A qualitative study into the effects of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) on year 6 children with special educational needs

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ABSTRACT

The 1988 Education Act introduced the policy of inclusion for children with special educational needs allowing all abilities to be educated in mainstream schools where extra resources would be supplied to ensure additional requirements are met. The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (2001) promotes equality of education and access to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum for all children regardless of their mental or physical disabilities.

The aim of this study was to establish what effects Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) have on year 6 children who are considered to have special educational needs. A qualitative research method used semi-structured interviews as a means of obtaining information regarding the subjective experiences of teaching assistants and learning support assistants. All these practitioners either still work or have recently worked with children with special needs throughout revision and implementation of SATs. Thematic analysis of transcriptions revealed that these tests had a large impact on the school life of year 6 children with SEN. Intervention programmes were curtailed, work was not always sufficiently differentiated, and the amount of time spent on foundation subjects was greatly reduced.

The teacher’s primary focus in year 6 is on improving attainment for children who are eligible to sit SAT tests due to the fact they are under constant pressure to maintain or improve the school’s position in performance tables.

KEYWORDS: STANDARD ASSESSMENT TESTS, SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS, INCLUSION, INEQUALITY, DIFFERENTIATION
Introduction

Personal Rationale
My initial paid employment in primary school involved working as a learning support assistant to a child possessing a statement of special educational needs for behavioural and learning difficulties. I had the good fortune to support this child throughout his last two years of primary school. His behavioural problems were quite obviously related to his frustration at not being able to perform at the same level as his peers, a message some members of his cohort never let him forget. His teachers found it extremely difficult to differentiate work to a level he could access whilst also trying to focus on SATs for the majority of the class. Although he was working at below level 3 in maths and literacy (the minimum level required to sit SATs exams) he was required to participate in SATs revision and implementation.

I feel a great deal of my time was spent as an unqualified counsellor, explaining how it was unacceptable to hit out at others no matter what the provocation which I believed was borne out of feelings of inadequacy at not being to perform at the same level as his peers. Whilst also trying to improve his self-esteem by practical use of his many ‘untested’ abilities. He was kind, polite, helpful and an exceptional artist.

However SATs tests did not allow him to demonstrate any of these talents.

Some time ago I found a newspaper article about the same young man who had received an accolade for his outstanding musical ability, being a virtual self taught Wurlitzer1 organ player.

This child did not benefit in any way by taking part in SATs revision, implementation or by having to endure the last year of primary school as a mere spectator of procedures. He made a ‘positive contribution’ and ‘achieved economic well-being’ - two of the points from the Every Child Matters Agenda (DfES 2003) in spite of SATs testing not because of them.

I am presently a teaching assistant in mainstream primary school with 7 years experience to date. I felt this research was necessary to highlight how the pressure of trying to achieve the best possible SATs results disadvantages children who’s abilities lie in areas outside those being tested. The pressure on teachers to continually produce improved test results has lead to them focusing their time and resources on SATs revision. This is to the detriment of pupils whose entitlement to a complete and rounded education has been reduced. The principles of inclusiveness and equality of education for all is sadly lacking at the end of Key Stage 2, Y6 primary school.

1 A Wurlitzer organ has 3 keyboards and 14 ranks of pipes

Background

Special Educational Needs
The term Special Educational Needs (SEN) was first introduced in 1971 by Professor Ron Gulliford of Birmingham University (Wedell 2008). The Warnock Committee officially adopted the term in 1978 to replace terminology previously linked to the psychomedical model of disability such as educationally subnormal, maladjusted and retarded.

The Warnock Report (1978) laid the foundations for a radical overhaul of educational systems to promote inclusive practice and integration into mainstream\(^2\) schools for children with moderate, specific or profound learning difficulties. These children had previously been forced into special\(^3\) schools regardless of their physical or mental capabilities where the culture of segregation and isolation often continued into adulthood (Lipsky & Gartner 1996). Extra provision in the form of staffing and equipment was to be made available by Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to allow mainstream schools to cater to the needs of every child and pursue equality of education for all.

The House of Commons Select Committee for Education and Skills (2006) illustrated that in 2005 15% or 1.5 million pupils in England were categorised as having special educational needs, nearly one in six children. This has risen steadily to 18% by 2008 (Shepherd 2009), only 1% of this figure are now educated in special schools.

A child is said to have a special educational need ‘if they have a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made for them’ (DES 2001: 6). Learning difficulties are defined as the inability to access use of educational facilities generally provided by the LEA or a learning ability that is significantly below that of the child’s peer group (DfES 2001). These can include social and emotional, physical or intellectual learning difficulties or disabilities such as ADHD, autism, Aspergers, cerebral palsy and dyslexia.

Learning difficulties or disabilities may be the result of a number of factors such as, birth abnormalities, prenatal abuse, delayed development, whilst also having a strong association with nurturance, life experiences and discriminatory societal practices. These include not conforming to the dominant or societal ‘norm’, which leads to a label of special educational needs (Skrtic 1995).

Research has also demonstrated a correlation between socially disadvantaged groups and attainment levels. Dyson et al (2004) found there are more children with SEN in schools serving disadvantaged areas. This is supported by Shepherd (2009) who found 28% of pupils in primary school who are currently eligible for free school meals have been assessed as having special educational needs. Free school meals being an indicator of child poverty.

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\(^2\)Any school not classified as a special school.

\(^3\)Special schools are today defined as schools that support the needs of pupils with severe learning difficulties or physical disabilities that cannot be adequately catered for in mainstream school.

The Special Education Needs Code of Practice was introduced in 2001 to provide guidance on identification, assessment and provision for all children in schools, pre schools, social and health care services. If a child fails to achieve a specific level of attainment in a specific timeframe they are said to have special educational needs (Dyson & Millard 2001).
One of the fundamental principles of the code states that ‘a child with special educational needs should have their needs met’ (DfES 2001:7). This provision is additional to and/or different from strategies already used for the child’s peer group. However a survey conducted by Wilkins (2008) consisting of one third of LEAs in England and Wales demonstrated very few complied with legal requirements to report training for teachers and support staff in SEN issues. This clearly demonstrates that the SEN Code of Practice Code is not enforceable, is poorly regulated and is not a school priority. Even though there was a 46% increase in budget in 2000/01 little or no improvement in outcomes has been recorded (Wilkins 2008). Money for provision is being granted but is either not used in this area or the strategies are ineffective (Wang et al 1986).

Standard Assessment Tests

In 1988 the Education Reform Act was introduced. A National Curriculum consisting of 3 core and 7 foundation subjects replaced the teacher-devised schemes of work previously used. Central government was now directly in control of what was to be taught to children aged 5-16 years and so began the state theory of learning (Alexander 2009). Kenneth Baker the then Secretary of State believed that national testing was needed to support the new National Curriculum in raising standards. The tests, named Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), became statutory for each child at an average age of 7, 11 and 14. These ages linked to the end of each ‘Key Stage’ (KS) in school. The 3 core subjects of mathematics, literacy and science were to be tested.

