daniella. However, given that in one of his pictures (Fig. 1) Abdul depicted tests as being '*hard*' and in the other (Fig. 13), he wrote '*I feel ecstatic that it's over*', one could question whether Abdul's choice to disagree strongly that he wanted to show his learning in a different way was a true reflection of how he felt and what he perceived. Perhaps this way of perceiving tests was something he had been told and something he tried to internalise to help him better cope with the tests, or at the time, he could not think of another way to show his learning.

Another reason given for not wanting to show learning in a different way came from Wendy who wrote '*not really since I do english [sic] Maths gramer [sic] spellings in class on a day to day*'. Her explanation may suggest that because children study the subjects they will be tested on daily (unlike the subjects they are not tested on), it follows that they should then take the tests in those subjects *'because tests are the easiest way to find out what I know and don't'* (Mayra). After weeks, months and even years of practising for the SATs by going through questions and answers, '*a test is the only method where we don't have answers to the questions in front of us, which helps truly show our learning*' (Meena). This could also be an indication that the amount and/or nature of test preparation had normalised the taking of tests to the point where children automatically accepted SATs as an outcome of showing their learning because it would have been the one instance where they did not go through the correct answers afterwards to try and learn from them. Thus, one could argue that, even when children appeared to be in support of testing, it was because they were constrained by the boundaries of the existing system of testing and perceived that they had no alternative choices within it.

One definitive recommendation regarding assessment and specifically testing, came from Charlie, who illustrated it through his picture and subsequent description it.

Fig. 17 Charlie's picture, pre-SATs



So you know that we have anti-bullying day, where we let off balloons, and I thought how about have a no test day, no tests allowed and we're setting off balloons. The biggest ones goes, it says no test on it and then all of the other Maths symbols go up, like they're flying away and like going away forever. (Charlie)

Charlie's picture puts forward the idea of having no tests at all and describing the image further, he explained, '*no tests allowed… how hard they are, and sometimes smaller*

things can lead to much more greatness'. Perhaps as an explanation of these *'smaller things'*, he proposed that *'instead of a massive paper you could just see what we do… then we would probably do better than we would actually do on a test because there's no pressure*'. For him, as was perceived by many of the children in this study, assessment was primarily associated with tests and as I have shown throughout this chapter, the children in this study made the argument that educational assessment impacts their experience of the curriculum and their mental health and well-being to such an extent that it has become high-stakes to them.

4.7 Chapter summary

I have interpreted the children's perceptions using the narrative approach to seek to understand the different stories shared by the children. In answering research question 1a regarding the impact of assessment on the curriculum and 1b regarding the impact of assessment on the children's mental health and well-being, the themes I identified were as follows. The themes identified in relation to impact on the curriculum were: enjoyment of different subjects; status given to different subjects; teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing; setting and interventions; life outside of school and potential improvements in learning. Themes identified in relation to mental health and well-being were the feelings of anxiety, worry and stress, followed by concerns about the following: being judged or labelled; anticipation of test results; test accessibility; distractions; copying of work; forgetfulness; fatigue; and time constraints. Children's self-efficacy was also impacted because of perceptions of teacher feedback, equal opportunities for all, children's experiences during tests and the importance of test results. During the taking of the test, children were explicitly concerned about test performance, then felt brief relief that tests were over until the next time and were then concerned over future opportunities. Research question 2 asked if children had any recommendations about assessment and I interpreted firstly, recommendations relating to tests and secondly, recommendations for alternatives to tests. Chapter 5 will now discuss these themes with reference to the literature, before suggesting recommendations to policy and practice and, followed by acknowledging the limitations of the study and subsequently making suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

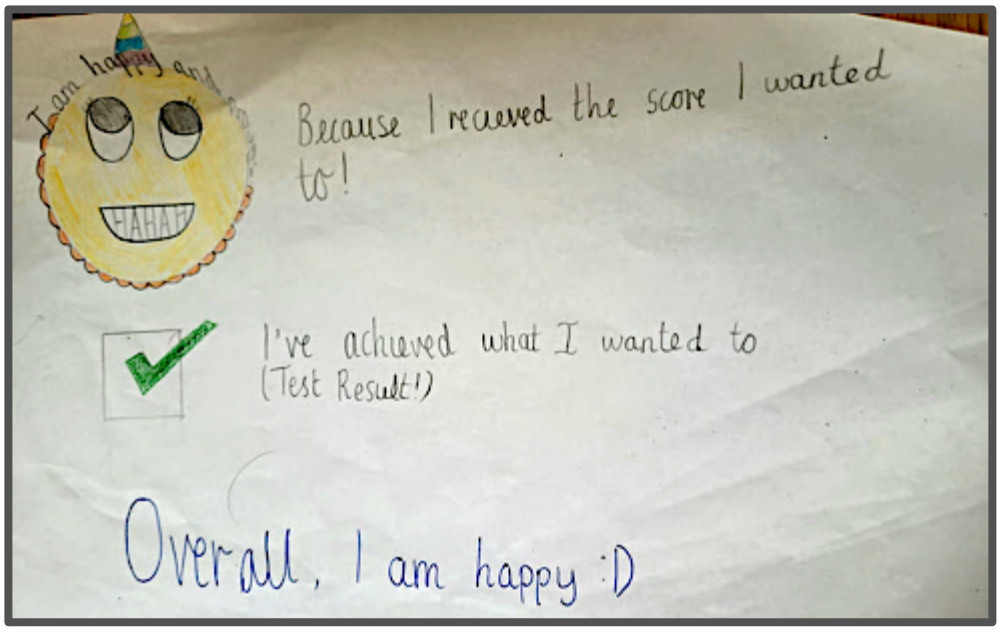


Fig. 18 Paavi's picture, post-SATs

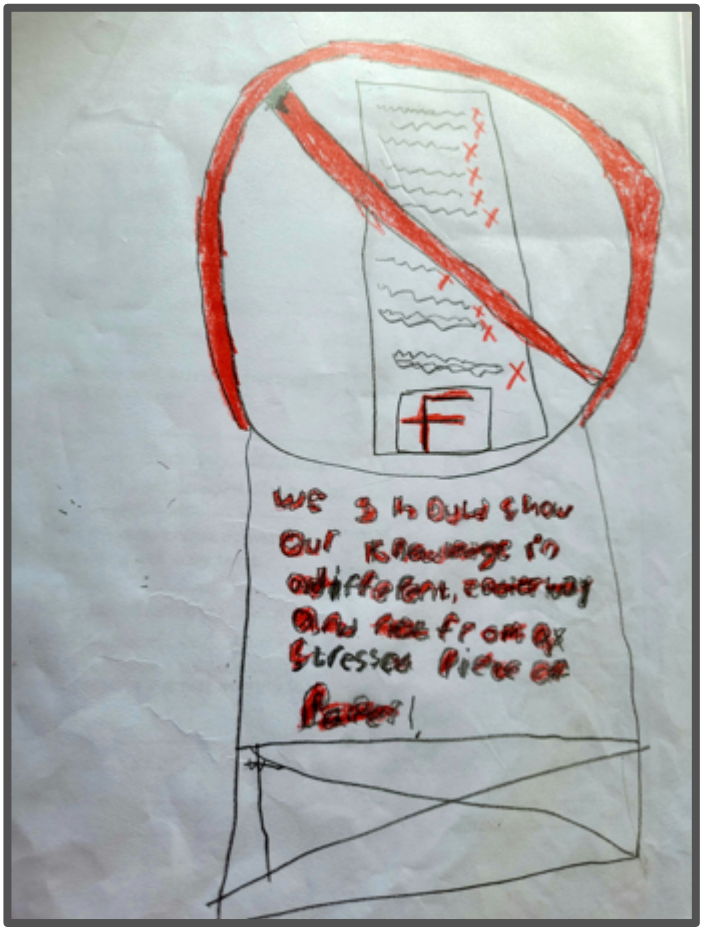


Fig. 19 Iman's picture, post-SATs

5.1 Introduction

Through this research it has become clear that children did perceive that assessment had an impact on their experiences of the curriculum and on their mental health and well-being (Paavi, Fig. 18) and that children were able to articulate this through their spoken and written words and pictures, thus highlighting that assessment can be interpreted as high-stakes.

> Despite the brevity of their lives, children have much to say not only about their pasts but also about the plans and ideas they have for the future. In these accounts children position themselves as active agents in the making of their own histories, histories which are both varied and highly contrastive and histories which are the outcome of their participation in the unique settings of their own everyday lives.
>
> (James, 205: 264).

The majority of children experienced assessment negatively (Iman, Fig. 19), as interpreted from quantitative and qualitative findings from the data. Through questionnaires, pictures/free-writing, and interviews, this research has given a personal and detailed insight into children's perceived experiences of assessment in one mainstream primary school setting in north-west London. This chapter discusses the outcomes based on children's stories and in response to the research questions:

1) What did children say was the impact of assessment on their experiences of a) the curriculum; and b) their mental health and well-being?
2) Did children have any recommendations about assessment?

These are then connected to findings within established theory and practice and contributions to new knowledge are explained. The interpretation of assessment as high-stakes makes a contribution to long-standing debates about school assessment in England and has implications for policy, and practice, for which recommendations are

suggested. This is followed by the limitations of the study and subsequent suggestions for future research.

5.2 Discussion of outcomes

When asked about assessment the children, based on their experiences, perceived this to primarily mean tests. The interpretation of the data led to several outcomes of the research related to different aspects of assessment and more specifically tests: the enjoyment and status of different subjects; curriculum narrowing and teaching to the tests; setting and interventions; life outside and beyond school; improvements in learning; anxiety, worry and stress; test accessibility; distractions; sitting with others; forgetfulness; fatigue; time constraints; self-efficacy; the end of the tests and future opportunities. The children then gave recommendations relating to tests and suggested alternatives to tests.

The interpretation of the data suggested that children mainly enjoyed the subjects that they were not tested in for the SATs. The subjects they specifically mentioned they *'really liked'* (Iman) or *'loved'* (Haider) included Science, RE, history, computing, PE, art, DT and music. Four children from the study said that they enjoyed the test subjects (either reading and/or writing and/or Maths). However, these subjects were only mentioned alongside non-test subjects. There were 12 instances of children referring to subjects that they did not enjoy and 11 (out of 12) of these were references to test subjects. Despite children stating that they mainly enjoyed non-test subjects and that they did not enjoy test subjects, they perceived test subjects to hold a greater status than the subjects they enjoyed. There was an explicit link made between the subjects that children perceived to be most important (reading, writing and Maths) and the fact that these were the same subjects that children were tested on (Paavi). The perception that test subjects were highly important compared to the other subjects reinforces the idea that assessment, in the form of tests, is indeed positioned as high-stakes in their experience.

Following on from the enjoyment and importance of difference subjects, children perceived that most of the teaching and learning time at school was dedicated to test

subjects at the expense of time spent teaching and learning in other areas, leading to a narrowing of the curriculum. This was exemplified by the timetable followed in that setting at that time (Appendix Q). Some children perceived this use of teaching and learning time and curriculum narrowing as necessary because '*practise*' (Maria) was required in the '*main subjects*' (Hila) to pass the tests. Thus, in addition to curriculum narrowing, it was also perceived that for the test subjects, content was taught to match the tests – teaching to the test. Some children perceived teaching to the test to be very routine, in that it was repetitive and time consuming, impacting both the curriculum and their mental health and well-being and thus further reinforcing the idea of tests as high-stakes.

Children perceived settings and interventions in school to be both a result of and an aid to assessment and that this affected their experiences of the curriculum and their mental health and well-being. For example, it was perceived that moving in and out of classrooms for settings and interventions might make children feel '*tired'* (Inka), '*annoyed'* (Zayna), '*sad'* (Ira), or '*awkward'* (Kelly). On the other hand, some children perceived there to be positives to setting and interventions. Two children enjoyed attending sets led by different teachers and other children felt that sets and interventions offered an appropriate level of learning for different children who were either '*at a high level or lower level'* (Kelly). The fluidity of movement between sets was also acknowledged as supporting children to improve in a subject but it is also possible that moving between sets might have led to children missing out on the teaching and learning of some content. Additionally, in the case of children such as Iman, who perceived that by being in a lower set '*you might feel like pressure to do better*', I suggest that this idea of sets as a motivating factor was a view stressed by the teachers in school and thus transferred to the children. There was also the perception that there would be progression and continuity of setting in secondary schools based on tests initially taken in primary schools and then also on tests taken in secondary schools. Speaking about this, Charlie and Iman perceived that children placed in higher sets would be exposed to a higher level of content, putting them at an advantage compared to those in the lower sets. The way in which setting and interventions appear to be tied to assessment indicates it is high-stakes.

Given the perceived high-stakes nature of assessment enacted within the teaching and learning of the curriculum at school, it was not only confined to the classroom and school but extended into children's homes. Children perceived that they were given additional work to do at home to prepare for assessments as most of the work given to do at home was related to practise in the test subjects, reflecting their high-stakes nature.

Assessment was perceived by 65.7% of children to contribute to improvements in learning. Despite this more positive perception, many children still perceived assessment to have negative implications on their mental health and well-being, further making it high-stakes. In addition to feeling anxious, worried and stressed, children felt a variety of similar feelings including *'it's nervous-wracking*' (Paavi), '*annoyed*' (Inka), '*pressure*' (Maria and Ganga) and *'panicked, scared, helpless, not confident, frustrated*' (Aisha). Some children described more positive feelings such as *'relieved, happy'* (Mark) and '*excited'* (Paavi). However, positive feelings were only expressed alongside more negative ones. In Charlie's case, he perceived that the pressure he felt during tests caused him dizziness. Children did give some reasons for their feelings: fear of being judged; concern over test results; and wanting to please parents and teachers. Thus, despite children appearing to have experienced a range of feelings, assessment did impact their mental health and well-being in a way that was associated with feelings of anxiety, worry and stress, further indicating that assessment is high-stakes.

Assessment was not always perceived to be accessible to all. This was due to the length and presentation of the test, such as lack of colour, the use of *'tricky'* words within questions (Charlie), and the '*trickier*' questions (Ira). The lack of accessibility for all was perceived to be of importance because the tests were perceived to be high-stakes.

Children reported being distracted by words and questions within tests and being distracted by objects, people and home. They also described the impact of these distractions. Distractions due to words and questions in the tests caused Abdul to perceive that he was in a '*different world*' during tests and similarly Inka described '*thinking too much about something else'.* Children were distracted by objects in the room such as a desk, rubber, protractors and mirrors and Kelly described being

distracted by a person sneezing. Finally, two children talked of the possibility of being distracted by people and events at home. Children perceived distractions to affect their mental health and well-being and also their chances of doing well in a test due to time and attention being lost through distractions. The importance placed upon distractions by the children is again indicative of the high-stakes nature of assessment.

A desire to sit alone was expressed by children who wished to minimise distractions and avoid the copying of work. It was perceived that '*you don't want people copying*' (Zayna) because '*it's cheating'* (Kelly) and '*I don't want to get in trouble for someone else copying my answers'* (Charlie). However, Inka perceived this differently, stating that if someone cheats, '*it affects them because they're not showing what they can do*'. The desire to sit alone was also expressed by Ahmed, who wanted more space when sitting. In contrast to these perceptions, Wendy perceived that sitting with others made her feel that she was '*not alone*' during the test and this brought her some comfort. These perceptions for and against sitting alone during tests emphasise the weight of the tests as perceived by the children.

Forgetfulness, fatigue and the time constraints were perceived experiences that came along with the taking of high-stakes assessment. Forgetfulness during the test was perceived as being due to '*pressure*' (Charlie) and feeling '*scared*' (Haider). According to Kelly, the result of this was that after the test, '*you'll just be kind of sad you didn't do that question because you remember it but at that time you didn't*'. Fatigue was felt during the tests: '*I get tired, so I might not like get the right answer'* (Wendy). Wendy described a mental tiredness that caused her to make mistakes in her test, whereas Abdul spoke of a spoke of physical tiredness that came with having to meet the time constraints of the test. The '*tension of the time limit*' (Meena) made children feel worried that they might not finish the test (Abdul) or have enough time to check their work (Safa) and that this might lead to low scores (Haider).

The issue of self-efficacy came to the fore when the children expressed doubts over their ability to attain well in assessments. The reasons given for this were teacher feedback, perceptions of other children's opportunities, experiences during the test, and

test results. Children sought validation by the teacher through verbal feedback in classwork (which, as illustrated, consisted mainly of test preparation) and also through written feedback in books (also test preparation) and school reports. Compliments and positive feedback made the children feel they were *'successful'* (Hila).

Children held mixed perceptions on whether they had the same opportunity as other children to do well in tests with some children perceiving that '*some people can be better at certain subjects'* for various reasons: being placed in different sets in school; being unwell and off-school; being new to school; different IQs and mindsets; having a special educational need, such as dyslexia; and attitudes to learning. It was perceived that '*people who are lower [in lower sets] in subjects have less of an advantage than the higher people*' (Iman). Children perceived that they were at a disadvantage compared to other children if they '*skip a day of school because they're sick*' (Ahmed). Children were also perceived to be at a disadvantage if they were new to school (Iman). IQ and mindset were perceived to be reasons why children might not have the same opportunity as others. Special educational needs were also acknowledged as giving children different opportunities to one another. Finally, in contrast to these perceptions where children believed they did not all have the same opportunity to do well, it was also perceived that doing well was related to children's own attitudes because being within the same school and class meant that children were exposed to the same teaching and therefore had the same opportunity to learn.

The experience of taking the test also contributed to children's self-efficacy. Iman perceived his mind telling him '*you're going to fail'* and comparisons to other children during the test prompted Charlie and Wendy to '*feel like they're smarter than me'* (Charlie). The experience during the test was then followed by receiving the tests results and this also impacted children's self-efficacy. Upon receiving their test results, children judged themselves and sometimes this was through comparing themselves to their peers. In addition to judging themselves, some children felt they were judged by teachers based on their test results and this further impacted children's self-efficacy.

Many children expressed happiness and relief when the tests were over because they had previously been '*stressed out and doing lots of learning*' (Paavi) and '*practising over and over again*' (Kelly). However, despite feeling '*ecstatic*' (Abdul) that the tests were over, some children perceived that this was only temporary. This was firstly because they were concerned about their results and secondly because they were worried about tests in their future.

Children perceived that assessment would affect their *'life ahead'* (Kelly), beginning with '*secondary school life'* (Paavi), where children might be grouped according to previous test results and then face further tests '*coming back stronger and bigger'* (Charlie). Opportunities beyond secondary school were also discussed. The writing on Aaliyah's picture was '*your grades will allways [sic] be with you when you get a job'*, indicating that children perceived their jobs and careers would be affected by their performance in school assessments. Thus, the perception that the consequences of taking tests would be felt into the future, from results through to potential jobs and careers, makes the assessment themselves high-stakes.

Through this summary of outcomes and subsequent discussion, I have shown that the children's stories can be interpreted as revealing that assessment was indeed perceived to be high-stakes for the children in this study. These insights have contributed to knowledge and recommendations for policy and practice.

5.3 Contributions to knowledge

This study made a unique contribution through its multiple methods used to gain an insight into 10-11 year-olds' stories of primary school assessment in one mainstream primary school in England. This was achieved not only through their questionnaire responses and written and spoken word, but also through the pictures and/or free-writing that they created. Using the combination of three methods facilitated a deeper

understanding of the children's perceived experiences and enabled me to more fully interpret and retell their stories. The research design included an opportunity for children to contribute to the questions that were asked in the interviews and to give their analysis of the pictures/ free-writing they had created about assessment. This formed part of the discussion in the interviews. Through these techniques, the study has produced detailed data and findings.

The main finding from this study was that the majority of children did perceive assessment to have an impact on their experiences of the curriculum and on their mental health and well-being in ways that exemplified assessment as being high-stakes. The children communicated a number of issues with assessment.

- Assessment was primarily perceived by the children to mean tests
- Children enjoyed non-test subjects more than test subjects
- Children associated Reading, Writing and Maths with tests and vice versa
- Curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test were perceived to occur
- Setting and interventions were perceived as having a negative impact on the curriculum and on children's mental health and well-being
- Extra work was carried out at home to practise for tests
- Some children did perceive that tests led to improved learning, but sometime at a cost to mental health and well-being
- Anxiety, worry and stress were experienced before, during and after tests
- Tests were perceived as not being accessible to all
- Children were concerned about issues during the taking of the tests: sitting with others; forgetfulness; fatigue and time constraints
- Children's self-efficacy was affected by and affected their experiences of tests
- The end of the tests brought partial and temporary happiness and relief before children would have to sit more tests
- Future opportunities were perceived to be impacted by tests

The outcomes from the findings have led to recommendations for policy and practice. Moreover, original contributions were made when children were asked to give their own recommendations for assessment, discussed below.

5.4 Recommendations for policy and practice

The children's experiences explored in this research 'remain valuable not only in relation to the participants themselves but also because they provide a lens through which subsequent events can be viewed' (Mccarthy, 2024: 1065); in this case consideration should be given to the future of educational assessment. Moreover, 'children's own wishes and expressed needs are relevant to the construction and implementation of social policies and practices' (Mayall 2000: 248). Findings from this research, according to my interpretation of the children's perceptions, appear to be in favour of reconsidering current assessment policy and practice within some mainstream primary schools in England. When developing and implementing assessment policy, consideration should be given to the impact that policy has on children as key stakeholders in assessment because the effects of assessment are felt on both children's experiences of the curriculum and on their mental health and well-being.

Thought should be given to the purpose of education and assessment. If children are to be enthused by education and inspired into becoming lifelong learners and caring citizens such as was required during the pandemic (Covid-19), perhaps there is a need to reprioritise and rethink assessment so children perceive that the knowledge and skills across all subjects of the curriculum are valued, including the subjects they enjoy and perceive themselves to be good at. This may involve expanding the range of subjects children are currently assessed in to minimise curriculum narrowing as children said that if they were to be assessed, they would prefer more equal weighting to all curriculum subjects. During the study, the children were asked if they wanted to show their learning in a different way to current assessment. As part of a 'different way' to the status quo, almost all children suggested tests in additional subjects, often the ones they had said they enjoyed or perceived they were good at. It was perceived that tests in other subjects '*should be a thing but aren't for some reason'* (Iman) and that having

tests in additional subjects would reassure children '*we're getting better at it*' (Paavi). Moreover, children spoke enthusiastically about being assessed in other areas and the thought captured their imagination of wanting to *'be an artist or a scientist'* (Zayna), for example. Giving the children the opportunity to show their learning in these areas in a way that is valued and celebrated at school with the same weight placed upon them as the existing test subjects, might just give children the confidence to pursue these paths.

As recommended by the children, rethinking assessment might also include the way in which children are assessed to minimise teaching to the test. Despite several children wanting '*different ways to show what we've learnt'* (Ira), the children found it difficult to '*think of anything else we can do instead of test*'. Thus, in relation to testing, changes to the administration of the tests were suggested, specifically testing by stealth (Iman) and having the option to retake a test (Zayna). There were requests to change the format of the tests: reducing the size, or length, of the test paper (Charlie and Wendy); adding colour to the tests (Charlie); having more time to complete it (Safa); more space to answer questions (Zayna); and having key words in bold (Abdul). Inka wanted there to be more than one question on the same topic within a test so *'the people who like mark the [test] can make like a more accurate assumption*'.

The recommendations made by the children above were all in relation to still having some form of tests but making adaptations to them that may involve changes to policy and practice within school. For example, the use of setting and interventions should be looked at to maximise opportunities for all children to attain and achieve well when being assessed. If sets and interventions are used, then the way in which the children come to perceive themselves within this system needs to be addressed so that it no longer impacts children's mental health and well-being negatively. Similarly, the content and benefits of homework could be reconsidered in light of test preparation at school followed by more test preparation at home. The accessibility of tests could also improve so that opportunities are maximised for all children to be successful and to feel successful, regardless of children's background and needs. Although there are measures in place to support some children in school with their assessments, such as some adaptations for children with SEND, the children in this study did not perceive these measures to be enough to make assessment accessible to all.

According to findings in this study, children experienced anxiety, worry and stress before, during and after the tests and their self-efficacy was also impacted by the tests. Only temporary happiness and relief was felt when the tests were over because the children perceived that their futures would be impacted by tests too. This would suggest that the way in which children come to perceive tests as so high-stakes needs to be addressed, beginning with changes in policy that take the emphasis off tests as the make or break of a school when schools are held to account and compared to other schools. This change of emphasis then needs to permeate through schools so that the top level of policy is enacted in a way that filters down to all other levels of policy on assessment and which ultimately results in less pressure on teachers, children and their parent/carers.

Despite the emphasis on adapting tests rather than replacing them, three recommendations were made by children for what they perceived as alternatives to tests as a form of assessment. Firstly, it was suggested that short quizzes were taken online or in books (Zayna). Secondly, there was the proposal of *'doing questions in your book*' (Inka). Thirdly, there was a case made for '*how we're doing in class should be our results*' (Hila). Interestingly, the first two suggestions are like tests in that they involve answering questions in some way. However, the children mentioned answering questions either online using the computer or in their books. Both these methods of teaching and learning were ones which the children were familiar with, but which took place in a less pressurised situation compared to tests. For example, test fatigue and time constraints would not have been as much of an issue when taking quizzes online or answering questions in their books because more time was given to do questions compared to time given in a test. Although the suggestion of '*how we're doing in class*' was not explained in more detail by Hila, other children did suggest assessment could be based on their classwork and this could therefore include the quizzes and questions mentioned above, possibly in a way that puts less pressure on the children. The children communicated such strength of feeling about assessment and its perceived impact on themselves and their peers, that it appears to be absolutely essential to take into account their stories going forward.

The outcomes of this study, contributions to knowledge and subsequent recommendations for policy and practice are all grounded in the children's perceptions and my interpretations of them. It is the children's own stories of experience that are the pillars of this study. As James puts it, 'were we to listen more carefully to the (hi)stories children are able to construct about their life course, we would, as adults, be better placed to assist children in the shaping and determining on their own lives' (2005: 264). Thus, 'increasing recognition of children as social actors, whose knowledge and views are worth investigating and should be included in policy-formation' (Mayall 2000: 257). With this in mind, the last comment made in the final group interviews before the children took their tests was as follows:

> *If all these [recommendations] are ignored by the government and trust me I know lots of times they are ignored by the government when other schools do this, at least think of this. If it may not happen now, make it happen in the future, I don't care which point of ours becomes a thing, just any of these points, they sound amazing, they would help tests massively. So I wound be extra really grateful if this happened in real life and if all of this became a reality.*
>
> (Iman)

The phrase '*extra really grateful'* would suggest that changes to school assessment would be exceptionally meaningful to Iman. In seeking to more fully understand his comment, I asked Iman if he meant that he wanted the children's stories and experiences of assessment, including the recommendations they had given, to be heard by those in a position to make a change. The answer to my question was a definite and conclusive '*Yes*'.

5.5 Limitations

It is acknowledged that some limitations to this study emerged throughout the research process, beginning with its design through to the data gathering, analysis and interpretation: my role as a teacher researcher; the setting being the children's school; the setting being only one school; the decision to focus on attainment and achievement of the children as distinguishing characteristics; the extent to which children were able to accurately depict their experiences through their words and pictures in the way that they wished to; the timescale for completion; the lack of opportunity to further investigate particular areas in more detail, the quantity of data gathered; and the impact of the pandemic (Covid-19).

In my methodology, I discussed the advantages and disadvantages of my dual role as a teacher researcher (Section 3.4.4). Despite the numerous positives of being in such a position, I must acknowledge that the research may have been impacted by this and that the findings in this study may have been different if carried out by someone who was not a teacher working in the same setting as the study took place. However, all cautionary and ethical measures were taken to minimise any limitations to this approach (Section 3.5), particularly to establish the trustworthiness of the human instrument (Section 3.4.3): the different stages and methods of the data collection were ethically considered and openly described; I had an practitioner relationship with my participants and worked with them for a prolonged amount of time; I used purposive sampling to create detailed rich descriptions (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 83) of experiences of assessment; I have documented the research process in detail and with full transparency; and I presented the data in a thematic fashion, showing how interpretations had been reached. Additionally, it was highlighted there were several benefits to the dual role. As a practitioner, I have knowledge of and a responsibility to adhere to professional and statutory frameworks such as the Nolan Principles (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995), the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011) and Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024 document (DfE, 2024). I have first-hand experience as a teacher and experienced teaching, learning and assessment for 15 years across 4 settings. I understood specifically how assessment was enacted in policy and practice within the setting that the research took place. Most importantly from an ethical perspective, I perceived myself to have an existing and trusting relationship with the children. As a researcher, I followed the BERA research and ethical guidelines (BERA,

2024) and my university guidelines. Thus, it was felt that ultimately, these advantages outweighed the potential limitations.

The setting being the children's school might have meant that the children saw it as place where rules were to be followed and adults are to be listened to. Thus, collecting the data at the school could potentially have impacted the children's responses to the questionnaire and during the interview. It could also have affected the children's picture/free-writing in that they might not have felt completely free to express themselves. In so far I was able to, I addressed this through trying to make the children as comfortable as possible and giving them the option to opt-out (Sections 3.4 and 3.) with no consequence attached to this.

The information shared by the children was specific to their experiences within one school setting. However, in different primary schools and with different teachers, the school might prepare for and administer assessments in different ways. Although this is true to some extent, I would argue that there is still value in the thick description (Holloway, 1997; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Punch 2005) of these individual children because they are still bound by a system that is in many ways prescriptive across the country and in other countries with high-stakes assessments. The literature (Chapter 2) has shown that there is some consistency in the way in which schools (and other countries that have high-stakes assessment) approach assessment and in the accountability and pressure felt by school staff and parents in relation to results and performativity. This is why the experiences of this age group are so important to share; even if they are children from one single setting, these children are still subject to the same system of assessment as so many other children their age.

In this study, I decided not to place emphasis on distinguishing characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, disadvantaged children, or children with English as an additional language despite these characteristics being recorded by the school and used to identify trends in the achievement and attainment of different groups of children (Appendix O). I did not include these other characteristics unless I interpreted a child has having

bought this up themselves, such as in the case of Iman who discussed special educational needs. Thus, I chose to focus on the stories told by the children themselves. The characteristics I did refer to in this study were achievement and attainment measured through scores and standards. This was because the achievement and attainment scores and standards were recorded as part of the assessment system within school and the children were continually made aware of what their scores and standards were by the school, unlike the other characteristics which were not discussed in the same way or referred to at all by the school to the children. The standards and scores were also referred to specifically by some of the children during the data collection process, whereas the other characteristics were not. The age of the children was acknowledged as part of the method because the design of the research required the children to be approaching their Key stage 2 SATs, thus making them all 10-11 years old.

It could be that the children might have remembered or interpreted events and the retold them in their own unique way through their words (both written and spoken) and their pictures. However, there is added value in this as their interpretation and retelling of their experience. Additionally, they may not have been able to articulate themselves or create their picture and/or free-writing in the way that they wished to do so. Although some might say it could be an issue that I did not meet with the children a final time to check that they had conveyed what they wanted to, what I was able to do was give the children an opportunity to comment further on their questionnaire and picture/free-writing during the interviews, which they did.

It might have been helpful to meet with the children one more time after the data had been transcribed, prior to analysis and interpretation, to check that they had conveyed what they wanted to and that I had correctly understood their meaning. However, the timescale of the work did not allow for this as there was a short window of time between the data collection both before and after the SATs and up till the end of the school term, after which I did not see the children again. However, meeting with them again may also have resulted in changed meanings and my intention was to collect data at a particular time rather than an ongoing longitudinal study over one school year, or years.

This work explored the children's perceptions over a specific period of time: the time that they were taking their assessments and shortly afterwards. Whilst it would have been interesting to consider how their perceptions changed over a longer period of time, in this study I captured the lived daily realities of the children as they experienced them at the height of their end of year and end of primary school assessments. Thus, the children's perceptions over this short space of time were critical to my research.

The timescale of the work also meant that there was a lack of opportunity to further investigate, in more detail, some of the narrative provided by the children. There were many times during the data analysis that, on reflection, I had wished I had probed further when children had said certain things or that I had asked additional questions that I did not think of at the time. Due to time constraints and the fact that I was in full time employment whilst carrying out this research, I was unable to analyse the initial transcripts earlier so that I might have asked some of these questions during the second round of interviews, enabling me to clarify my understanding of their intended meanings and pursue further avenues of inquiry.

One further limitation was related to the quantity of data collected. Using three distinct methods created a large amount of quantitative and qualitative data and added a degree of complexity to the analysis whereby I had to interpret and bring together data for each child from each of the methods they took part in. Additionally, I had to consider how the multiple forms of data could be interpreted and connected across the range of participants. It took a long time to analyse everything available. However, in another way this quantity of data was a strength of this study because it created the rich description (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 83) required to share children's stories.

Finally, as explained in the literature review (Chapter 2), the pandemic (Covid-19) had an impact on the design of this study. For the first time since the introduction of the SATs (1991), they had to be cancelled for the academic year that my data collection was conducted (September 2020–September 2021) and this was also the case the previous academic year (DfE, 2020a). However, the children in this study still prepared

for the SATs before they were cancelled by the government and still took SATs test papers from 2018 and were subject to the teacher assessment through SATs style written assessments. This would have been a similar situation for students throughout the country who were due to take the SATs that year. Furthermore, many people, including the children, may have felt additional stress and anxiety due to the pandemic (Covid-19) and this may have affected their general mental health and well-being, which in turn might have been reflected in their questionnaire and interview responses. However, despite this, the children were still expected to take assessments throughout and at the end of the year and so this study was still relevant, perhaps even more so, under this unprecedented situation and in this context. Thus, this research still has relevance despite the circumstances created by the pandemic (Covid-19), particularly as at the time of writing it is unknown whether SATs will continue in their current form in future years. Having highlighted some of the limitations of this research, it is possible that these could create opportunities for future research.

5.6 Suggestions for future research

Despite all research being based on its individual context of time and place, suggestions for future research have been given based on both the limitations of this study and also on some of the questions that arose out of the findings of this research. They are as follows: eliciting the perceptions of parent/carers and teaching staff; tracking the perceptions of the children over time, considering the impact of other characteristics of the children; and scaling up the research to capture primary-aged children's stories about assessment in different types of primary schools and various geographical regions across the UK.