As education is a large state enterprise its primary use being to service the political and financial economy (Griffiths 2003), neoliberalisation of the education system (Harris 2007b) ensured, these subjects were chosen to reflect the work related focus of a twentieth century capitalist society. Results of these tests were used to record pupil progress and provide accountability and direct comparison of schools primarily for government but promoted for parental benefit. However these performance tables have been critiqued for supplying limited information being especially poor in indicating the achievement of children with special educational needs (DCSF 2008). Pupils are required to be working at a stipulated level of attainment at the end of each key stage to be eligible to take part in SATs. Children in year 6 have to be working at level 3 or above to sit KS2 SATs. Teacher assessment is used for pupils working below these set levels who may be ‘disapplied’, not eligible to take the tests. Omission of pupils from these performance tables does not giving a true reflection of whole school accountability (Wedell2008).

Children with special educational needs who usually receive extra help in the classroom, or have a statement of special educational needs may receive additional support to enable them to take SAT tests. This includes; help with reading questions, transcribing answers, additional time and larger print etc (NAA 2008). However SATs committees have been unable to devise mental maths or spelling tests that children with profound hearing loss may access. Procedures denote they are marked absent in SATs returns (NAA 2008) and teacher assessment information utilized. Exclusionary practices also exist for lower ability children wishing to sit tests alongside their peers a paragraph in the test administrators guide states:
Pupils who sit tests for reasons of inclusiveness should not do so under test conditions and their test scripts should not be sent for internal marking. (NAA 2008:10).

In recent years a reductionist view of education has developed where the reputation and effectiveness of a school is determined solely by results of SAT tests (Radford 2006). In primary school the results of 3 tests in maths science and English has come to represent a valid summation of 7 years of social and academic learning. However the actual effects SATs may have on the social and emotional development of a child should be questioned. Head teachers have reported children sobbing with worry (Telegraph 2008). Whilst the ‘English, Maths and Science Test Administrators’ Guide’ included the following paragraph:

What if a pupil has a panic attack or absence seizure? (Bold and italics in print)
If this is disturbing other pupils, stop the test and arrange for the pupil to go to a quiet area. Decide what arrangements can be made to help the pupil settle. The pupil may continue the test if he or she is well enough. Give the remaining pupils a few moments to refocus and then continue the test. (NAA 2008:10)

The artificial conditions of SAT environments and the context in which they are completed are totally at odds to normal classroom practice where explanations, examples, teacher input and brainstorming of ideas are commonplace before any work commences. Furthermore Cooper and Dunne (2000) found inconsistencies in marking schemes for maths papers when abstract thought or life experiences can allow more than one answer to be correct.

In year 6 the required SATs pass mark is a level 4. Failure to achieve this level does not make a child illiterate as all children learn and develop at different ages and stages (Piaget 1983) furthermore Griffiths (2003, p18) reiterates,...‘there are no epiphanies of learning, which can come to an individual at a specific time’. The stigma of not reaching this specified level may have a lasting impact on the child’s ability to progress and on personal self-esteem (Skrtic1995).

4Science SATs have ceased in their current form for 2010 but an externally marked sample test will now be introduced (DCSF 2010)

Recent legislation

In 2008 School Secretary, Ed Balls announced the ‘scrapping’ of Key Stage 3 SATs (Curtis 2008). He explained that GCSE and A level results provided adequate accountability for pupils and teaching practices in high school. Furthermore, in 2009 he also announced the abolition of science SATs at key stage 2. Therefore in 2010 year 6 pupils will have to take SATs in mathematics and literacy only. This is
contrary to a previous statement made by the government who remarked that they would not make an apology for focusing on English, maths and science in primary school as these were deemed key to the future success of the child (House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families 2008). From 2010 science will be assessed by teachers with a ‘sample’ test externally marked and results reported on the DCSF website (DCSF 2010).

**Review of relevant literature**

In October 2009 the results of an independent research project named the ‘Cambridge Primary Review...children, their world, their education’ was published. This report into primary education took three years to produce and gathered information from a vast range of sources including; published materials, seminars, research surveys, testimonials, meetings and e-mails etc. Although the outcomes suggested that the majority of schools were doing a good job, one of the main criticisms was the impact of government policy, primarily the Standards Agenda having precedence over the National Curriculum.

The Standards Agenda is controlled by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and manages the numeracy and literacy hour taught in school. The ability to dictate how and what children should learn in these subjects has subsequently been used as a political tool. Improvements in these areas have become a measure of government success with results regularly released to the public. However as these topics take up 40% of the school day, little time remains to allow the depth and breadth of additional subjects or subject matter to be developed.

The Cambridge Primary Review states:

> As children progress through the primary phase, their statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced primary education is increasingly but needlessly compromised by the ‘standards agenda’. (Alexander, 2009: 1)

The report goes on to critique how the introduction of targets, testing, performance tables and national strategies have caused damage to educational achievement especially in year 6 with the curriculum continuously competing with the narrow focus and shallow learning of SATs subjects. ‘Teaching to the test’ has been found to reduce a child’s natural ability and enthusiasm for learning, suppress imagination and left them ill prepared for independent thought or study required for further education (House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families 2008). Practitioners agree that this focus on testing has lead to a neglect of areas where children may have more success such as the arts, sports, or other foundation subjects. The House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families (2008) also found that once SATs are finished subsequent work is deemed irrelevant and a general ethos of none examination work being unimportant.

The Cambridge Review’s consultation with parents recommended a full evaluation of special educational needs provision as they were unconvinced current strategies benefited their children, reiterating Wang *et al* (1986). Imparity to remove ethos of pursue test results at all costs (House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families 2008) especially when children suffer.
Prior to the publication of The Cambridge Review in October 2009, the Government hastily instigated its own review of the primary curriculum finalised in April 2009. This was headed by Jim Rose, former director of inspection at the office for standards in education (Ofsted). The Rose Review acknowledged criticisms that the current primary curriculum was too prescriptive, inflexible and overloaded and allowed little time for teachers to consolidate learning or accommodate individual needs (Alexander 2009). Yet stressed this stage of education should inspire learning whilst developing knowledge, skills and understanding for future life. (Rose 2009). However, Rose made few recommendations for special educational needs education except to highlight the need to empower these children and improve self-esteem. He failed to demonstrate how this might be achieved whilst continuing to support standard assessment tests even though they have shown to instil a negative attitude to learning and confirm educational failure when a child’s abilities lie outside those being tested (Alexander 2009).