The focus of this story was on the stories of the children themselves. Although possible views of teachers and parent/carers were referred to by the children, it was as the children perceived then to be. It would have been interesting to obtain the perceptions of other key stakeholders in this setting, such as the parent/carers and teaching staff. This might have brought to light further stories about the impact of assessment on the curriculum and the well-being of the adults within this setting. It would also have been

insightful to compare and contrast the stories of the children with that of the adults, especially given the wider context of policy and societal expectations that I discussed earlier in this thesis.

Tracking the perceptions of children over time could be done in various ways. One suggestion might be collecting data from the children during each year of their primary school experience to see if and how their perceptions in relation to assessment change over time. An investigation into whether they perceive the curriculum to change as they draw closer to annual assessments and the SATs and how this impacts their mental health and well-being might reveal interesting insights into any trends and changes over time and the possible reasoning behind them. Another avenue to explore might be collecting at least one set of data at some point in secondary school and even beyond that. This might give children an opportunity to reflect on their past perceptions and discuss whether the perceptions they gave about the future were accurate and and/or if they have changed since. This could also shed some light on the extent to which the SATs results might have a long-lasting impact.

This study sought to retell individual narratives about individual experiences related to assessment. Exploration of the characteristics of the children other than their achievement and attainment might provide additional insights into how individual children might be affected by assessment in other ways. This might result in ways to make assessment more accessible to a wider range of children.

Carrying out this research in different types of primary schools and/or different geographical regions would help paint a broader national picture. If assessment was perceived to be less or more high-stakes in different types of primary school and different geographical regions, one might consider what some schools were doing differently to others in relation to the curriculum and children's mental health and well-being. It is possible that even if schools were doing things differently to one another, the findings of the research across different schools and regions would still be the same: children perceive assessment to be high-stakes.

5.7 Chapter summary

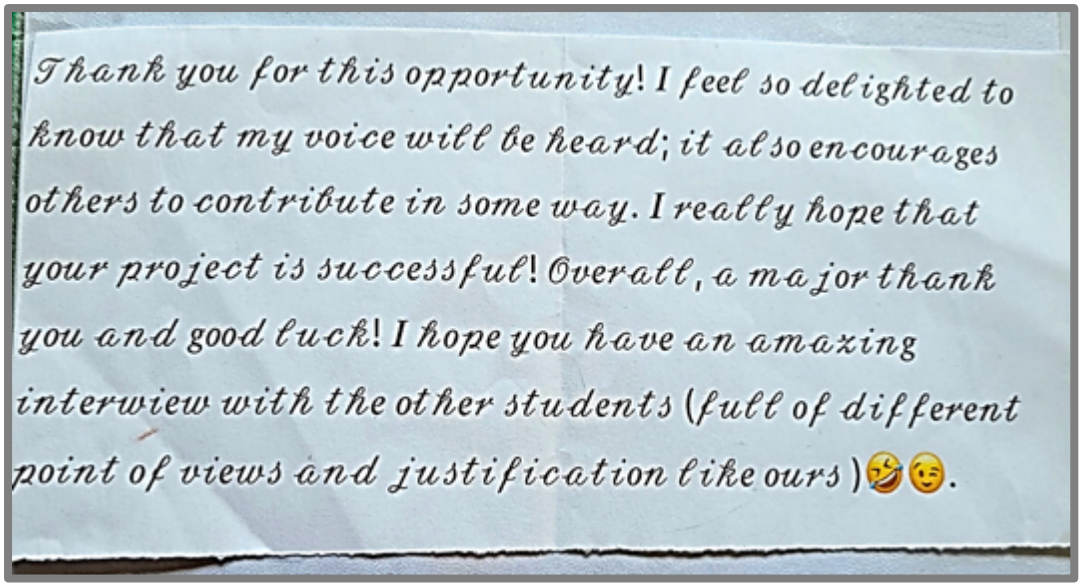
This chapter discussed the outcomes of this research based on children's stories and in relation to the research questions:

1) What did children say was the impact of assessment on their experiences of a) the curriculum; and b) their mental health and well-being?
2) Did children have any recommendations about assessment?

These were connected to findings within established theory and practice: the findings of this research were consistent with existing literature that suggests primary school assessments are high-stakes for the children. At the time the findings of this research contradicted existing research that argued otherwise (Jerrim, 2021). Contributions to new knowledge were through the multiple methods used whereby children combined their words with quantitative questionnaire data and qualitative pictures/free-writing, often retelling their stories in detail and reflecting themes and highlighting issues relating to high-stakes assessment. The interpretation of assessment as high-stakes makes a contribution to ongoing debates about school assessment in England and a critical time when assessment arrangements are under review (Gov.uk Website 2025a). Thus, implications for policy, and practice, and recommendations were suggested. This was followed by the limitations of the study and subsequent suggestions for future research.

As a final thought, a typed message I received from Paavi after her interview revealed her wishes to have her voice and the voice of her classmates heard.

Fig. 20 Note by Paavi


Thank you for this opportunity! I feel so delighted to know that my voice will be heard; it also encourages others to contribute in some way. I really hope that your project is successful! Overall, a major thank you and good luck! I hope you have an amazing interwiew with the other students (full of different point of views and justification like ours)🤣😉.

The primary goal of my research from the beginning was to give the children an opportunity for their perceived experiences to be shared and it is my hope that through the narrative inquiry approach to this study and using multiple methods, my interpretation of the children's stories has been shared in the way that Paavi's note illuminates.

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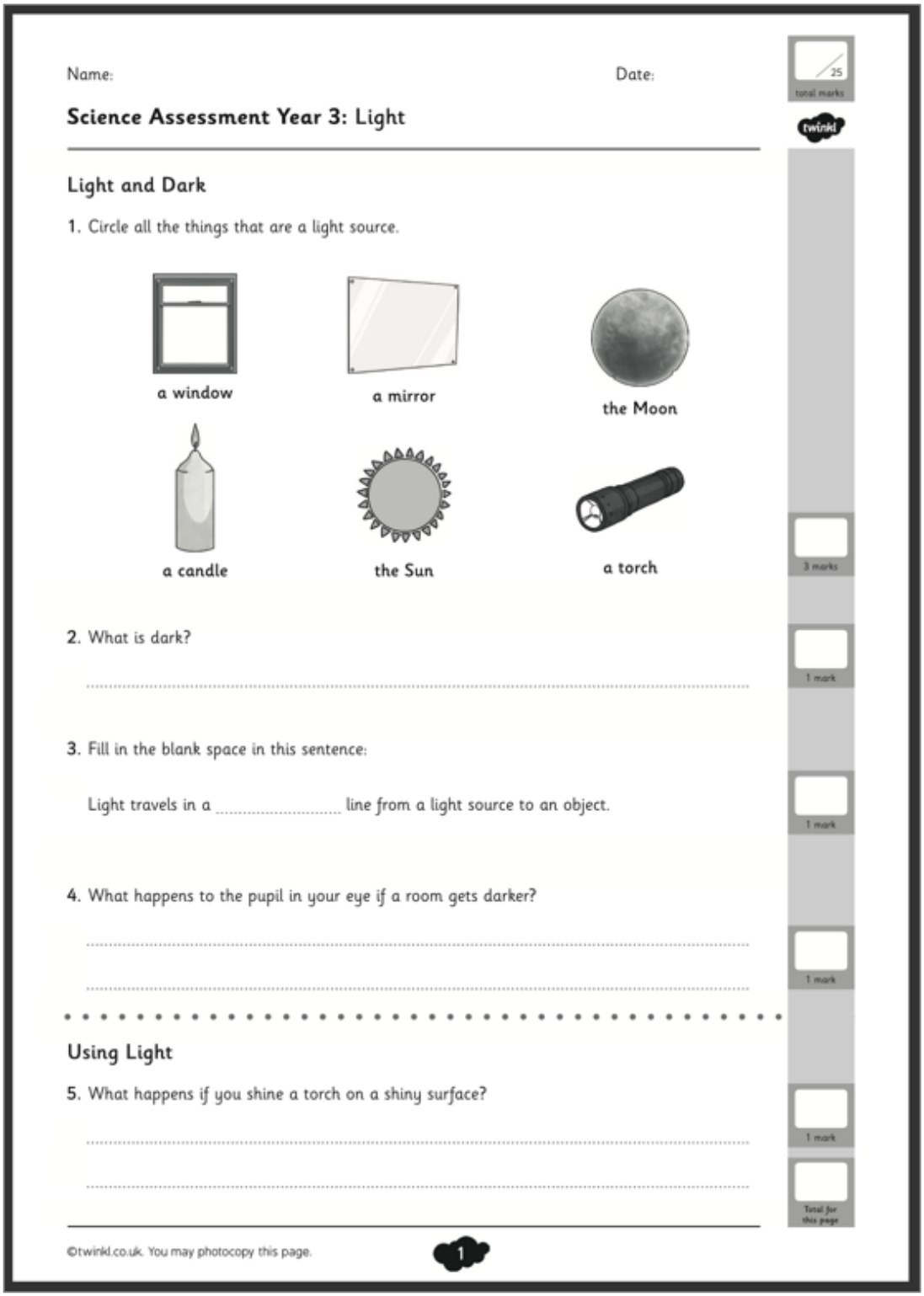
Appendix A: Exemplar light test

(Available at: https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resource/t2-s-854-y3-light-end-of-unit-assessment, Accessed 19th January 2025)

An example of a specific topic-based test that children in the Year 3 class would take at the end of each unit of learning in Science (Section 1.6 in thesis).



Name: Date:

/25 total marks

Science Assessment Year 3: Light

twinkl

Light and Dark

1. Circle all the things that are a light source.

a window

a mirror

the Moon

a candle

the Sun

a torch

3 marks

2. What is dark?

.....

1 mark

3. Fill in the blank space in this sentence:

Light travels in a ..... line from a light source to an object.

1 mark

4. What happens to the pupil in your eye if a room gets darker?

.....

.....

1 mark

Using Light

5. What happens if you shine a torch on a shiny surface?

.....

.....

1 mark

Total for this page

1

6. Why do you think road signs are made out of reflective material?

1 mark

7. Write **true** or **false** for these statements:

Statement	True or False
Light reflects better off rough surfaces	
Cats' Eyes on roads reflect car headlights	
The Sun helps people make vitamin D	
We can see UV light	

3 marks

8. Name the colours in the visible spectrum.

4 marks

9. Name **two** dangers of UV light.

1 mark

10. Explain **one** situation when UV light is stronger.

1 mark

11. Why should you **never** look directly at the sun or other bright lights?

1 mark

Total for this page

12. Think about protecting yourself from UV rays. What can you do to protect these things:

a) Your eyes:

1 mark

b) Your skin:

1 mark

Shadows

13. Join up these words to the correct explanation:

Word	Explanation
Transparent	Lets **some** light pass through but you can't see clearly through it.
Translucent	Does not let light pass through at all.
Opaque	You can see clearly all the way through.

2 marks

14. Explain how a shadow is made:

2 marks

15. How do you make a shadow bigger?

1 mark

Total for this page

Appendix B: BREO approval letter

Ethical approval letter from Brunel University giving permission for this study to go ahead (Section 3.4.4 in thesis).

Brunel University London

College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Brunel University London
Kingston Lane
Uxbridge
UB8 3PH
United Kingdom

www.brunel.ac.uk

25 June 2021

LETTER OF APPROVAL

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 26/06/2021 AND 22/09/2021

Applicant (s): Ms Bhavisha Soma

Project Title: High-Stakes? 10-11 year old children's stories of primary school assessment

Reference: 24001-MHR-Jun/2021- 32951-1

Dear Ms Bhavisha Soma

The Research Ethics Committee has considered the above application recently submitted by you.

The Chair, acting under delegated authority has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. Approval is given on the understanding that the conditions of approval set out below are followed:

- **The agreed protocol must be followed. Any changes to the protocol will require prior approval from the Committee by way of an application for an amendment.**
- In addition to the above, please ensure that you monitor and adhere to all up-to-date local and national Government health advice for the duration of your project.
-

Please note that:

- Research Participant Information Sheets and (where relevant) flyers, posters, and consent forms should include a clear statement that research ethics approval has been obtained from the relevant Research Ethics Committee.
- The Research Participant Information Sheets should include a clear statement that queries should be directed, in the first instance, to the Supervisor
  (where relevant), or the researcher. Complaints, on the other hand, should be directed, in the first instance, to the Chair of the relevant
- Research Ethics Committee.
  Approval to proceed with the study is granted subject to receipt by the Committee of satisfactory responses to any conditions that may appear
- above, in addition to any subsequent changes to the protocol.
- The Research Ethics Committee reserves the right to sample and review documentation, including raw data, relevant to the study.

You may not undertake any research activity if you are not a registered student of Brunel University or if you cease to become registered, including abeyance or temporary withdrawal. As a deregistered student you would not be insured to undertake research activity. Research activity includes the recruitment of participants, undertaking consent procedures and collection of data. Breach of this requirement constitutes research misconduct and is a disciplinary offence.

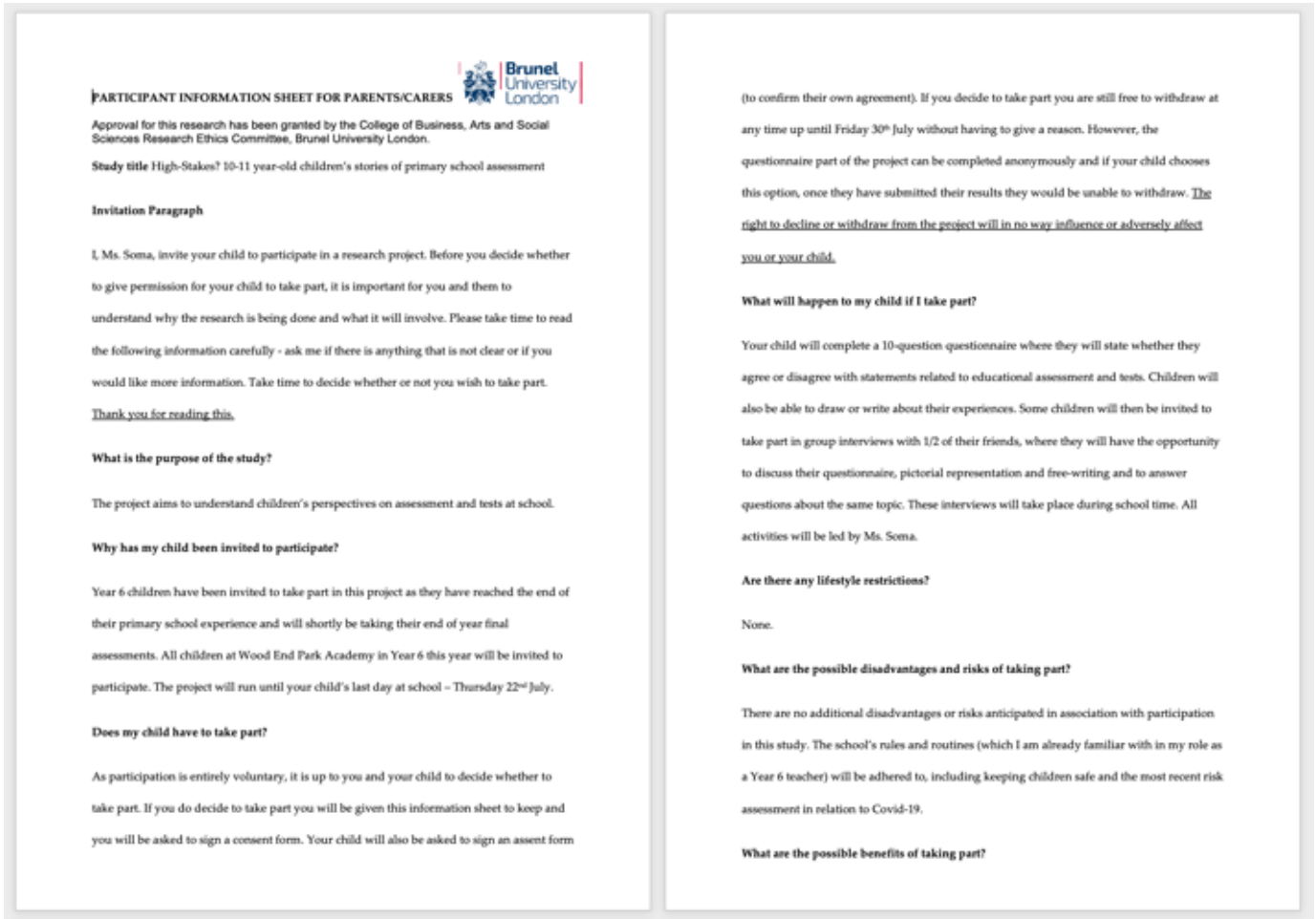
Professor David Gallear

Chair of the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Brunel University London

Appendix C: Information for parent/carers

Information letter provided to parent/carers prior to seeking their consent for their children to take part in this study (Section 3.5.2 in thesis).



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS/CARERS

Brunel University London

Approval for this research has been granted by the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Brunel University London.

Study title High-Stakes? 10-11 year-old children's stories of primary school assessment

Invitation Paragraph

I, Ms. Soma, invite your child to participate in a research project. Before you decide whether to give permission for your child to take part, it is important for you and them to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully - ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

The project aims to understand children's perspectives on assessment and tests at school.

Why has my child been invited to participate?

Year 6 children have been invited to take part in this project as they have reached the end of their primary school experience and will shortly be taking their end of year final assessments. All children at Wood End Park Academy in Year 6 this year will be invited to participate. The project will run until your child's last day at school – Thursday 22nd July.

Does my child have to take part?

As participation is entirely voluntary, it is up to you and your child to decide whether to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form. Your child will also be asked to sign an assent form (to confirm their own agreement). If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time up until Friday 30th July without having to give a reason. However, the questionnaire part of the project can be completed anonymously and if your child chooses this option, once they have submitted their results they would be unable to withdraw. The right to decline or withdraw from the project will in no way influence or adversely affect you or your child.

What will happen to my child if I take part?

Your child will complete a 10-question questionnaire where they will state whether they agree or disagree with statements related to educational assessment and tests. Children will also be able to draw or write about their experiences. Some children will then be invited to take part in group interviews with 1/2 of their friends, where they will have the opportunity to discuss their questionnaire, pictorial representation and free-writing and to answer questions about the same topic. These interviews will take place during school time. All activities will be led by Ms. Soma.

Are there any lifestyle restrictions?

None.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no additional disadvantages or risks anticipated in association with participation in this study. The school's rules and routines (which I am already familiar with in my role as a Year 6 teacher) will be adhered to, including keeping children safe and the most recent risk assessment in relation to Covid-19.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Through work with these children and through the use of questionnaires, interviews, drawing and writing, this study hopes to make a new contribution to existing knowledge, with the potential to improve assessment and testing routines.

What if something goes wrong?

There are no additional disadvantages or risks anticipated in association with participation in this study. The person to be contacted if you wish to complain about the experience should be the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee (see details at the end of this document).

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

The school name and the name of the participants (and any other identifying information) will be anonymised and remain confidential. Electronic data will be stored in a locked file before being transferred onto the secure password protected Brunel network drive or locked for the duration of the research (April 2024) and 10 years beyond this date (April 2034) – as advised by the university. Paper data will be scanned and stored electronically, with the original paper documents shredded by a professional shredding company. As all names and information will be anonymised, it would not be possible to withdraw any information beyond Friday 30th July 2021. If during the course of the research evidence of harm or misconduct come to light, then it may be necessary to break confidentiality. If I need to do this, I will follow the school procedures that are in place to protect the children.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recording be used?

If your child is interviewed, their voice only (without video) will be recorded using a tablet. This will then be transcribed so that I can understand what has been said.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be written up as part of my studies. They may also be shared through publication of the findings in journals related to education and at conferences about education. The data headlines, the main findings of the data, will be shared as a summary with the school. The data headlines, presented in a clear and concise way, will also be shared with the children. Your child and the school will not be identified in any report or publication unless you specifically request it.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is being organised by myself (Bhavisha Soma) in conjunction with Brunel University London.

What are the indemnity arrangements?

Brunel University London provides appropriate insurance cover for research, which has received ethical approval.

Who has reviewed the study?

College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Chair

Research Integrity *Brunel University London is committed to compliance with the Universities UK Research Integrity Concordat. You are entitled to expect the highest level of integrity from the researchers during the course of this research.*

Contact for further information and complaints

Researcher name and details: Bhavisha Soma, Bhavisha.Soma@brunel.ac.uk

For complaints, College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee: Professor David Gallear (David.Gallear@brunel.ac.uk)

Appendix D: Consent form for parent/carers

Consent form provided to parent/carers prior to seeking their consent for their children to take part in this study (Section 3.5.2 in thesis).

CONSENT FORM

Brunel University London

High-Stakes? 10-11 year-old children's stories of primary school assessment

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Bhavisha Soma

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 26/06/2021 AND 22/09/2021

The child's legal representative (parent/carer) should complete the whole of this sheet.		
	YES	NO
Have you read the Participant Information Sheet?	☐	☐
Have you been given an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	☐	☐
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?	☐	☐
Do you understand that you will not be referred to by name in any report concerning this study?	☐	☐
Do you understand that:		
• Your child is free to withdraw from this study at any time	☐	☐
• Your child does not have to give any reason for withdrawing	☐	☐
• Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will not affect your child's rights or care	☐	☐
• You can withdraw your data any time up to 30/07/2021	☐	☐
I agree to my child's interview being audio recorded	☐	☐
I agree to the use of non-attributable quotes when the study is written up or published	☐	☐
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me	☐	☐
I agree for my child to take part in this study	☐	☐

Name of child:	Child's class:
Signature of research participant's parent/carer:	
Print name:	Date:

Approval for this research has been granted by the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Brunel University London.

Appendix E: Information for participants

Information letter provided to parent/carers prior to seeking their assent to take part in this study (Section 3.5.2 in thesis).

Brunel University London

INFORMATION FOR CHILDREN AND ASSENT FORM

I (Ms. Soma) would like to ask you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand what the study is about and what will happen to you if you take part. Please read this information carefully and ask me about anything that you do not understand.

What is the study for?
This study is trying to improve the understanding of how primary-aged school children experience their assessments and tests.

Why have I been chosen to take part?
All Year 6 children at [redacted] have been invited to take part in this project because you have reached the end of your primary school experience and you will soon be taking your end of year final assessments.

What will happen if I take part?

1) You will complete a short questionnaire showing how much you agree or disagree with statements about assessment and tests.
2) You can draw (pictorial representation) or write (free-writing) about your experiences
3) Some of you will take part in group interviews with 1 or more of your friends, where you can discuss your questionnaire answers, pictorial representation and free-writing. I will also ask some more questions about this topic. The audio (speech only, not video) will be recorded so I can listen to it again later.

These activities will all take place during school time and be led by Ms. Soma.

What happens with my data?

- Your name, class and school will be kept confidential (readers of the research study will not know who you are)
- Electronic copies of your picture and free-writing/ pictorial representations will be made and the originals will be returned to you (if you choose to include your name and class on it)
- These electronic copies will be stored in a secure location, along with the audio recordings from your interview

What will happen afterwards?
The information from the study will be written up. It might be published in journals and shared at conferences about education. The main findings of the data will be shared with you and with the school. No-one will know which child said what.

Do I have to take part?
No. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. You can change your mind about taking part at any time without saying why. If you withdraw from the project, it will not affect anything else in the future.

What if I have any questions?
You can ask me your questions at school. Your parent/carer also has my contact details if they need to ask me anything.

Appendix F: Assent form for participants

Assent form provided to parent/carers prior to seeking their assent to take part in this study (Section 3.5.2 in thesis).

INFORMATION FOR CHILDREN AND ASSENT FORM

Brunel University London

Next to the sentences below, please circle "yes" if you agree to the question or "no" if you do not agree to the question:

	Yes	No
Do you understand what this project is about?		
Have you asked any questions you would like to?		
Have you had your questions answered so you can understand?		
Do you agree to take part?		

If any answers above are 'no' or you don't want to take part, then please don't sign your name!

If you do want to take part, please can you write your name below:

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

Appendix G: Pilot questionnaire

Pilot questionnaire given to pilot group of participants (Section 3.5.5 in thesis).

Proposed Questionnaire for Children

For each sentence, circle the box that you think best matches your perspective.
If you want to explain your answer, you can do so in the space under each question.

1)	Tests show what I have learnt at school.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
2)	Tests help me to improve my learning.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
3)	I enjoy taking tests.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
4)	I get anxious / worried / stressed about taking tests.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
5)	I have the same chance as everyone else at doing well in my tests.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐

6)	How I perform in a test matters to me.	Disagree strongly 	Disagree 	Agree 	Agree strongly 
					Unsure ☐
7)	My test performance matters to my teachers.	Disagree strongly 	Disagree 	Agree 	Agree strongly 
					Unsure ☐
8)	My test performance matters to my parents/carers.	Disagree strongly 	Disagree 	Agree 	Agree strongly 
					Unsure ☐
9)	I would like to show my learning in a different way instead of tests.	Disagree strongly 	Disagree 	Agree 	Agree strongly 
					Unsure ☐
10)	Preparation for tests takes up the right amount of time on the school timetable.	Disagree strongly 	Disagree 	Agree 	Agree strongly 
	If you disagree or strongly disagree with this last statement, circle if you think test preparation takes up *too much time* or *too little time*.				
					Unsure ☐

Thank you for taking part.

Appendix H: Final questionnaire

Final questionnaire given to participants included in this study (Section 3.5.6 in thesis)

Questionnaire for Children: For each sentence, circle the box that you think best matches your perspective. Please explain your answer in the space under each question.

1)	Tests show what I have learnt at school.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
2)	Tests help me to improve my learning.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
3)	I enjoy taking tests.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
4)	I get anxious / worried / stressed about taking tests.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
5)	I have the same chance as everyone else at doing well in my tests.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
6)	How I perform in a test matters to me.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐

7)	How I perform in a test matters to my teachers.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
8)	How I perform in a test matters to my parents/carers.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
9)	I would like to show my learning in a different way instead of tests.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
					Unsure ☐
10)	Preparation for tests takes up the right amount of time on the school timetable.	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
	If you disagree or strongly disagree with this last statement, circle if you think test preparation takes up *too much time* or *too little time*.				
					Unsure ☐

Can you suggest any questions that I could ask Year 6 children to help me to better understand your experiences of assessment?

You can now do your own pictorial representation or free-writing to share your experiences of assessment.

Thank you for taking part.

Appendix I: Pilot interview schedule

Pilot interview schedule given to pilot group of participants (Section 3.5.8 in thesis).

Proposed Interview Questions with Prompts

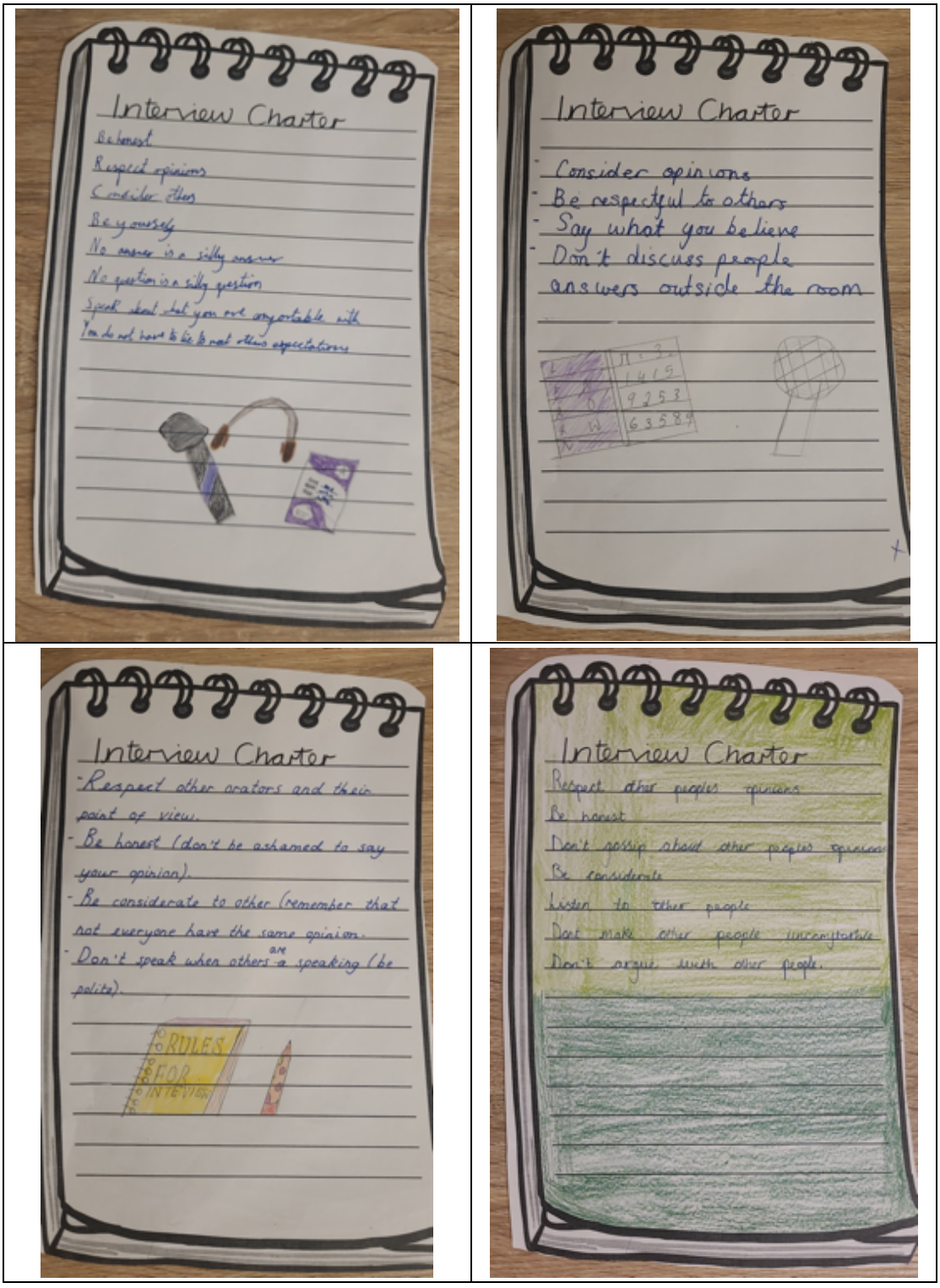
These questions will be adapted following analysis of the data from the initial pupil questionnaire. Children will also be invited to discuss their pictorial representation/free-writing, which they can use as a prompt for putting forward their stories.

Q	Question	Prompts
1	Which subjects do/don't you enjoy at school?	What subjects do/don't you enjoy and why? Do you think these subjects are equally important? Do they prepare you for your future? How?
2	How do you feel about the teaching/learning time allocated to each subject?	Do you have any recommendations relating to the school timetable?
3	How do you feel about changing groups for particular subjects and/or coming out of your usual class for interventions?	What do you see as the advantages/disadvantages to this?
4	What makes you feel successful in your learning at school?	How can you tell if you have done well/need to improve at your learning?
5	In what ways are you assessed at school?	By 'assessment' I mean, how are judgements made about how well you are doing in different subjects. E.g. talking to the teachers, marking in books and taking tests. Do you prefer some forms of assessment to others?
6	Would you like to talk to me about your questionnaire/ picture / writing about assessment/tests?	
7	How do you prepare for tests at home/school and how do you feel about this?	What does test preparation involve? How much time is spent on this? Do you think this is the right amount of time? Too little/less?

8	How do you feel about taking tests?	Do you enjoy them or not? Do you feel anxious/worried/stressed about taking them? Do you think you have the same chance at doing well in your tests as everyone else? Why/why not?
9	What do test results mean to you?	How accurate are test results in showing what you have learnt? Do test results help you with your learning? What do you believe will happen as a result of the marks you get?
10	What do you think the test results tell someone else?	Who do they tell? How useful do you think tests results are to parents/carers? How useful do you think tests results are to your teachers? How useful do you think tests results are to your future teachers at secondary school?
11	Do you have any recommendations about assessment/tests?	
12	Is there anything else you want to tell me about this topic that I have not asked you about already?	

Appendix J: Interview charter

Interview charter created by the pilot group – four children chose to put this down on paper (Section 3.5.9 in thesis).