A comprehensive study by Dyson et al (2004) into inclusion and pupil achievement using 16 case study schools and involving questionnaires, observations and interviews with teachers, pupils and support staff also found risk factors of isolation and low self esteem for children with special educational needs. Their study also highlighted the ‘inappropriate nature of the curriculum for inclusion and children with SEN’ (p.81). Furthermore their research highlighted the need for additional resources in every class to support children with special educational needs as disruptive behaviour was found to be a contributing factor to achievement for both children with and without SEN. Dyson et al also recommended that teachers should spend more of their time working with children with SEN to assess their abilities and achievements rather than leaving them to work exclusively with TAs. This study again found that the inflexible, inappropriate, prescriptive nature of the curriculum presented major challenges for teachers to achieve target levels and left little time to differentiate lessons for the weakest pupils to access.

However, a study by Wilkins (2008) at Lyndhurst School in South London demonstrated how the motivation and innovation to challenge current pedagogy could achieve beneficial results for all pupils. Lyndhurst is a mainstream school, which specialises in dyslexia. One quarter of all it’s pupils have special educational needs and 30% had free school meals. The teachers agreed that specific learning difficulties required specific teaching methods but that all learners could benefit from these methods. This school recognized that no two children are ever the same, that diversity is not detrimental to learning and that differences can be overcome with practise and training. They had the foresight to work with and alongside more specialist services and to try alternative teaching methods. This ensured all learners were engaged to the same degree and that every child was achieving. Instigating these new procedures lead to achievement of their best ever exam results (Wilkins 2008).

Current political discourse continually reiterates parental approval of SATs, as it gives an indication of individual achievement and school performance. However the information given on performance tables is difficult for anyone outside the teaching profession to understand (see appendix 1). Institutional practices and specialist language prevents many interested parties who may wish to comprehend these tables from doing so. Children with SEN are listed in the tables if they are on ‘school
action’ or ‘school action plus’ i.e. requiring and receiving extra help in school, but still eligible to take the tests. Although the government’s strategy for the SEN document ‘Removing Barriers to Achievement’ states, ‘We will publish OFSTED’s judgement about schools’ inclusiveness in performance tables’ (DfES 2004:22) this inclusiveness fails to include disapplied children who are hidden under the ‘absent’ (A/T) columns.

In February 2009 the National Union of Head teachers (NUHT), carried out it’s own survey into parental views. Receiving over 10,000 completed surveys with an overwhelming 85% saying tests shouldn’t continue. 90% of parents expressed a wish for teacher assessment whilst 97% requested greater emphasis on individual achievement in any area in which the child excelled (NAHT 2009). The NUHT’s research also suggested that the National Curriculum should be broader, devoid of months of revision and coaching to tests.

Discussions at a conference for the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the NUHT found huge pressure on teachers to achieve and maintain certain standards resulted in discriminatory practices operating within schools which were particularly detrimental to those who require extra help and support as: -

Teachers are more likely to concentrate their efforts on children who are borderline - working just below the level required to give the school a higher rating. (BBC 2009)


There has been various reviews of primary education along with reanalysis of special educational needs provision and strategies (DfEE 1997, DfEE 1998, SENCo forum, 2003, Warnock 2005, House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). There has also been research into the reliability of SATs tests (Radford 2006). However, there has been little research on the effects of these tests on children with special educational needs especially from a practioners perspective.

Aim and Research Questions
This investigation aims to explore the subjective experiences of teaching assistants (TAs) and learning support assistants (LSAs) who currently work or have recently worked alongside children with special educational needs in mainstream year 6. This research will focus on their work with pupils during SATs preparation and implementation.

The specific research questions are: -

How does SATs revision and implementation impact on the school life of a year 6 children with SEN?
To what extent do SATs affect the social and emotional development and behaviour of year 6 pupils with SEN?
What are the benefits of children with SEN taking part in SATs?
What extra provision do schools supply to support pupils with SEN during SATs revision and implementation?
Method

The rational for this study originated from personal experience of working with two year 6 children with special educational needs. The aim of this research was to study the subjective experiences of other school practioners working in similar environments. Quantative research was not relevant for this research as this method tries to eliminate the subjective views of participants (Flick, 2006). Participants’ knowledge and practices were extremely relevant to this study. Qualitative research is deemed extremely useful in ‘research that seeks to explore where and why policy and local knowledge and practice are at odds’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2006: 53). Therefore this technique was appropriate to study how government legislation relating to SATs and special educational needs and actual school practices are sometimes in conflict. Qualitative analysis was felt to be the most suitable methodology for this research utilizing semi-structured interviews followed by thematic analysis of transcripts.

Design and procedure

Questionnaires were not felt appropriate for this study. Ticking a box prepared by a researcher might have obtained socially desirable answers but not the authentic, elaborate, spontaneous and deeper reactions face-to-face interactions can encapsulate (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). A semi-structured interview was chosen over a structured interview as this was thought to elicit the recount of subjective experiences (Riessman, 2008) from educational practitioners who work closely with pupils who have special educational needs. This methodology also empowers the interviewee to shift the conversation towards an area they have strong feelings about rather than having to answer a strict list of questions a standardised interview requires.

Materials

Marshall and Rossman, (2006) believes the purpose of an interview is, ‘to capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants’ own words’ (pp.55). Semi-structured interviews allow greater equality in conversations as more control is given over to the interviewee permitting this to develop. The interview schedule (appendix 2) was devised using tacit knowledge of school procedures to try to draw out experiences from school practitioners relevant to the aim of the study.

In semi structures interviews, the thematic direction is given much more preference and the interviews may be focused much more directly on certain topics (Flick 2006: 205).

Prior to appointments being made with participants, a letter to the governors of one particular primary school was written (appendix 3) requesting permission to interview two participants on their premises. Requests for participants to take part were made via telephone.

When interviews commenced, all participants were given a briefing form (appendix 4), which explained who the researcher was and the reason for the interview. It stated that the study was interested in personal experiences of how children with
SEN deal with the changes in school practices during SATs revision and implementation.

It then explained that should participants have common experiences to, or personal knowledge of the interviewer, this should not inhibit or restrict their responses in any way. As the interview was being recorded for later transcription replies such as, “You know”, would not be beneficial to the study and needed to be expanded upon. The brief also requested their signed consent to take part (appendix 5), which remained the property of the researcher for the purpose of anonymity.

The schedule began with an open question regarding the interviewees current work experience and details about their current school. This generated information regarding the number of children with special educational needs who attended their school and socio economic catchment area. Next the concept of inclusion was discussed, what participants believed the meaning to be and how it was carried out in school. This lead on to the main focus of SAT tests. Information was generated regarding their utility and their assessment of how typical daily routines children with special educational needs generally follow might be affected by revision and implementation of these tests.

The researcher commenced with general open questions then used more specific enquiry once a rapport had been established.

A tape recorder and tapes were obtained from Manchester Metropolitan University on a short loan basis for the duration of the interviews. These were later returned to them once the information had been transcribed.