Appendix K: Final interview schedule

Final interview schedule given to participants included in this study (Section 3.5.10 in thesis)

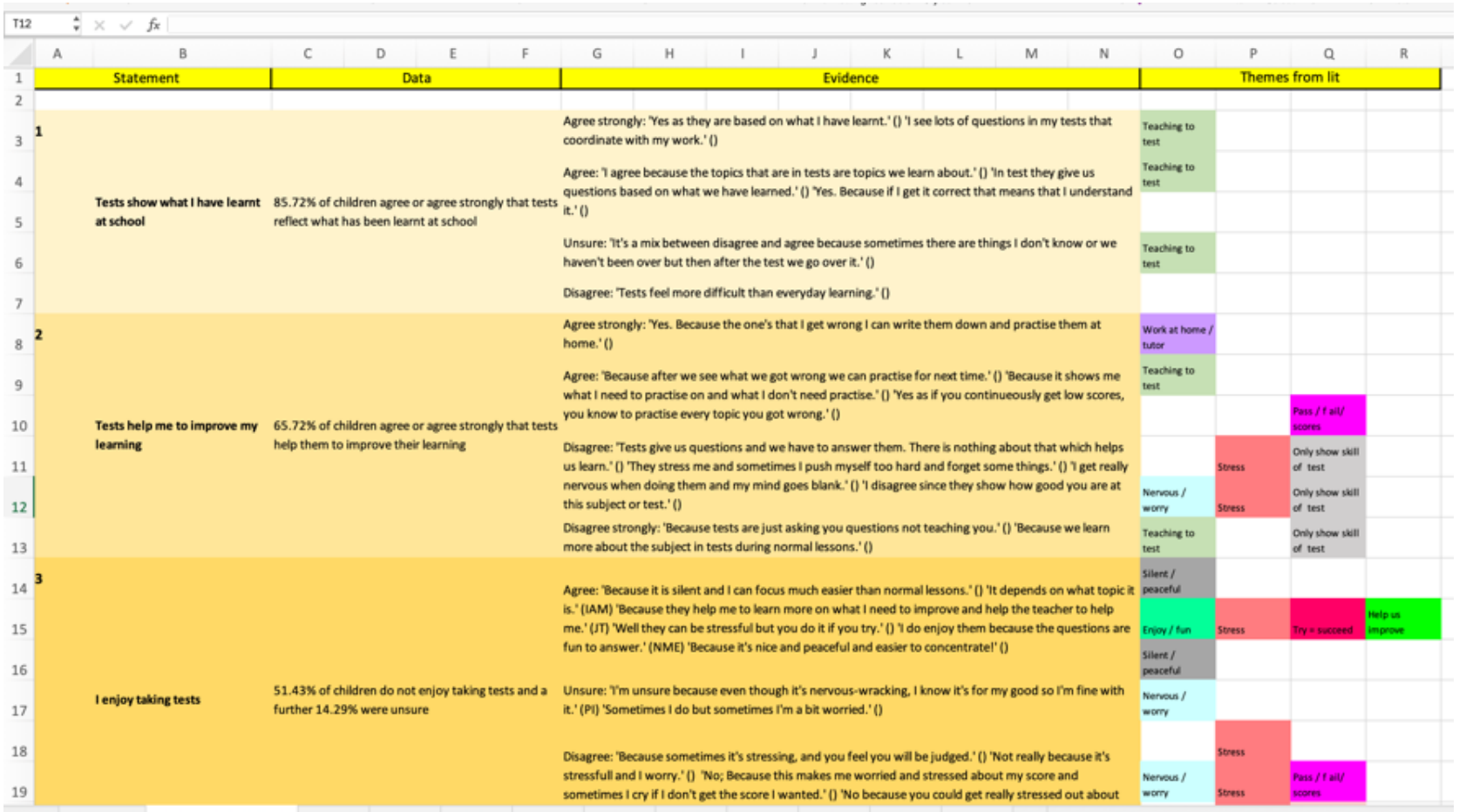
Q	Question	Prompts
1	Which subjects do you enjoy at school?	Why? Do you think these subjects are equally important? Do they prepare you for your future? How?
2	Which subjects don't you enjoy at school?	Why? Do you think these subjects are equally important? Do they prepare you for your future? How?
3	How do you feel about the curriculum time allocated to each subject?	Do you have any recommendations relating to the school timetable?
4	How do you feel about coming out of your usual class for interventions or different groups?	What do you see as the advantages/disadvantages to this?
5	What makes you feel successful in your learning at school?	How can you tell if you have done well/need to improve at your learning?
6	In what ways are you assessed at school?	By 'assessment' I mean, how are judgements made about how well you are doing in different subjects. E.g. talking to the teachers, marking in books and taking tests. Do you prefer some forms of assessment to others?
7	Would you like to talk to me about your questionnaire/ pictorial representation / free-writing that	

	you did about assessment/tests?	
8	How do you prepare for tests at school and how do you feel about this?	What does test preparation involve? How much time is spent on this? Do you think this is the right amount of time? Too little/less?
9	How do you prepare for tests at home and how do you feel about this?	What does test preparation involve? E.g. homework, SATs workbooks, etc How much time is spent on this? Do you think this is the right amount of time? Too little/less?
10	How do you feel about taking tests?	Do you enjoy them or not? Do you feel anxious/worried/stressed about taking them? Do you enjoy some tests more/less than others? Do you think you have the same chance at doing well in your tests as everyone else? Why/why not? Are there any questions in tests that you may not have learnt about in class? If yes, how do you feel about them? What goes through your mind when taking the tests? Would you like to have tests in any other subjects? Are there any challenges or distractions during tests? How do you feel about sitting next to other children during tests?
11	What do test results mean to you?	How accurate are test results in showing what you have learnt? Do test results help you with your learning? What do you believe will happen as a result of the marks you get?

12	What do you think the test results tell someone else?	Who do they tell? How useful do you think tests results are to parents/carers? How useful do you think tests results are to your teachers? How useful do you think tests results are to your future teachers at secondary school?
13	Do you have any recommendations about assessment/tests?	
14	Is there anything else you want to tell me about this topic that I have not asked you about already?	
		Questions added in by the children

Appendix L: Example of questionnaire data headlines and coding

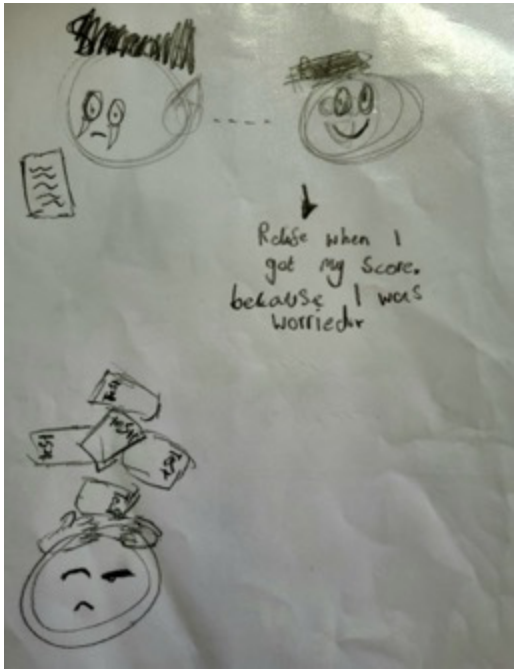
Coding against questionnaire data headlines and evidence – written comments by participants on questionnaire (Section 3.6.1 in thesis).

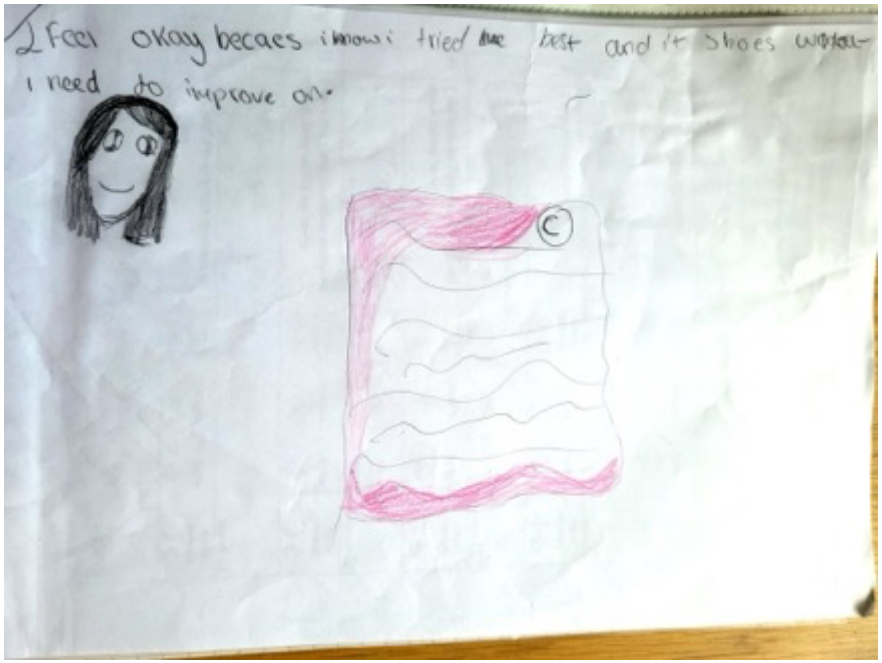
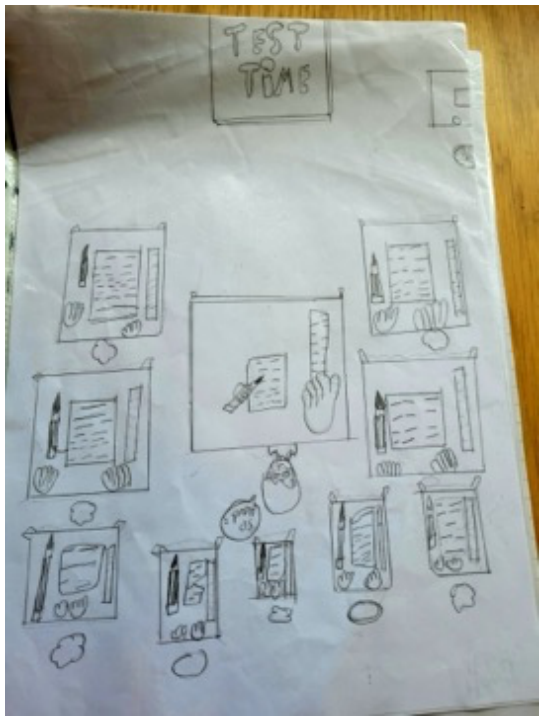


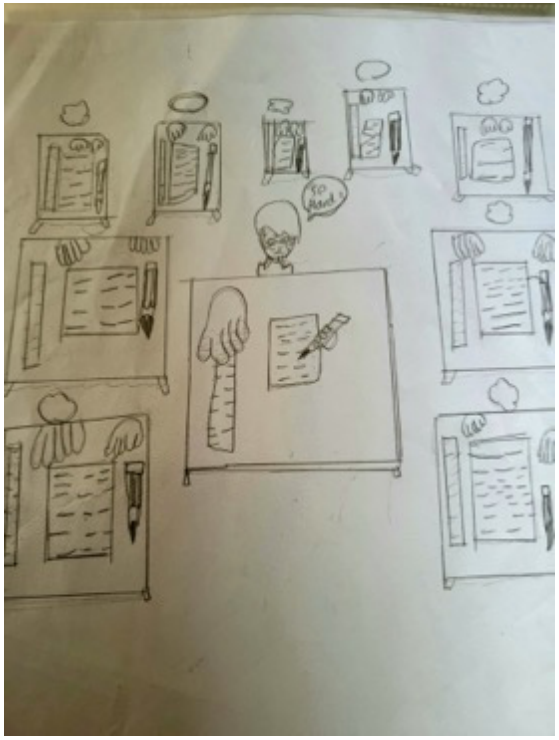
		Statement	Data	Evidence	Themes from lit			
3	1	Tests show what I have learnt at school	85.72% of children agree or agree strongly that tests reflect what has been learnt at school	Agree strongly: 'Yes as they are based on what I have learnt.' () 'I see lots of questions in my tests that coordinate with my work.' ()	Teaching to test			
4				Agree: 'I agree because the topics that are in tests are topics we learn about.' () 'In test they give us questions based on what we have learned.' () 'Yes. Because if I get it correct that means that I understand it.' ()	Teaching to test			
6				Unsure: 'It's a mix between disagree and agree because sometimes there are things I don't know or we haven't been over but then after the test we go over it.' ()	Teaching to test			
7				Disagree: 'Tests feel more difficult than everyday learning.' ()				
8	2	Tests help me to improve my learning	65.72% of children agree or agree strongly that tests help them to improve their learning	Agree strongly: 'Yes. Because the one's that I get wrong I can write them down and practise them at home.' ()	Work at home / tutor			
9				Agree: 'Because after we see what we got wrong we can practise for next time.' () 'Because it shows me what I need to practise on and what I don't need practise.' () 'Yes as if you continueously get low scores, you know to practise every topic you got wrong.' ()	Teaching to test			
10							Pass / f ail/ scores	
11				Disagree: 'Tests give us questions and we have to answer them. There is nothing about that which helps us learn.' () 'They stress me and sometimes I push myself too hard and forget some things.' () 'I get really nervous when doing them and my mind goes blank.' () 'I disagree since they show how good you are at this subject or test.' ()		Stress	Only show skill of test	
12					Nervous / worry	Stress	Only show skill of test	
13				Disagree strongly: 'Because tests are just asking you questions not teaching you.' () 'Because we learn more about the subject in tests during normal lessons.' ()	Teaching to test		Only show skill of test	
14	3	I enjoy taking tests	51.43% of children do not enjoy taking tests and a further 14.29% were unsure	Agree: 'Because it is silent and I can focus much easier than normal lessons.' () 'It depends on what topic it is.' (IAM) 'Because they help me to learn more on what I need to improve and help the teacher to help me.' (JT) 'Well they can be stressful but you do it if you try.' () 'I do enjoy them because the questions are fun to answer.' (NME) 'Because it's nice and peaceful and easier to concentrate!' ()	Silent / peaceful			
15					Enjoy / fun	Stress	Try = succeed	Help us improve
16					Silent / peaceful			
17				Unsure: 'I'm unsure because even though it's nervous-wracking, I know it's for my good so I'm fine with it.' (PI) 'Sometimes I do but sometimes I'm a bit worried.' ()	Nervous / worry			
18				Disagree: 'Because sometimes it's stressing, and you feel you will be judged.' () 'Not really because it's stressfull and I worry.' () 'No; Because this makes me worried and stressed about my score and sometimes I cry if I don't get the score I wanted.' () 'No because you could get really stressed out about		Stress		
19					Nervous / worry	Stress	Pass / f ail/ scores	

Appendix M: Pictures and free-writing

Pictures and free-writing created by partcipants in this study (Section 3.5.7 in thesis)

	
Aaliyah, before SATs	Aaliyah, after SATs

	
Aaliyah, after SATs	Abdul, before SATs

	
Abdul, before SATs (reverse orientation)	Abdul, after SATs

	
Ahmed, before SATs	Ahmed, after SATs

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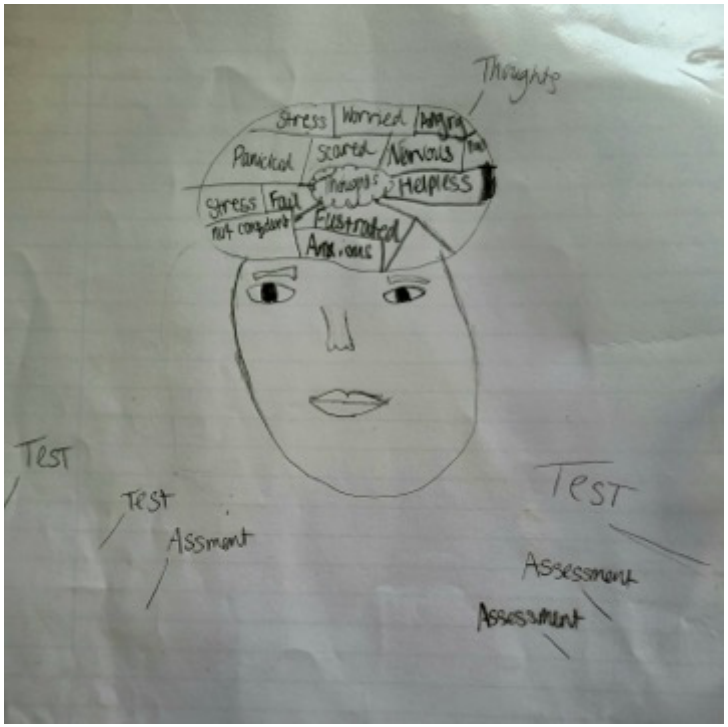
<td> 
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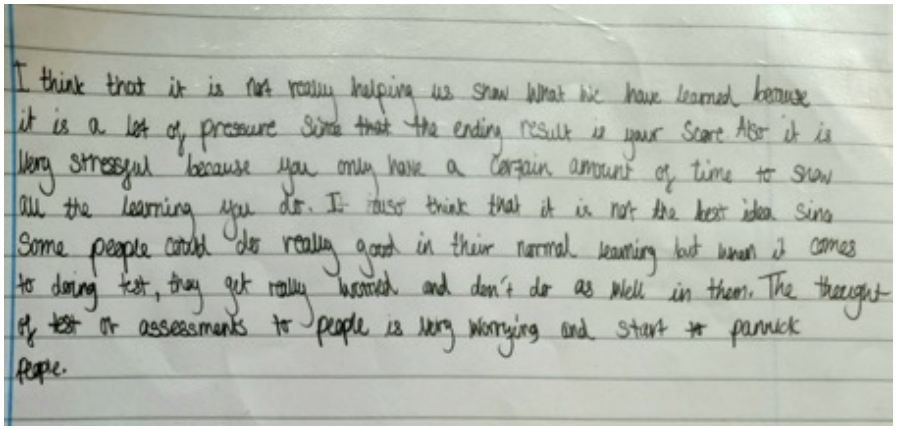
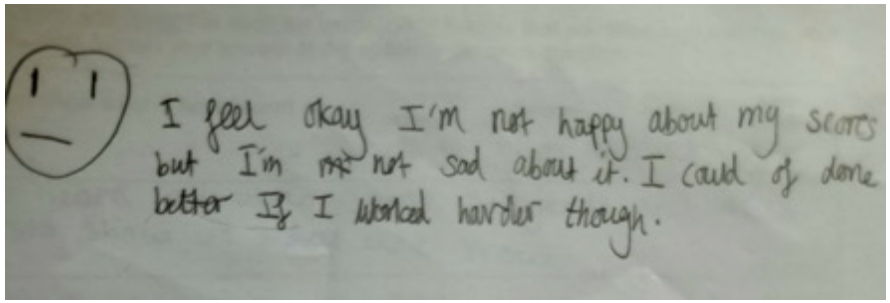
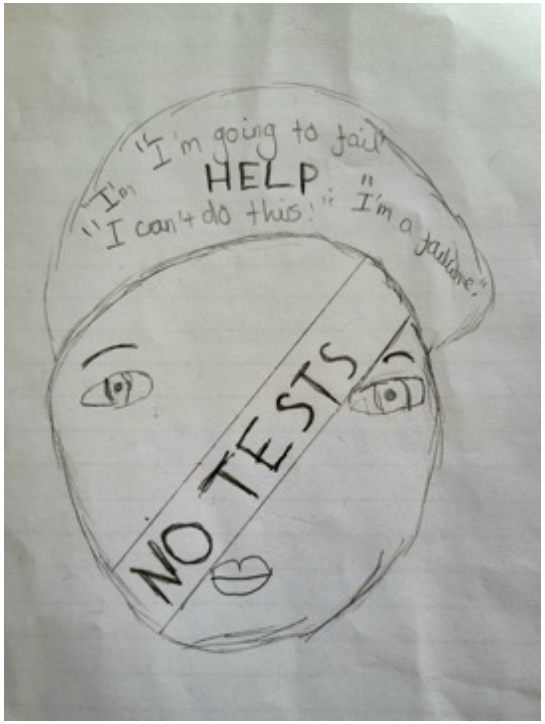
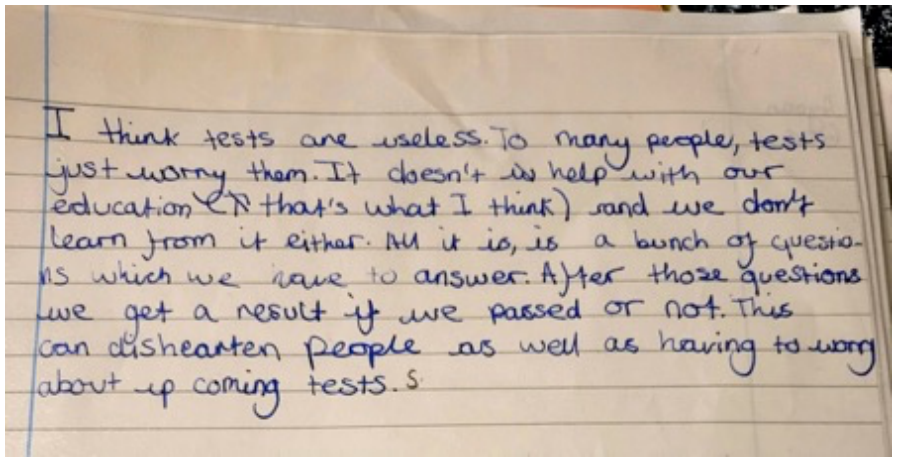
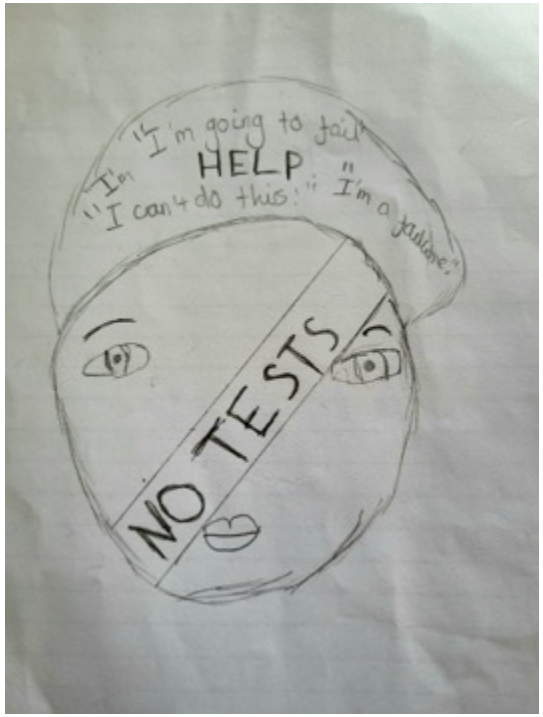
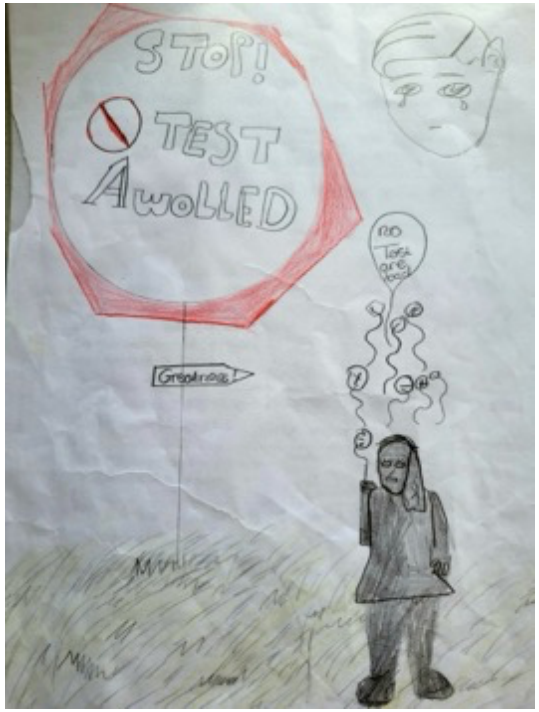
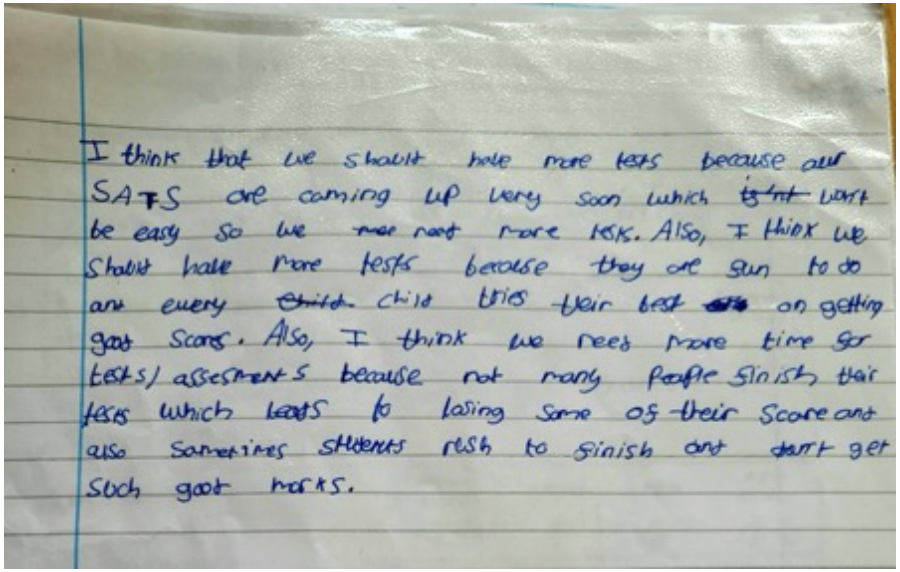
<td> 
</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aisha, before SATs</td>
<td>Aisha, after SATs</td>
</tr>
</table>

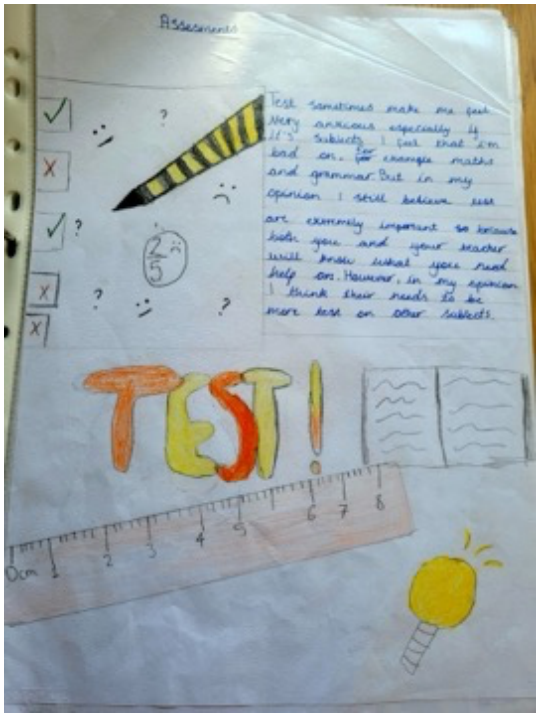
	
Aisha, after SATs	Amber, before SATs

	 I think tests are useless. To many people, tests just worry them. It doesn't do help with our education (if that's what I think) and we don't learn from it either. All it is, is a bunch of questions which we have to answer. After those questions we get a result if we passed or not. This can dishearten people as well as having to worry about up coming tests. S
Anay, before SATs	Anay, before SATs