**Participants**

Four participants agreed to take part in the study. All were female, known personally to the researcher and currently working in mainstream primary schools, therefore not randomly selected. The participants worked in three different primary schools.

For ease of analysis transcriptions were labelled Interview 1 – 4 with the corresponding interviewee having the same number, i.e. interview 1 is participant 1.

**Participant 1**

Interviewee 1 has 5 years experience in mainstream primary schools. She is currently a teaching assistant. For the previous school year (September 2008 – July 2009), she was a learning support assistant in a different school to a child in year 6 who had a statement of special educational needs for severe memory problems. Her school was in a fairly affluent catchment area with the majority of children from two parent working class families. She worked with the only statemented child in the school although some children were awaiting statements. She believed there to be around 200 children in the school but did not know how many had special educational needs.

**Participant 2**

Interviewee 2 had 7 years experience in mainstream primary school. She is currently a learning support assistant in year 6 to a child who has a statement of special educational needs for learning and behavioural problems. Her present school has around 150 children; it is in quite a deprived area with a large number of single, non-working parents, a number of whom are not able to read. Two children in the school have a statement for special educational needs. She believes there are about 42 children in the school who have special educational needs.
Participant 3
Interviewee 3 has nearly 11 years experience in primary schools. She currently works as a teaching assistant in year 6. Her present school is relatively small and has a lot of problems with single non-working parents and split families. She believes the children’s parents have quite low abilities and are frightened of asking for help but put pressure on their children to be better. She estimates around 30% of children in school have special educational needs.

Participant 4
Interviewee 4 has over 10 years school experience in her school. She is currently a teaching assistant whilst her previous year was spent as a learning support assistant to a child in year 6 who had a statement of educational needs for global learning difficulties. The school is in a rural setting but not far from town, in quite an affluent catchment area with a mixture of single and two parent families – some families are very wealthy. The school has about 80 children with about 15 that have special educational needs.

Procedures and setting
A pilot interview was carried out to establish if questions were comprehensible to participants and that practitioners would be able to expand on answers without too much additional prompting by the researcher. It was also used as a guide to establish how long the interview might take so that correct information could be handed out to actual participants. This was important as some were completed during lunch breaks at school. The number of questions was reduced to allow interviewees to tell their own stories and to keep within the 30-minute timeframe stated.

All interviews were recorded on audio equipment and later transcribed by the researcher. R corresponds to researcher whilst I is the interviewee on all transcriptions contained in appendix 6.

The interviews were carried out between October and November 2009. Two took place at the participants’ place of work in a private room away from distractions and interruptions. Whilst the remainder were conducted in the researcher’s home when they were the sole occupants.

Thematic Analysis
According to Marshall and Rossman, (2006) thematic analysis identifies prominent themes and frequent ideas and patterns of belief. Thematic analysis adopted an interpretive phenomenological approach as accounts of participants’ work experiences and beliefs were utilized. The researcher then interpreted the answers with regard to the main questions of the study. This was used in preference to a constructionist approach where the researcher would look at the meaning behind the way that participant’s answered the questions.

Transcriptions were read and re-read a number of times, notes made and bullet points produced. Transcriptions were then colour coded with points written out again. Eventually patterns emerged and descriptions or codes were allocated. Although themes can come from transcripts, theories and research questions the researcher was aware that the data should speak for itself (Grbich, 2007).
Although the themes were checked and rechecked it was recognized that this could not be completely reliable as no second researcher was involved in the process and as Weber (1946) and Silverman (2001) state ‘All research is contaminated to some extent by the values of the researcher’ (Silverman: 270).

**Ethical Issues**

The British Psychological Society’s ethical procedures were followed throughout this research (see appendix 7). Participants were each given a brief to read (appendix 4), which stated whom the researcher was, and the reason for the interview. Whilst giving them the right to withdraw at any time it also made participants aware that the interview would be recorded and later transcribed. Whilst all over the age of consent they each signed a consent form (appendix 5) to allow the interview to begin. This informed consent was retained by the researcher for reasons of anonymity and reiterated the points above. Additionally it made them aware that all personal information would be kept securely in a locked cabinet at the researchers home. Confidentiality was not guaranteed but anonymity was as transcripts would be made available to students in MMU library and information discussed with the researcher’s dissertation supervisor. Anonymity was important as the working practices of schools and teachers may come under scrutiny within the research. To retain anonymity, the researcher kept personal details of participants and schools attended to a minimum to avoid recognition as Flick (2006) believes, ‘Researchers must avoid harming participant’s involved in process by respecting and taking into account their needs and interests (pp.45). A letter to the governors of one primary school was written (appendix 3) requesting permission to interview participants on their premises with the address details being hidden in the researchers work for reasons of anonymity. All tapes were wiped clean of interview material before returning them to Manchester Metropolitan University.

All participants agreed to take part on the basis of information given; no deception or incentives were included.

At the end of the interviews participants were presented with a debrief (appendix 8) which stated their right to withdraw either now or within the next 4 weeks if they were unhappy with their contribution. They were also given the chance to request a copy of the transcription to edit if they so wished along with information on how to receive the completed study later in the year. No participant subsequently asked to be withdrawn from the study or requested a copy of their transcript for editing purposes.

**Analysis**

The main aim of this research was to study how standard assessment tests affected the school life and education of year 6 children with special educational needs. This was to be carried out by interviewing educational practitioners i.e. teaching assistants and learning support assistants who work with pupils on a daily basis and are therefore qualified to describe and explain their experiences during SATs work.

The specific research questions are: -

How does SATs revision and implementation impact on the school life of year 6 children with special educational needs?

To what extent do SATs affect the social and emotional development and behaviour of year 6 pupils with SEN?

What are the benefits of children with SEN taking part in SATs?
What extra support do schools give to children with SEN during SATs revision and implementation?

A number of themes have been derived from the data, which will be explored below. The first regarding exclusionary practices, which includes effects on a child’s self esteem and personal growth. The next relates to a narrowing of the curriculum with a reduced focus on non-core subjects. Then finally exploring the utility of SAT tests to children with special educational needs.

Exclusionary practices

The 1981 Education Act advocates equality of education for all along with the pledge that children with special educational needs would be given extra provision and resources to ensure their needs are met in mainstream school (DfES, 2001). This provision may take the form of special interventions aimed at trying to improve achievements of pupils in specific areas or employing strategies that are additional to or different from those already being used in class teaching. Furthermore, slower paced or differentiated work could also be utilized to ensure that the curriculum is being adhered to and that the child is being included in lessons. This work should still challenge the pupil but be achievable and set at a less demanding level than that of his/her peers.

Innovative interventions have demonstrated how all pupils are able to achieve high standards of achievement when schools are sufficiently motivated to challenge current pedagogy (Wilkins 2008). However during SATs revision inclusive or differentiated practices are not viewed as a priority with resources being focused on pupils who are eligible to take the tests.

Possessing a diverse learning style or uncommon cognitive process, not conducive with current pedagogy could lead to the child being labelled deficient or different in some way (Skrtic 1995).

Removing children from work with peers further reinforces their differences.

This point is demonstrated throughout this study by exclusionary and discriminatory school practices being carried out in year 6, especially during SATs preparation.

…the teachers tend to send the lower ability children out of class – exclude them more that way, than actually sitting in class. Ermm, I think that’s a bit of pressure on the children as well. To me they’re sort of being labelled as well - you know we’re going out because we’re no good. (I-3, 66-69)

…well I suppose I used to take her and do other things with her because the work they were doing she felt isolated from because whatever they were doing she knew she wasn’t good enough to do. (I-4, 152-154)

Rose (2009) advocates the need to empower children who have SEN, however procedures such as these will not contribute to this.

There was also an alternative view held that work within the classroom could have the same exclusionary effect as children being taken out. Not having the ability to join in class activities, or complete the same work as peers could prove to be frustrating leading to behavioural problems and distraction of others.

the class I’m in now there’s like 3 children who are on the bottom table – so to speak - and they are expected to do the same work, more or less as
everybody else. It was the same class that I was with last year, and one of them you can just see him losing it, you know he's like...(eyes raised in head looking round) and you just feel for him.... You know when you're trying your hardest to help him and stuff. (I-1, 65-70)

Focusing on SATs work leaves little time available to differentiate work to the lower level that some pupils require. This could lead to pupil frustrations at not being able to access the work, therefore affecting their social and emotional behaviour. This supports Dyson et al. (2004) who suggested that SEN could be a risk factor for isolation and low self-esteem. Even though support staff intervene when the work is too difficult for the pupil to access, there are limits as to how effective this intervention can be without discussions with the teacher to express this opinion, which may be interpreted as criticism. All TAs and LSAs in this study have expressed their disappointment with some strategies they are asked to comply with and instructions they are asked to follow as they can see that some are ineffective. However they believed they were not in a position to challenge these requests as the teachers are more qualified to deal with these domains.

Some view separate teaching as exclusionary and bad for self esteem although there was evidence from participant 4 that more damaging effects would result from staying in the class.

No I’d have thought ‘Z’ would have been better taken out... Well I mean Z’s peers are working at a year 6-7 level, Z isn’t and Z is going to know that the work she is doing is totally different to what the others were doing so she felt a bit downhearted sometimes. (I-4, 33-37)

This belief was the result of a previous head teacher’s differentiation strategy that had allowed different age groups to be taught together in ability groups thereby promoting personal achievement and empowerment, i.e. supporting Rose (2009).

Well I thought it was good because the children who had high ability moved up and the children with lower ability moved down and I think it worked better because it meant that the work they were doing, they could achieve it... It boosted their confidence because they knew they could... whatever they were working at they knew they could achieve that and not have to struggle. (I-4, 50-52)

However this strategy ceased when a new head teacher took over. Little or no consultation with support staff took place, which left them feeling quite aggrieved at not having an input into decisions pertinent to their work with special needs. This again demonstrated differences of opinions and tensions between support staff and teachers.

Erm I don’t think the teachers questioned it, ermm a few TAs said it’s not workin’ – quite often the TAs are working with the special needs children so they saw how it helped self esteem, I mean I questioned it and some of the
other TAs did. The reply was that the teacher should be differentiating to the level for that child. (I-4, 58-62)

Current pedagogy promotes peer mentoring within the same age group, children learning from each other as well as the teacher but again innovative practices, which were seen to be working for various children at this school, were ceased because of institutional policy. Wilkins (2008) demonstrated that Lyndhurst School greatly improved their achievements for all pupils by challenging and changing accepted methods of teaching. Whilst the Cambridge Review (2009), critiqued current pedagogy for being too inflexible and prescriptive. However some schools fear change may affect their chances of achieving SAT targets and are therefore reluctant to try.

Interviewee 2 believed that children were removed from the class for the benefit of the teacher, ‘…it’s to ease the pressure on the teacher to teach the SATs that they need to teach. (I-2, 97-98). Although she does not state her approval for this strategy she appreciates the reasons behind the actions. Political demands for schools to continually improve performance and teachers’ focus on results seem to outweigh the importance of education for all or equality in education promoted by the SEN Code of Practise supposedly supported by the government. Children in year 6 who have SEN do not benefit from this regime although it does have a huge impact on their school year.

Intervention programs that may have commenced prior to starting SATs revision are left unfinished as the pressure of these tests allows fewer resources to be allocated to individual needs (Cambridge Review 2009). Therefore not supporting one of the critical success factors of the SEN Code, which states that ‘deployment of resources are designed to ensure all children’s needs are met’ (DfES 2001:7).

… they do make availability for the intervention programmes, but even that’s not always carried through. They start off schemes – Wellington Square, Wave 3, Springboard but…or they’re setting up a system and after 2-3 weeks it’s “Oh can you just do this or can you just do that…?” (I-3 103-110)

Further evidence that SATs do impact on children with SEN as extra programmes designed to help pupils ‘catch up’ with concepts and skills their peers already possess are not carried out as routinely as the programme advises, leading to less effective results. Extra provision that was being supplied to aid less able children in year 6 is withdrawn because of the perceived importance of tests. An alternative view was heard in interview 2, ‘There is probably more intervention work because they are sent out of class so often’ (129-130). However being ‘sent out of class’ does not automatically signify completion of intervention work.

Yes I go out with groups of children and do work that the teacher sets, but the teacher is not really interested in whether the children have achieved or coped with the work, but I do give them feedback. (I-3, 212-214)

…but only very basically – like how did they do that, did they manage it or not? and that’s it. (I-2, 136-138)
Although pupils are taken out to do work that is better suited to their individual abilities the teacher requests little feedback. Failure to assess what a child is capable of achieving and building onto that for future progress are all elements needed to promote achievement. However during SAT preparation the work of children with SEN is not seen as a priority and teachers have been found guilty of aiding higher-level ability children while not including those disapplied from tests or unable to access them (I-2, 121, BBC, 2009). Evidence of this was seen when participants were asked to talk about extra revision sessions called 'boosters'.

...what they tend to boost is the middle group to try and get them up to the higher ones -with the rest it’s a case of the lower ones are forgotten about cos’ they can’t do much with them, they’re not going to achieve what they want them to achieve so they tend to be sort of brushed under the carpet. (I-2, 116-119)

The middle group excludes low level 3 children who have to sit SAT papers and be completely demoralised and frightened by them (I-1, 119, I-3, 160-166). The focus on improvement may be commendable if it were aimed towards those on school action programmes or pupils possessing a statement. However this study shows how one learning support assistant was asked to go through practise SATs papers with a group of children whilst the pupil she was supporting (who could not access any of the work) was also present. Asked how she thought the child might have felt in these conditions, she responded that the child would have thought is was OK because he/she didn’t have to do any work. This does not support the ‘Every Child Matters Agenda’ (2003) to give every child a chance to succeed or any of the SEN code or practice directives. ‘Every child’ is not being given the same chance to succeed or having their individual needs met, in the above case the pupil was actually being ignored or treated as a burden.