	
Anay, after SATs	Charlie, before SATs

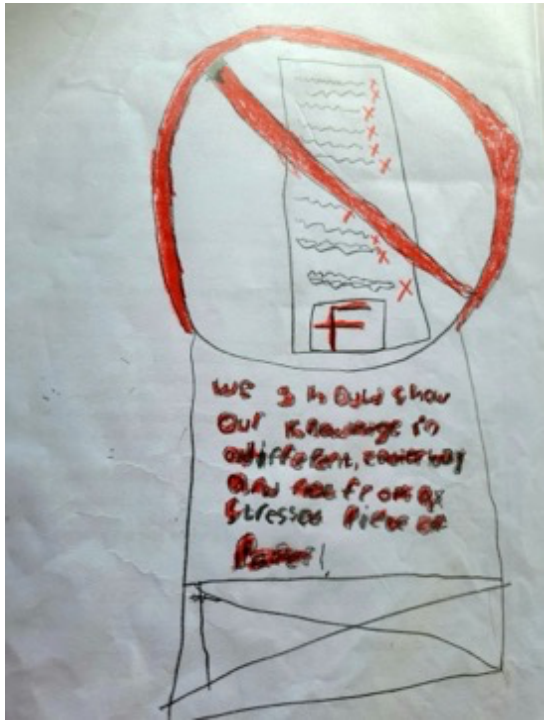


Haider, before SATs

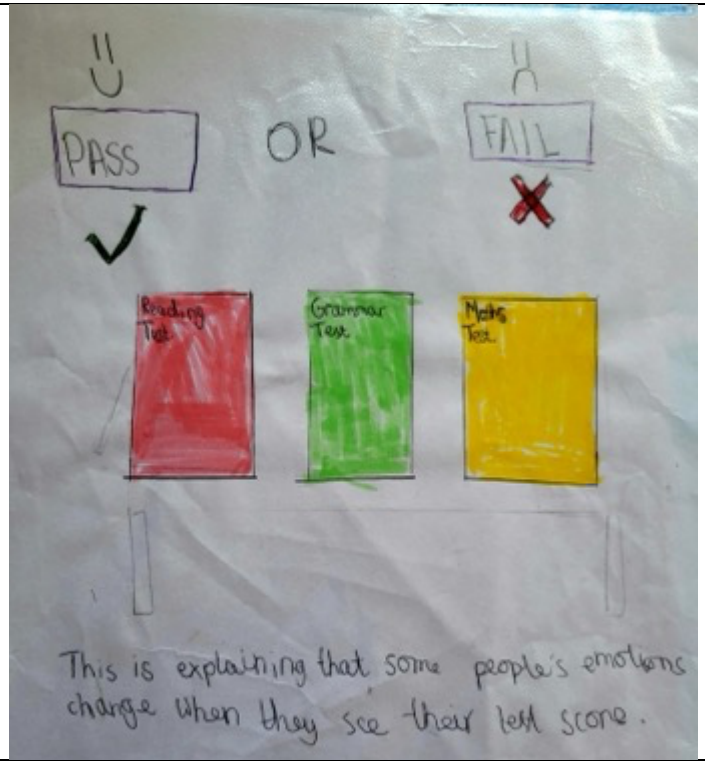


Hila, before SATs

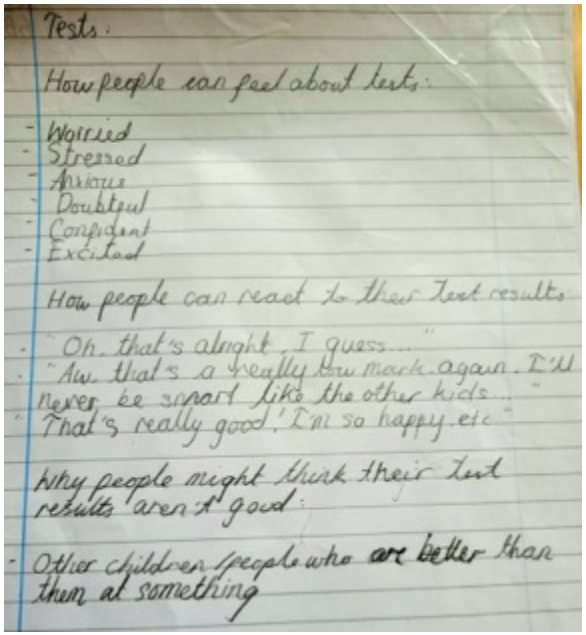
Hila, after SATs



Iman, before SATs



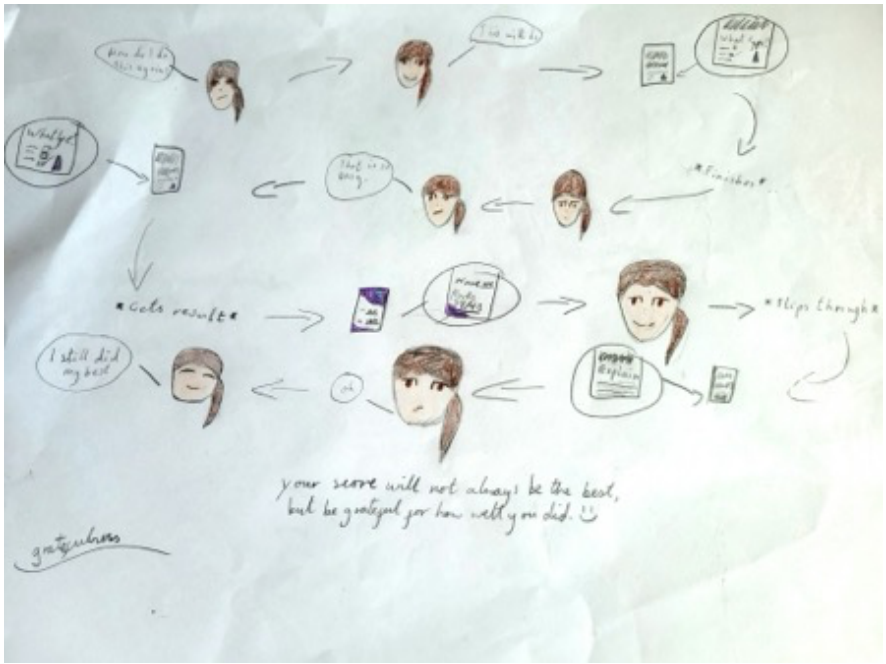
Inka, before SATs

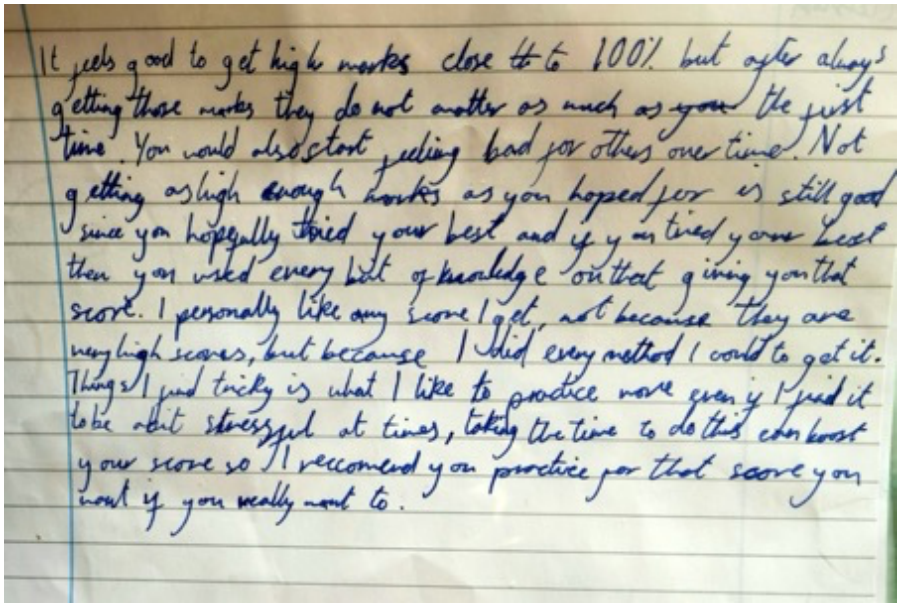


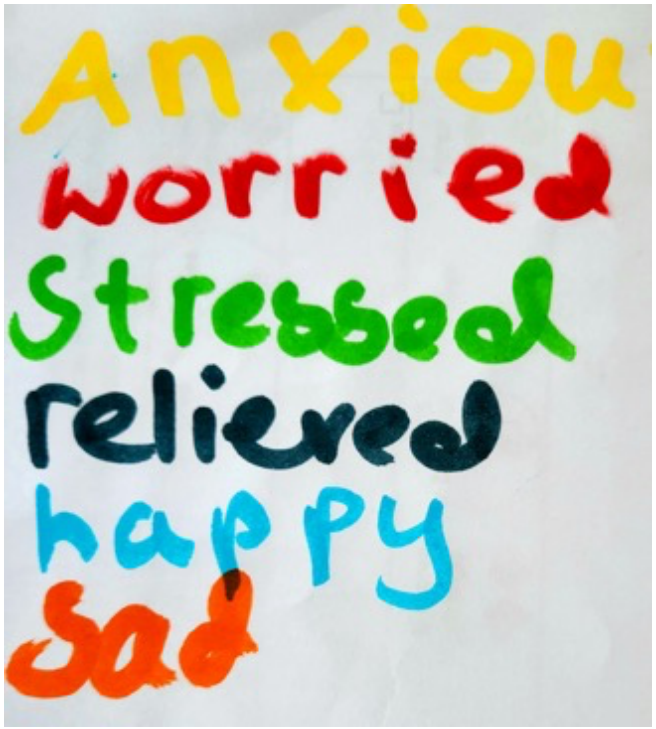
Ira, before SATs

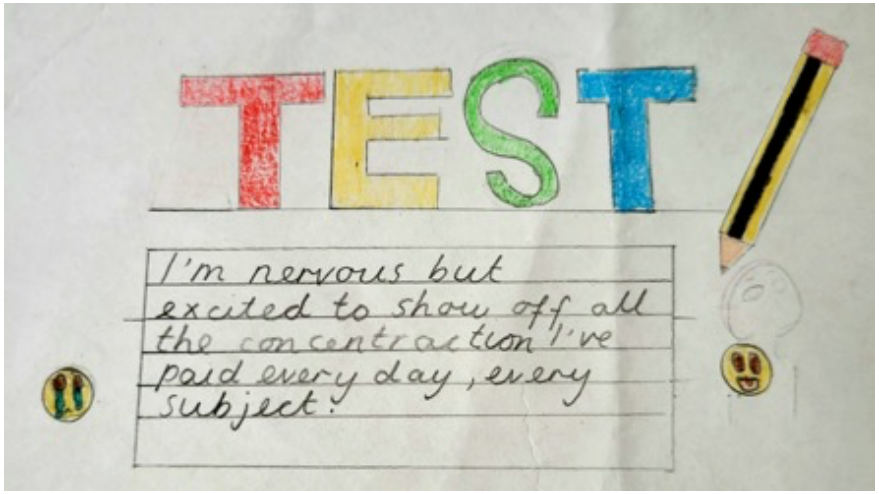
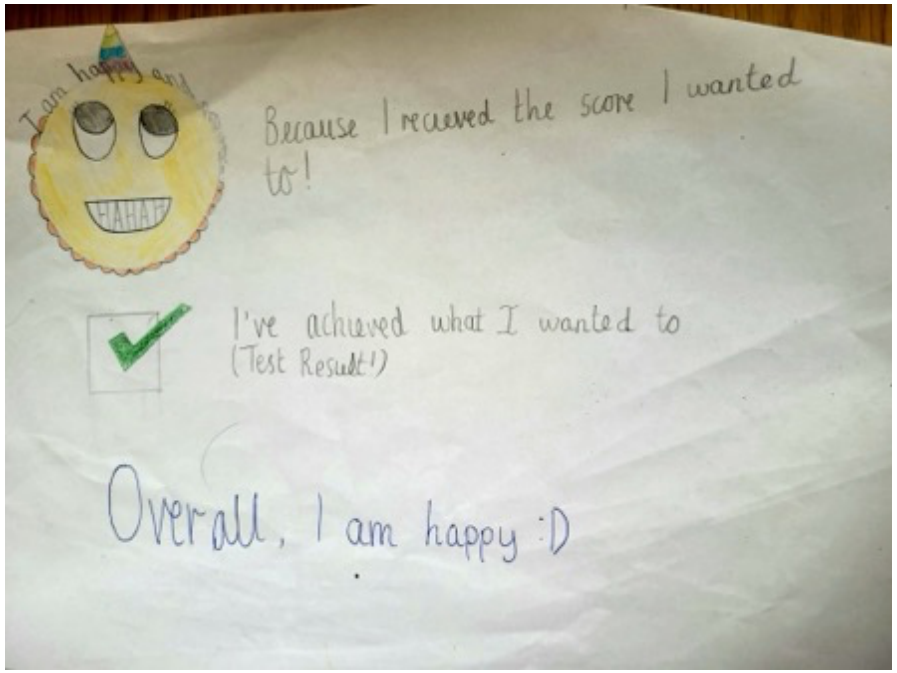
	
Ira, after SATs	Jayesh, before SATs

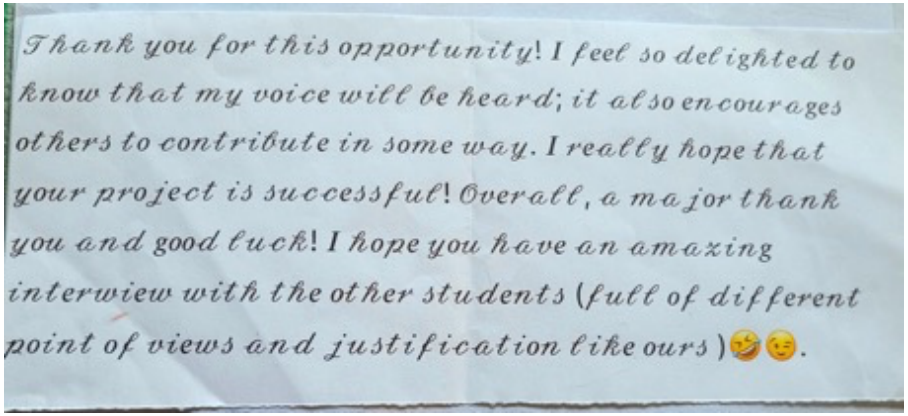
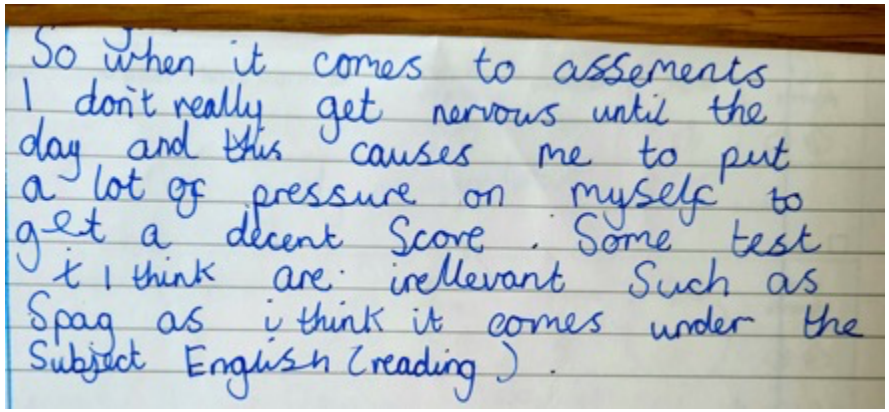
	
Jayesh, after SATs	Keiran, before SATs

	
Kelly, before SATs	Kelly, after SATs


It feels good to get high marks close to to 100% but after always
getting those marks they do not matter as much as your the first
time. You would also start feeling bad for others over time. Not
getting as high enough marks as you hoped for is still good
since you hopefully tried your best and if you tried your best
then you used every bit of knowledge on that giving you that
score. I personally like any score I get, not because they are
very high scores, but because I did every method I could to get it.
Things I find tricky is what I like to practice more even if I find it
to be abit stressful at times, taking the time to do this can boost
your score so I reccomend you practice for that score you
want if you really want to.

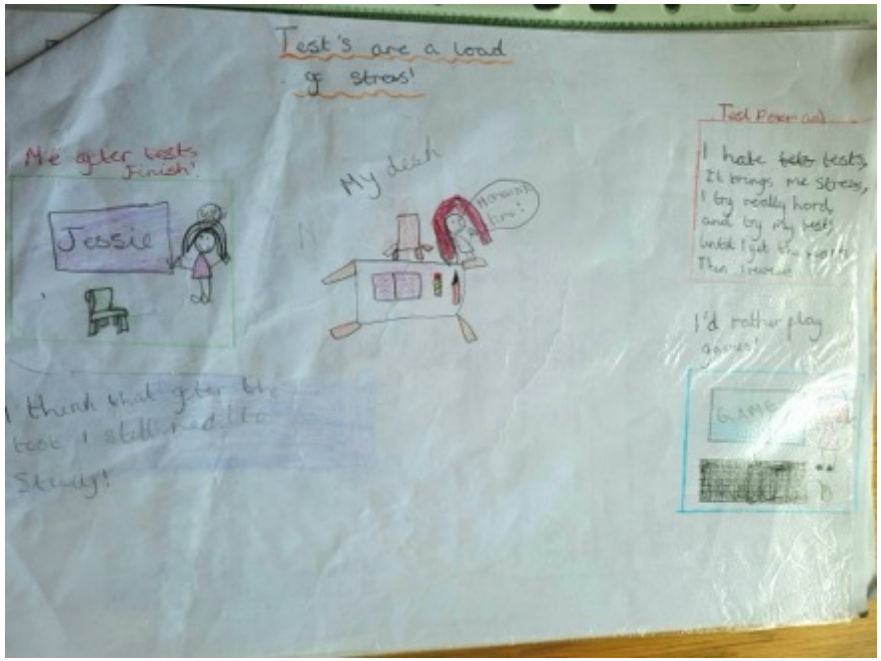

Anxiou
worried
Stressed
relieved
happy
sad

	
Paavi, before SATs	Paavi, after SATs

	
Paavi, thank you note	Ryan, before SATs

Thank you for this opportunity! I feel so delighted to know that my voice will be heard; it also encourages others to contribute in some way. I really hope that your project is successful! Overall, a major thank you and good luck! I hope you have an amazing interwiew with the other students (full of different point of views and justification like ours) 🥰😉.

So when it comes to assements I don't really get nervous until the day and this causes me to put a lot of pressure on myself to get a decent Score. Some test I think are irellevant Such as Spag as i think it comes under the Subject English (reading).

	
Safa, before SATs	Wendy, before SATs

	
Wendy, after SATs	

Appendix N: Examples of interview coding

1	Accessibility of test
2	Curric,narrow / imp subs
3	Distractions during test
4	Enjoyment of diff subs
5	Future opps
6	Happy tests are over
7	Help us improve
8	Like / dislike tests
9	Marks / scores
10	Nervous / worry / anxious
11	Please parents
12	Please teacher
13	Pressure
14	Recommendations
15	Same chance for all
16	Self-efficacy
17	Setting / intervention
18	Sitting with others during
19	Stress
20	Success / failure
21	Test fatigue
22	Test forget
23	Test prep
24	Time constraints
25	Time spent on diff subs
26	Try your best
27	Test strategy
28	Tests reflect learning

(Section 3.6.2 in thesis) Rezvani et al. used a narrative inquiry approach for their study and advised that 'the transcribed data underwent qualitative thematic analysis, which is widely recognised as the most popular qualitative analytic strategy in narrative studies' (2024: 178). Thematic analysis was also used by Tian and Diamond (2024) with their interview transcriptions, Mccarthy (2024) and Moss (2022). Thus, I used Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis (2006) for the interviews, which was also used and summarised by Rezvani et al. as: '(1) familiarising ourselves with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing and revising themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report'. (2024: 178). As a starting point, Rezvani et. al (2024) chose to use the interview data to uncover patterns and identify recurrent themes. Similarly, in my own study, when analysing the interviews, coding was used (Bradbury et al., 2021). I assigned labels to elements that occurred repeatedly throughout the data and these were then categorised allowing meaning to be attached to the data. Codes were both descriptive and inferential but always based on what the data suggested. These codes and grouping of codes into categories helped me to define the themes. I underwent an in 'iterative process' (Mccarthy, 2024: 1060) of close reading and re-reading and interpreting of the interview transcripts repeatedly (Meegan, 2023a, Sikes and Hall, 2018) 'to gain a thorough and nuanced understanding of the data' (Rezvani et. al, 2024: 178).

Section of a transcript where 3 codes were interpreted based on what the data suggested from what one child said. The codes on the left are colour coded to match the evidence in the text.	**Help us improve** **Like / dislike tests** **Nervous / worry / anxious**	The same with … I'm the same like how [redacted] said. I sometimes feel a bit nervous but then I know it's for my good because if I get those questions wrong, I'll be able to learn from them and so I try and make myself feel better and do the questions. **OK. Are there some tests that you enjoy more than others?** Yes, I like maths mostly because it's one of my favourite subjects, so I enjoy it more, especially the arithmetic(?) work.
Section of a transcript where 2 codes were interpreted based on what the data suggested from what one child said. The codes on the left are colour coded to match the evidence in the text.	**Nervous / worry / anxious** **Time constraints**	**A quiz you'd prefer, OK. Alright, [redacted], would you like to talk to me about your picture that you drew and explain your picture?** Basically I … sometimes how I feel in a test, I find it … I find it like quite hard because … because sometimes you might be … might be … some questions might … some questions might be very hard and you can't do them, and then there's the time where you start losing … you start losing this(?) time(?), you start getting more worried and you start … when you get … when you get more worried, you … when you get more worried, you try … you try … it's like sometimes stay on the same question, keep on doing it until you get it right, but then at the end you just have less time to finish off.

Section of a transcript where 3 codes were interpreted based on what the data suggested from what one child said. The codes on the left are colour coded to match the evidence in the text.	**Marks / scores** **Same chance for all** Test prep	**Thank you, and is there a certain thing that you prefer … out of those different ways that teachers decide how well you've done, is there a particular method that you prefer or that you don't like maybe?** Something that I don't like is when people do it from their test results because there could be a reason why the person maybe hasn't got the score they usually should have got or the estimate of what they should have got. **OK, can you give me an example?** Maybe some … something happened in their family or personal problems could lead them not to study as much as they usually when there's a test coming up. **(14.55)** **OK, thank you. [redacted], anything … [redacted], [redacted] that you'd like to add to that?** No, I agree with that. **OK.** I agree with her.

Appendix O: Pupil attainment and characteristics

Page from school spreadsheet showing pupil attainment and recorded characteristics – information colour-coded in original document ((Section 3.5.3 in thesis)

Summary table showing pupil end of year results and pupil characteristics for each subject

ALL SUBJECTS			KS2 SATs Papers – 2018 for Maths, Reading and SPaG				Teacher judgment for Writing result		
Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Pupil Premium	SEND	EAL	MATHS	READING	SPaG	WRITING
Aisha	F	Other Ethnic				EXS	EXC	EXS	EXS
Iman	M	Black Somali	T		Y	WTS	EXS	EXS	WTS
Hila	F	Black Somali			Y	EXS	EXC	EXS	EXC
Haider	M	Afghan			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS
Charlie	M	White British	T	Y		EXS	EXS	WTS	WTS
Inka	F	Black Somali				EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC
Jayesh	M	Indian				EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Anay	M	Other Ethnic			Y	WTS	EXS	EXC	EXS
Safa	F	Indian			Y	EXS	EXS	EXC	EXS
Ira	F	Indian			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Paavi	F	Other Ethnic			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXS
Kelly	F	White British				EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Abdul	M	Black Somali	T		Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Ahmed	M	Black Somali			Y	EXS	WTS	EXS	EXS
Sarah	F	White British	T			EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS
Aaliyah	F	Afghan				EXS	EXS	WTS	WTS
Wendy	F	White Irish	T			WTS	EXS	WTS	WTS
Zayna	F	Pakistani	T		Y	WTS	WTS	WTS	WTS
Keiran	M	White Other			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Mark	M	White Other		Y		EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Alexis	F	White British			Y	EXS	EXC	EXC	EXS
Richard	M	Other Ethnic			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Ganga	F	Other Ethnic				EXC	EXC	EXC	EXS
Array	F	Other Ethnic				EXC	EXC	EXC	EXS
Dante	F	Black Somali			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Daniella	F	Pakistani			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Meena	F	Indian			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Adina	F	Black Somali	T		Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS
Maria	F	Black African	T		Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC
Asad	M	Indian		Y		WTS	WTS	WTS	WTS
Anisa	F	Black Somali	T		Y	WTS	WTS	EXS	WTS
Asar	M	Pakistani			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS
Ila	F	White British				EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC
Eliza	F	Black African			Y	EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC
Mayra	F	Indian	T		Y	WTS	EXS	EXC	EXS

Tables showing pupil targets and results throughout the year and pupil characteristics for each subject

MATHS	KS2 SATs Papers – 2018		WTS = Working towards the expected level, 55% EXS = Working at the expected level, 87% EXC = Exceeding the expected level							
Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Pupil Premium	SEND	EAL	KS1 SATs	On Entry	Year Target	KS2 SATs	% on paper
Aisha	F	Other Ethnic				EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	68.18%
Iman	M	Black Somali	T		Y	Diff school	New to school	WTS	WTS	53.64%
Hila	F	Black Somali			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	66.36%
Haider	M	Afghan			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	57.27%
Charlie	M	White British	T	Y		EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	70.00%
Inka	F	Black Somali				EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	68.18%
Jayesh	M	Indian				Diff school	New to school	EXS	EXC	87.27%
Anay	M	Other Ethnic			Y	EXS	WTS	EXS	WTS	51.82%
Safa	F	Indian			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	60.00%
Ira	F	Indian			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	93.64%
Paavi	F	Other Ethnic			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	99.09%
Kelly	F	White British				EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	96.36%
Abdul	M	Black Somali	T		Y	EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	87.27%
Ahmed	M	Black Somali			Y	WTS	EXS	EXS	EXS	74.55%
Sarah	F	White British	T			EXS	WTS	EXS	EXS	56.36%
Aaliyah	F	Afghan				EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	84.55%
Wendy	F	White Irish	T			EXS	WTS	EXS	WTS	52.73%
Zayna	F	Pakistani	T		Y	WTS	WTS	WTS	WTS	14.55%
Keiran	M	White Other			Y	Diff school	EXC	EXC	EXC	100.00%
Mark	M	White Other		Y		EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	95.45%
Alexis	F	White British			Y	EXC	EXS	EXC	EXS	80.00%
Richard	M	Other Ethnic			Y	EXC	EXS	EXC	EXC	96.36%
Ganga	F	Other Ethnic				EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	100.00%
Arrav	F	Other Ethnic				EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	97.27%
Dante	F	Black Somali			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	99.09%
Daniella	F	Pakistani			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	100.00%
Meena	F	Indian			Y	Diff school	EXC	EXC	EXC	100.00%
Adina	F	Black Somali	T		Y	WTS	WTS	WTS	EXS	59.09%
Maria	F	Black African	T		Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	98.18%
Asad	M	Indian		Y		WTS	WTS	WTS	WTS	52.73%
Anisa	F	Black Somali	T		Y	Diff school	WTS	WTS	WTS	20.91%
Asar	M	Pakistani			Y	EXS	WTS	EXS	EXS	70.91%
Ila	F	White British				EXS	WTS	EXS	EXS	77.27%
Eliza	F	Black African			Y	EXS	EXS	EXC	EXS	80.91%
Mayra	F	Indian	T		Y	EXS	WTS	EXS	WTS	54.55%