When the interviewee was asked her personal opinion about having to do this type of work when she was employed as an LSA she replied:

Errr well I suppose I just do the work my teacher has asked me to do, there is so much pressure on results that you feel that you are helping the school - it’s not really up to me to say anything to the teacher is it? (I-2, 205-207).

A further statement of powerlessness felt by the LSA to questions any directives given from the teacher whose focus was SAT results at all costs.

A learning support is employed to be a one to one support for a named individual because the local educational authority believes their needs cannot be met by any other means i.e. school action and school action plus interventions (DFES 2001). Unquestioning adherence to teacher instructions might explain why few improvements in outcomes for children with SEN had been found even though budgets had increased enormously in 2000-2001 (Wilkins 2008). Whilst also supporting Radford (2006) and his reductionist view that the effectiveness of a school is determined purely by SATs results.

Although many interviewees defined inclusion as all children working together and not being excluded from work with peers (I-2, 18-20, I-4, 17-18, I-1, 40-41), the
interviews revealed that year 6 children with special educational needs are marginalized during test times. The main focus is on children who have the ability to complete SAT papers. This was especially prominent in schools in low socio economic areas (I-3, 15-17) where the need for extra support and improved achievement is vitally important for them to get out of the poverty trap. Children whose parents’ cannot read proficiently will not be able to offer the same amount of support at home with reading (I-3, 26-27) and homework that other, more able parents can offer. Therefore school interventions and focus on children with special educational needs are extremely important and these additional schemes should not be reduced or relaxed for the benefit of performance and league tables.

The above may indicate why parents are not convinced current strategies for SEN work and why the Cambridge Review (2009) recommended a full evaluation of special educational needs provision.

Narrowing of curriculum

The National Curriculum was developed to ensure children had a broad and balanced education. Originally consisting of 3 core subjects; mathematics, science and English and 6 foundation subjects; physical education (PE), music, art, geography, history and religious education. Additional subjects have since been added to respond to the 21st century economy, these include subjects such as design technology, information communication technology (ICT) and personal social and health education. However the introduction of standard assessment tests significantly reduced the amount of time teachers could spend on many foundation subjects, (Cambridge Review 2009, House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families 2008) with more time being spent on constant revision of SATs subjects and completion of mock tests.

The pressure of maintaining or moving up school performance tables means many schools start revision for SATs soon after the Christmas break for tests that do not take place until the middle of May, (I-4, 73, I-1, 125, and I-3, 94). However in one school the impact of these tests started even sooner:

…They are more or less right from going into year 6 – they do bits cos they know what kind of work is going on in SATs – they don’t know exactly but they know what kind of work they’ve got to cover for them to do the SATs. (I-2, 67-70)

The amount of time spent on revision of these tests seems to, ‘totally take over’ (I-4, 83) the majority of pupils’ school day where over 40% was already taken up with maths and English. Children are not given the opportunity for abstract or independent thought (Cooper & Dunne 2000) which allows deeper processing and retention of knowledge but a shallow repetitive method is utilized i.e. ‘coached’ (I-4, 123) to pass a test. The TAs daily practices are reduced to handing out past papers and timing each test, this routine going on for weeks without a break (I-1, 183-184) whilst the futility of these relentless tasks for both children and practitioners are expressed in statements such as, ‘it was a slog for us. You know it was like… we got, I got bored of it …’ (I-1, 129-130). However one interviewee felt that there was a benefit to some children with special educational needs taking part in this
repetitive routine. Knowing what they were going to do each day, every day did help some children:

Some actually improve if they’ve got some slightly bad behaviour – not really bad but I think some of them improve. Because they know they’ve got to do the work and they get used to doing the work, they know what they’re doing so they tend to get on with it. (I-3, 187-190)

However, many children with special educational needs have problems keeping up with the fast pace of core subjects, especially when objectives are rigid and methodology inactive. They look forward to more creative, kinaesthetic subjects where their talents or superior abilities often lie. TAs and LSAs expressed their support for additional time, not a reduction in time, to be given to foundation subjects as these offered an alternative area for pupils to ‘shine’ (I-3, 86), an area to improve self confidence, achievement and self-esteem. These practitioners advocated keeping records of personal achievements in non core subjects as this would be more advantageous to many pupils (I-3, 90-92).

One interviewee admitted not withdrawing pupils for intervention programmes on occasions because they were enjoying and participating at the same level as peers in ICT or practical science lessons, an event she rarely observed.

I was just going to say, rightly or wrongly sometimes that I take it upon myself to say, “well we’ll leave today and you carry on with that”. (I-3, 82-83)

This TA used her own knowledge and judgement that completing the work they were actually capable of, with peers, would be more beneficial to the child than being taken out of the classroom do other things. Although extra provision had been supplied inclusion and interpersonal skills were being developed in this instance. She later justified her challenge to teacher agreed work schemes by stating; ‘but then you do it for the children don’t you? (I-3, 216). Demonstrating empathy for pupils she feels would have been unfairly treated.

The amount of time spent on foundation subjects is mostly reduced because of ‘boosters’ sessions. These compete with foundation subject time slots, which condense the statutory range of subjects the National Curriculum was designed to include (Cambridge Primary Review 2009).

... the focus is very much on SATs subjects; although they still have music lessons in the morning the afternoon subjects like geography, history and art become much less. Plus there are boosters going on all day - some days, so children miss chunks of afternoon lessons while the teacher talks to them about wrong answers on practise SATs papers. (I-2, 192-196)

And I know they do maths, science and literacy but all the other subjects like history, geography, art, sports and other subjects that they might excel at but - it’s just narrowed down to concentrate on SATs. (I-4, 102-104)

One year 6 class did not do any PE for nearly a year (I-1, 136), which would be an issue, should school inspectors (OFSTED) visit (I-1, 146-147) as it is as important as
maths and English (I-1, 142-143) and is repudiating the ‘Every Child Matters Agenda’ of ‘being healthy’ (DFES 2003). However the current system and SATs focus leaves little opportunity for this to occur when five months of the year is used for test preparation. Children with SEN might achieve commendable progress if this amount of time were spent on initiatives for their individual improvement.

**Utility of standard assessment tasks**

According to Kenneth Baker (1993) the initial purpose of SATs was to support the National Curriculum in raising standards whilst also demonstrating to parents’ teachers and pupils what had been learned in school. This was accomplished by collating results from every government-controlled school into performance tables, which are then made public. These tables have eventually become representative of 7 years of primary education (Radford 2006) and forced some schools to become so focused on these tables that they have been accused of selecting whom they allow to take the tests:

> Although I do know of a school that doesn’t enter any SEN child into SATs so that they can maintain their 100% pass rate and their place in the league tables. (I-4, 167-169)

Not entering children for SAT tests allows school to include them under the absent column of the performance table where it does not affect their overall results (Wedell 2008). The above position may be beneficial to children if they do not want to take tests but is discriminatory to children who do not have SEN and do not have a choice. This research shows that higher ability children often struggle with the pressure of test conditions (I-3, 168-169). Effects can be so severe that there are special instructions for panic attacks and absence seizures in test administrators’ literature (NAA 2008). The artificial conditions of exams are totally different to the relaxed, idea sharing, and questioning ethos of the classroom environment. However, evidence in this study shows that one interviewee feels children are kept away from test anxiety.

> So I don’t think that there’s actual pressure on the children to do what they think they can’t… they keep the children away from it. (I-3, 184-185)

Many children with SEN are entitled to extra support to help them access SAT exams. This assistance is normally with reading and writing (if required) during the actual tests. All support staff are required to adhere to strict guidelines when acting as a 1:1 support in test conditions so as not to influence or assist the child in a prohibited way. However this study has found that no procedures were read in 2 schools (I-2, 151-155, I-3, 143) illustrating that uniform procedures may not always be carried out which could damage the validity of the test results whilst also giving some children an unfair advantage.

TAs and LSAs expressed their dislike for these tests as experience of sitting with and helping pupils during SAT implementation has demonstrated firsthand, the effects SATs have on children.
Pressure of tests was believed to increase absenteeism and problems with emotional behaviour:

... they’re worried sick, they know when the SATs are and they use every excuse in the book not to do them. (I-4, 176-177)

If you’re not bothered then it’s no problem but for some children it could frighten the pants off them… (I-1 118-119).

... because it is all so in depth and thrown at them that you can understand how some children may react in a bad way to them, or just be completely lost that… (I-3, 197-199)

Yeah, and it must knock their confidence so much more, they must look round and see all these other children working away and thinking ‘I wish I could do them’ (I-1, 233-235)

See like I say last week we did these practise ones and this little boy- I mean he doesn’t really know his numbers to 20, you know, doesn’t really know anything and he was doing these tests- you know when you just think… because you open this piece of paper, and it would be like us opening something in Chinese wouldn’t it? And you’re expected to read it – you know and you just think… I kept going ‘Are you all right? Just do your best, try your best, look for any words you know. (I-1, 225- 231)

The research reveals the emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) support staff invest in their work situations, feeling empathy for children whilst reeling at the futility of these tests can be quite emotional and stressful for support staff. The analogy of the paper appearing ‘as if written in Chinese’ to some children demonstrates how senseless it is to put some children through this trauma. Teacher assessment across both core and foundation subjects would give a far more accurate picture of the child (I-4, 98, I-1, 120-121) as ‘a whole’, not the child as a maths or English receptacle. However institutional rules stipulate they must ‘take part’ therefore pupils are forced to endure these practices for the benefit of league tables.

Some children actually express a wish to be part of the same situations as peers and join in with tests (I-1, 167-168) even though they may struggle with reading papers that support staff are not allowed to help with. This practice is at least allowing inclusively and empowering the child to make his/her own decisions regarding their education, one of the fundamental principles of the SEN Code of Practice. However, the general consensus in this research was that SAT tests are an unwelcome interruption to the daily practices of TAs, LSAs and also to children both with and without SEN.

Adding to the futility of these practices is the knowledge that when the children enter year 7 in high school the pupils are tested again (I-1, 111-112 & I-3, 172-173), if the results of these tests are a true reflection of a child’s ability then surely these secondary school tests would not be necessary? Perhaps knowledge of the revision techniques primary schools utilize invalidates test results.
Once tests are over the children are allowed to relax and enjoy their last few weeks before leaving primary school.

…but I know that when they had finished they were so glad that they had finished you know because then it was like ‘fun time’ really because they don’t do anything after that. They go to PGL (outdoor adventure weeks) erm and then its sex education, that’s what we had (laugh), yeh and a bit of art – that was it, painting lots of pictures – things like that. (I-1, 176-180)

Evidence demonstrates that children feel this is the best time they have in school because the pressure of SATs has been eliminated although this research also shows there can be negative consequences to this.

…the kids don’t want to bother any more – SATs is over I can do what I want now. They don’t want to learn after that. (I-4, 110-111)

The House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families (2008) found that because children are tested so often, non-examination work becomes unimportant and that these procedures are reducing children’s natural ability and enthusiasm for learning. Tests are not being used to assess what children have learned and how to apply this new information; they are being taught how to retain information only to recite it again in an examination (Cambridge Review 2008). This will not be beneficial to them for future studies or life in general when independent thought is a necessity.

Discussion

Summary

The main findings of this research show that standard assessment tests have a large impact on the school life of year 6 pupils with special educational needs. Current pedagogy and the increased focus on school accountability, via improved SAT results, allow little flexibility, time and resources to respond to the individual requirements of children with special needs. Any extra provision that schools normally provide is reduced and there are few perceived benefits of sitting or being involved with these tests. However, there is immense pressure on resources to be diverted to areas where improvement in maths and English can be measured. Pupils with lower abilities are being marginalized, leading to feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. These feelings are intensified with the reduction in time spent on foundation subjects, often areas where children with SEN have more success. Teaching assistants and learning support assistants who witness these inequalities feel powerless and unqualified to change this regime.

The Cambridge Primary Review (2009) obtained evidence from a huge range of sources that the ‘standards agenda’ (focus on maths and English) and governmental insistence on continual assessment was having detrimental effects on the curriculum of year 6 primary school children. This was a general statement encompassing all pupils, not specifically children with special educational needs or disability. However this study has found that the effects of this regime are amplified for children with SEN whose entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum, are needlessly reduced while teachers move their attention and resources to children who will improve the
standing of their school in performance tables, a confession many teachers have made (BBC 2009). This also confirms research by Dyson et al (2004) that the current curriculum is inappropriate for children with special needs but fails to demonstrate a consistent strategy that all schools could instigate to improve this situation, admitting that different strategies are successful at different schools although this could be a result of them not being implemented correctly.

Whilst the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2006) found that the current system for SEN was not ‘fit for purpose’ (p2), and that the needs of the child should be put first. However, if the SEN Code of Practice (2001) was followed more closely and rules implemented more rigidly this it what should be happening.