READING	KS2 SATs Papers – 2018		WTS = Working towards the expected level, 56% EXS = Working at the expected level, 80% EXC = Exceeding the expected level							
Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Pupil Premium	SEND	EAL	KS1 SATs	On Entry	Year Target	KS2 SATs	% on paper
Aisha	F	Other Ethnic				EXS	EXS	EXS	EXC	82.00%
Iman	M	Black Somali	T		Y	Diff school	New to school	WTS	EXS	74.00%
Hila	F	Black Somali			Y	EXC	EXS	EXC	EXC	84.00%
Haider	M	Afghan			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	70.00%
Charlie	M	White British	T	Y		EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	76.00%
Inka	F	Black Somali				EXS	EXC	EXS	EXC	84.00%
Jayesh	M	Indian				Diff school	New to school	EXS	EXC	90.00%
Anay	M	Other Ethnic			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	68.00%
Safa	F	Indian			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	60.00%
Ira	F	Indian			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	82.00%
Paavi	F	Other Ethnic			Y	EXS	EXC	EXS	EXC	82.00%
Kelly	F	White British				EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	96.00%
Abdul	M	Black Somali	T		Y	EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	82.00%
Ahmed	M	Black Somali			Y	WTS	WTS	EXS	WTS	42.00%
Sarah	F	White British	T			EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	60.00%
Aaliyah	F	Afghan				WTS	WTS	EXS	EXS	66.00%
Wendy	F	White Irish	T			EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	70.00%
Zayna	F	Pakistani	T		Y	WTS	EXS	WTS	WTS	54.00%
Keiran	M	White Other			Y	Diff school	EXS	EXS	EXC	98.00%
Mark	M	White Other		Y		EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	92.00%
Alexis	F	White British			Y	EXC	EXS	EXC	EXC	86.00%
Richard	M	Other Ethnic			Y	EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	92.00%
Ganga	F	Other Ethnic				EXS	EXS	EXS	EXC	100.00%
Arrav	F	Other Ethnic				EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	88.00%
Dante	F	Black Somali			Y	EXC	EXS	EXC	EXC	98.00%
Daniella	F	Pakistani			Y	EXC	EXS	EXC	EXC	100.00%
Meena	F	Indian			Y	Diff school	EXC	EXC	EXC	100.00%
Adina	F	Black Somali	T		Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	62.00%
Maria	F	Black African	T		Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	94.00%
Asad	M	Indian		Y		WTS	WTS	WTS	WTS	18.00%
Anisa	F	Black Somali	T		Y	Diff school	WTS	WTS	WTS	36.00%
Asar	M	Pakistani			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	62.00%
Ila	F	White British				EXC	EXS	EXC	EXC	84.00%
Eliza	F	Black African			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	92.00%
Mayra	F	Indian	T		Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	70.00%

SPaG	KS2 SATs Papers – 2018		WTS = Working towards the expected level, 54% EXS = Working at the expected level, 80% EXC = Exceeding the expected level							
Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Pupil Premium	SEND	EAL	KS1 SATs	On Entry	Year Target	KS2 SATs	% on paper
Aisha	F	Other Ethnic				N/A	EXS	EXS	EXS	77.14%
Iman	M	Black Somali	T		Y	N/A	New to school	WTS	EXS	72.86%
Hila	F	Black Somali			Y	N/A	EXS	EXC	EXS	78.57%
Haider	M	Afghan			Y	N/A	EXS	EXS	EXS	77.14%
Charlie	M	White British	T	Y		N/A	WTS	EXS	WTS	45.71%
Inka	F	Black Somali				N/A	EXS	EXS	EXC	85.71%
Jayesh	M	Indian				N/A	New to school	EXS	EXC	85.71%
Anay	M	Other Ethnic			Y	N/A	EXS	EXC	EXC	85.71%
Safa	F	Indian			Y	N/A	EXS	EXS	EXC	80.00%
Ira	F	Indian			Y	N/A	EXC	EXC	EXC	92.86%
Paavi	F	Other Ethnic			Y	N/A	EXS	EXC	EXC	92.86%
Kelly	F	White British				N/A	EXS	EXC	EXC	92.86%
Abdul	M	Black Somali	T		Y	N/A	EXC	EXC	EXC	87.14%
Ahmed	M	Black Somali			Y	N/A	EXS	EXS	EXS	78.57%
Sarah	F	White British	T			N/A	EXS	EXS	EXS	64.29%
Aaliyah	F	Afghan				N/A	WTS	EXS	WTS	47.14%
Wendy	F	White Irish	T			N/A	EXS	EXS	WTS	48.57%
Zayna	F	Pakistani	T		Y	N/A	WTS	WTS	WTS	25.71%
Keiran	M	White Other			Y	N/A	EXS	EXC	EXC	100.00%
Mark	M	White Other		Y		N/A	EXC	EXC	EXC	95.71%
Alexis	F	White British			Y	N/A	EXS	EXC	EXC	88.57%
Richard	M	Other Ethnic			Y	N/A	EXS	EXC	EXC	82.86%
Ganga	F	Other Ethnic				N/A	EXS	EXS	EXC	95.71%
Array	F	Other Ethnic				N/A	EXS	EXS	EXC	84.29%
Dante	F	Black Somali			Y	N/A	EXC	EXC	EXC	98.57%
Daniella	F	Pakistani			Y	N/A	EXC	EXC	EXC	94.29%
Meena	F	Indian			Y	N/A	EXC	EXS	EXC	100.00%
Adina	F	Black Somali	T		Y	N/A	EXS	EXS	EXS	74.29%
Maria	F	Black African	T		Y	N/A	EXC	EXC	EXC	90.00%
Asad	M	Indian		Y		N/A	WTS	WTS	WTS	47.14%
Anisa	F	Black Somali	T		Y	N/A	EXS	EXS	EXS	61.43%
Asar	M	Pakistani			Y	N/A	WTS	EXS	EXS	65.71%
Ila	F	White British				N/A	EXS	EXS	EXC	87.14%
Eliza	F	Black African			Y	N/A	EXC	EXC	EXC	91.43%
Mayra	F	Indian	T		Y	N/A	EXS	EXS	EXC	80.00%

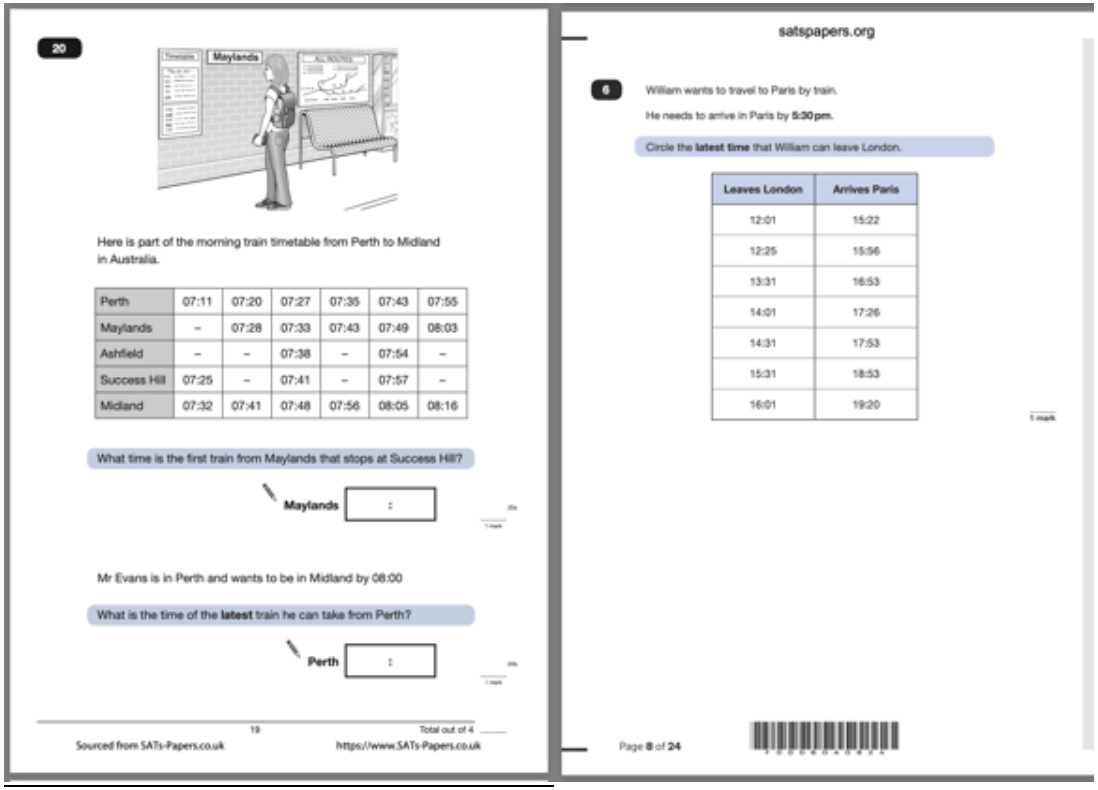
WRITING	Teacher Judgement		WTS = Working towards the expected level, EXS = Working at the expected level, EXC = Exceeding the expected level							
Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Pupil Premium	SEND	EAL	KS1 SATs	On Entry	Year Target	KS2 SATs	% on paper
Aisha	F	Other Ethnic				EXS	EXC	EXC	EXS	N/A
Iman	M	Black Somali	T		Y	Diff school	New to school	WTS	WTS	N/A
Hila	F	Black Somali			Y	EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Haider	M	Afghan			Y	EXS	WTS	EXS	EXS	N/A
Charlie	M	White British	T	Y		EXS	EXS	EXS	WTS	N/A
Inka	F	Black Somali				EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Jayesh	M	Indian				Diff school	New to school	EXS	EXC	N/A
Anay	M	Other Ethnic			Y	EXS	EXC	EXS	EXS	N/A
Safa	F	Indian			Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	N/A
Ira	F	Indian			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Paavi	F	Other Ethnic			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXS	N/A
Kelly	F	White British				EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Abdul	M	Black Somali	T		Y	EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Ahmed	M	Black Somali			Y	WTS	EXS	EXS	EXS	N/A
Sarah	F	White British	T			EXS	WTS	EXS	EXS	N/A
Aaliyah	F	Afghan				WTS	WTS	EXS	WTS	N/A
Wendy	F	White Irish	T			WTS	EXS	EXS	WTS	N/A
Zayna	F	Pakistani	T		Y	WTS	WTS	WTS	WTS	N/A
Keiran	M	White Other			Y	Diff school	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Mark	M	White Other		Y		EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Alexis	F	White British			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXS	N/A
Richard	M	Other Ethnic			Y	EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Ganga	F	Other Ethnic				EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	N/A
Arrav	F	Other Ethnic				EXS	WTS	EXS	EXS	N/A
Dante	F	Black Somali			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Daniella	F	Pakistani			Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Meena	F	Indian			Y	Diff school	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Adina	F	Black Somali	T		Y	EXS	EXS	EXS	EXS	N/A
Maria	F	Black African	T		Y	EXC	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Asad	M	Indian		Y		WTS	WTS	WTS	WTS	N/A
Anisa	F	Black Somali	T		Y	Diff school	WTS	WTS	WTS	N/A
Asar	M	Pakistani			Y	WTS	EXS	EXS	EXS	N/A
Ila	F	White British				EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Eliza	F	Black African			Y	EXS	EXC	EXC	EXC	N/A
Mayra	F	Indian	T		Y	EXS	EXC	EXS	EXS	N/A

Appendix P: Exemplar Maths SATs questions related to the reading of timetables

(Left: *2011 SATs Mathematics Test B*, Available at: https://www.sats-papers.co.uk/sats-papers/ks2/mathematics/2011/ks2-mathematics-2011-test-b.pdf, Accessed 19th January 2025)

(Right: *2017 Mathematics Paper 3: reasoning* Available at: https://www.satspapers.org/SATs%20papers/2016%20onwards/2017%20SATs%20papers/Maths/STA177738e_2017_key_stage_2_mathematics_paper_3_reasoning.pdf, Accessed 19th January 2025)

(Section 4.3.5 in thesis)



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Here is part of the morning train timetable from Perth to Midland in Australia.

Perth	07:11	07:20	07:27	07:35	07:43	07:55
Maylands	–	07:28	07:33	07:43	07:49	08:03
Ashfield	–	–	07:38	–	07:54	–
Success Hill	07:25	–	07:41	–	07:57	–
Midland	07:32	07:41	07:48	07:56	08:05	08:16

What time is the first train from Maylands that stops at Success Hill?

Maylands : 1 mark

Mr Evans is in Perth and wants to be in Midland by 08:00

What is the time of the **latest** train he can take from Perth?

Perth : 1 mark

19 Total out of 4

Sourced from SATs-Papers.co.uk https://www.SATs-Papers.co.uk

satspapers.org

6 William wants to travel to Paris by train.

He needs to arrive in Paris by **5:30pm.**

Circle the **latest time** that William can leave London.

Leaves London	Arrives Paris
12:01	15:22
12:25	15:56
13:31	16:53
14:01	17:26
14:31	17:53
15:31	18:53
16:01	19:20

1 mark

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Appendix Q: Year 6 school timetable

Year 6 class timetables (5 classes) pre-SATs (Section 4.2.3 in thesis)

[redacted]	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.50-9.05	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start
9:05- 9:45	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading
9:45-10:50	English	English	English	English	English
10:50-11:05	Break				
11:05-11:30	Spelling test	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic
11:30-12:30	PPA **from 11.30am** Computing - BH	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths
12 30 to 1 30	Lunch				
1.30-3.00	RE - CW PE - FA (outdoor)	PE - FA (gym)	Science	Hist/Geog	PSHE
		Music - SC			Votes for Schools
3.00-3.20		Grammar	Give out spelling and go through patterns	Grammar	Assembly

[redacted]	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.50-9.05	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start
9:05- 9:45	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading
9:45-10:50	English	English	English	English	English
10:50-11:05	Break				
11:05-11:30	Spelling test	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic
11:30-12:30	PPA **from 11.30am** Computing - KD	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths
12 30 to 1 30	Lunch				
1.30-3.00	PE - FA (outdoor) RE - CW	Music - SC	Science - KD	Hist/Geog	PSHE - KD
		Votes for Schools - KD			PE - KD (KS1 hall)
3.00-3.20			Give out spelling and go through patterns	Grammar	Assembly

[redacted]	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.50-9.05	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start
9:05- 9:45	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading
9:45-10:50	English	English	English	English	English
10:50-11:05	Break				
11:05-11:30	Spelling test	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic
11:30-12:30	PPA **from 11.30am** Music - SC	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths
12 30 to 1 30	Lunch				
1.30-3.00	Computing - KD PE - BH (outdoor)	PSHE – Votes for schools - Do RE (Swap with Sci when covered?)	Science (Swap with RE when covered)	RE – Do H/G PE (KS2 hall)	Hist/Geog – do Votes
3.00-3.20			Give out spelling and go through patterns	Grammar	Assembly

[redacted]	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.50-9.05	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start
9:05- 9:45	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading
9:45-10:50	English	English	English	English	English
10:50-11:05	Break				
11:05-11:30	Spelling test	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic
11:30-12:30	PPA **from 11.30am** PE - MS (outdoor)	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths
12 30 to 1 30	Lunch				
1.30-3.00	Computing - BH Music - SC	PSHE Votes for Schools	Science	RE PE (KS1 hall)	Hist/Geog
3.00-3.20			Give out spelling and go through patterns	Grammar	Assembly

[redacted]	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.50-9.05	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start	Soft start
9:05- 9:45	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading
9:45-10:50	English	English	English	English	English
10:50-11:05	Break				
11:05-11:30	Spelling test	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic	Arithmetic
11:30-12:30	PPA **from 11.30am** PE - FA (outdoor)	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths
12 30 to 1 30	Lunch				
1.30-3.00	Music - SC Computing - KD	Votes for Schools	Science	Hist/Geog	PSHE
		RE			PE (KS2 hall)
3.00-3.20			Give out spelling and go through patterns	Grammar	Assembly