The current study also corroborates the findings of Dyson et al (2004) that TAs work almost exclusively with children with SEN leaving the majority of the pupils to be taught by the teacher. There is support in this study for his recommendations that the teacher should spend more time using his/her professional judgement and training to assess and help these children to achieve their full potential, one of the main aims of the ‘Every Child Matters Agenda’ (DES 2003). However Dyson’s research does not explain where the additional time will be found for the teacher to leave her class duties to fulfil this extra role. The abolition of SATs might help to achieve this.


Knowledge is power when its accumulation by certain groups gives them authority to define reality for others, and particularly when it gives them authority to define others as abnormal… (Skrtic 1995: XLV)

Being described as having SEN will not empower the child, which Rose (2009) is trying to promote. This label could be detrimental to future success inducing a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968) of low child aspirations and teacher expectations. Allowing a pupil to accept as real something that doesn’t actually exist (Parker 1992) and change his/her behaviour accordingly. This study demonstrates how this label leads to exclusion from most of the child’s peers whilst ‘inclusive’ strategies are taught in groups either away from class or within class as ‘different’ differentiated levels. This study demonstrates that sometimes in year 6 work is sometimes not differentiated sufficiently to allow some children to access it.

Rose (2009) believed primary education should promote an enthusiasm for learning and independent thought, yet ‘coaching to the test’ (Cambridge Review 2009, House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families 2008) does not allow this to happen, both points are supported in this study. Children learn that non-examination work is unimportant and that once SATs are finished they do not have to ‘try’ anymore (House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families 2008). This is not an ethos academia would like to promote.

…the central message of our Report has been that national testing can be used in inappropriate ways and that this may lead to damaging consequences for the education system and, most particularly, for children.

(House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families 2008: 87)
The SEN Code of Practice (2001:7) states ‘...children with special educational needs should be offered full access to a broad, balanced and relevant education...’ However this curriculum is significantly reduced in year 6 as at least 5 months of the year are taken up with SATs revision and practise. Neoliberalisation of the education system allows institutions to be shaped for political gains. The capitalist focus on science, maths and English required for the 21st century society (McLaren 2009) can seriously restrict the aspirations, ambitions or career opportunities of individuals whose talents or abilities lie outside these areas.

Much of the literature reviewed was based on large, longitudinal studies using a variety of methods and consulting with teachers, parents and children in various schools throughout England. However, many of the findings were similar to this relatively short, small study. Although this research was not representative of different cultures or of Wilkins’ research (2008) into large inner city schools. Her research demonstrated that challenging current pedagogy and introducing new innovative methods of teaching whole classes, regardless of ability, could ultimately be successful. Although, ‘innovation and creativity in teaching approach is considered “too risky”...’ (House of Commons Committee for Children, Schools and Families 2008: 44). This statement being supported in this research when a change of head teacher stopped a successful, alternative, regime from continuing, even though this may be detrimental to year 6 children. Wilkins (2008) also demonstrated that training for special needs education was not seen as priority in many schools. Responses to local education authorities questions regarding the amount of time schools allocate for teachers and support staff to be trained in special need practices was extremely low.

The tensions that exist between support staff and teachers regarding discriminatory practices have been apparent throughout this study although not identified in any of the related literature searches. This could be attributable to purely qualitative research methods being utilized with semi-structured, personal interviews allowing undetected information to emerge.

Furthermore, none of the reviewed studies focused exclusively on year 6 children who have the added burden of SATs, or solely on the experiences of children with special educational needs.

No study reviewed utilized only the commentary of existing teaching assistants or learning support assistants in year 6 who spend the majority of their time in school with children with special educational needs. These practioners have proven to be a valuable resource for divulging information regarding the perceived experiences these pupils may have.

Dyson et al (2004) did interview children in year 6 and found that SATs promoted self esteem once the ‘ordeal’ (p79) of them was over. Although the children who responded did not have special educational needs, and their experiences might be quite different.

Additionally, researchers who are current school practitioners did not complete reviewed studies. Having up to date knowledge of actual practices and experiences in primary school projects an affinity with participants, which may lead to more open and honest information being obtained.
Future Research

Future research could extend this current study by utilizing TAs and LSAs not known to the researcher to establish if results differ to those found. Personal, honest information regarding actual school practices may not be supplied. Or this study repeated with TAs and LSAs from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds to investigate how perceived experiences of children in school might vary according to cultural interpretation of practices.

Future research might also compare the experiences of children with special needs in year 6 who take SATs with those of children in either Scotland or Wales who have abolished this system. It would be interesting to see how curriculum, and attainment compare, when the pressure of SATs does not exist. Also whether enthusiasm, imagination and enjoyment of learning is higher in those schools without the tests.

It would also be interesting to find out how a child’s actual experiences of school in year 6 during SATs compares to a teaching practioners viewpoint although this would need strict ethical considerations.

Studies into how the test results of year 7 pupils compare to the SAT results of year 6 children would be advantageous to establish if deep processing (understood and retained knowledge) of SAT information had occurred or whether shallow processing i.e. memorising for recall purposes only had taken place. This might prove the utility or uselessness of SAT tests beyond that of performance tables.

Reflexive Issues

As a practising teaching assistant myself, I understood that my personal experiences might have been reflected in this research and that it was difficult to have an unbiased neutral stance in the interpretations of participants’ responses. Also that this research is set in its current social and political period when changes in the number of SATs tests being taken is being reduced and there has been emphasis recently on the futility of these tests with the 2009 NUHT’s survey of parental views.

I was also aware that as an inexperienced interviewer, I may have had my own agenda at the back of my mind and asked some leading questions (I-1 132, 166, I-4, 63) knowing that I wanted interviewees to answer my research aims rather than letting their own narrative develop.

I did try to resolve this perceived problem by having a pilot interview, to rehearse what I wanted to ask and the kinds of answers I might obtain.

I tried hard not to misrepresent others (Hurd & McIntyre 1996) when using responses in my thematic analysis and to keep their remarks relevant to the context in which they were given.

I had to remind myself regularly to step back and try not to impose my own personal views and biases on the research which I was aware of failing to do at times especially when responding to interviewees practices that I was in agreement with, responses such as ‘Brilliant’ (I-4, 28) and ‘Fantastic (I-4, 32). I was also not able to stop myself from being disapproving on other occasions by saying ‘Oh!’ and ‘Oh dear!’ (I-1 134 & 137). However most of the disapproving responses occurred in interview 1, and I believe I improved on withholding these feelings, as the interviews progressed.

Finally, I was also conscious of the commonalities between the participants and myself aiding and even biasing the interview process (Oakley 1981). Our similarities
with regard to profession helped build rapport – although we were acquaintances beforehand. I believe this was beneficial to the study as I was trying to obtain information regarding practices that were sometimes not abiding by the rules of the SEN Code of Practice (2001) and interviewees may have been hesitant in divulging information regarding strategies they knew to be wrong. This ‘insider’ knowledge would not have been available to anyone not working at a school or an independent or unknown researcher.

References


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