

“Abolish SATs they’re utterly useless!”

Michael Rosen is angry about SATs. Angry that they constrain and control the primary curriculum, angry that they deprive children of quality writing and storytelling, and angry that the government remains wedded to the “useless” tests and “monstrous” league tables. That’s why he’s actively supporting the NUT and NAHT campaign to have them abolished, as he explained to Elyssa Campbell-Barr.

“The tailback from SATs, into primary education in particular, has been absolutely lethal,” fumes Michael Rosen. And he should know. His work as a children’s writer, broadcaster, education campaigner and, until recently, children’s laureate, has taken him into schools pretty much every week for the past three decades. And his two youngest children are experiencing first-hand the “tawdry little worksheets”, “constrained curriculum” and “huge anxiety” that he says SATs have brought to the classroom.

Teaching is in Michael’s blood. Both his parents were teachers and active campaigners in the NUT. He proudly recalls his mother’s role in the successful fight for equal pay for women teachers when he was a child in the 1950s.

He also recalls his schooldays as being largely free of stress and worry, apart from the years when he sat his 11-plus, O levels and A levels. Things have changed for today’s children, he tells me, as many schools start to deliver SATs-like education from Year 1. His youngest son and daughter, aged five and eight and attending a north London primary, frequently have homework that’s “effectively mini-SATs”.

Michel believes all exams control and constrain education, and create stress and anxiety for children, families and teachers. “Exams should be treated with incredible caution by people in authority, and they’re not,” he says. “They just think they’re the best instrument they have for levering up standards. It’s as if they don’t look at the educational and emotional consequences.”

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League tables, he feels, compound the problem. “League tables are a monstrous carbuncle sitting on education, terrifying teachers and misleading parents. They’re of no use whatsoever.”

Michael began campaigning against SATs as soon as they were announced by the Conservative government in the early 1990s. From the outset he feared they would have a disastrous impact on education.

“The doom-mongers among us said ‘this is going to be like a policing system because it’s not just SATs, it’s SATs plus league tables plus Ofsted. It’ll constrain and control teaching to this base level because children and schools will be defined by them.’

“Now we’ve had ten years of it, that’s precisely what’s happened. Those Cassandra-like prophecies we made have been absolutely correct.”

Saving storytelling

As the writer of some of Britain’s favourite children’s books, including *We’re Going On a Bear Hunt* and *Quick, Let’s Get Out of Here*, one of Michael’s principal concerns about SATs is the effect they have had on storytelling in schools. It dismays him to see SATs papers – and the education that prepares children to sit them – breaking narratives into a series of facts for pupils to regurgitate.

“We tell each other stories in order to emotionally engage with the world – it’s a marriage of ideas, feeling and sequence. If you try to separate them out, particularly with young children, then you wreck the purpose of reading and you make life very uninteresting.

You deprive children of stories and you end up discriminating against those who don’t have reading for pleasure in their lives.”

He’s also infuriated by the rehashes of stories that pupils are given on worksheets in class, or as homework exercises or exam questions. “What we do is put in front of children – and think of the children who won’t come across books – the worst possible writing. Is that short-changing them or what?” he asks incredulously.

He argues that we should be giving children the very best writing, whether from the Beano or from the *Odyssey* or Shakespeare. “It’s obvious – if you want children to be good writers and good readers, you put good writing and good reading in front of them.”

It was following a conversation with Michael that children’s writer and NUT member Alan Gibbons set up *Authors Against the SATs* in 2003, railing in the pages of this magazine against the “skewed” curriculum, “crude excerpt-itis” and “oppressive sub-culture of booster classes, SAT clubs and mock tests” that the exams had brought to the classroom. The initiative has drawn support from Philip Pullman, Carol Ann Duffy, Michael Morpurgo, Malorie Blackman, Anne Fine and more than 100 other children’s writers.

Like most of his colleagues, Michael believes England’s children should be doing fewer exams and reading more stories and poems. “What schools should be absolutely busting a gut to do is get every single child and home reading widely and often, outside of school. And then the schooling bit is a cinch.”

He cites research from organisations such as the National Literacy Trust, Reading



Children's author Michael Rosen vents his spleen on SATs.

Connects and the Book Trust that shows the beneficial effect that a love of reading has, not just on children's achievement at school, but also on their behaviour and attitude, and on their character as they grow up. He accuses the government of blithely ignoring the findings because they're blinkered by their SATs and league tables agenda.

Getting through to government

Michael's dream is to see teachers, local authorities and the government focusing their attentions on making every school a book-loving school. As Children's Laureate from 2007 to 2009 he published a 20-point outline on achieving this, and sent it to education secretary Ed Balls and the then-education minister Jim Knight. Their first response was 'we can't find it; can you send it again?', their second a glib 'we're doing it anyway'.

He's angry about the Labour government's treatment of those in public services. "There's been a complete fallacy – and not just in education – that what you do to professionals to make them better is give them targets and keep testing them and punishing them and naming and shaming. It's a complete misunderstanding of why people go into professions and how standards can improve.

"What you do, with all this testing and targeting, is mistrust the professionals. Why? Why should you mistrust people who've said I want to do this career of social work, medicine, training or education? They've put themselves through years and years of training, they're educationally and emotionally attached to their vocation.

"The key thing is to give them the space to work out ways of improving their professional lives. That's what you have to do, so that whatever group they're working with – the so-called 'client group' – can benefit."

His message to the current government, and whoever forms the next one, is unequivocal. "Abolish SATS – they're utterly useless and they drive children, teachers and parents nuts. They're bad for kids, bad for education, bad for parents and bad for families."

Finding alternatives

Although confident that the campaign to have SATs abolished is winnable, Michael warns that "the government will no doubt try to dismiss us as anti-assessment and anti-monitoring". He's convinced, however, that there are other, more useful, forms of assessment based on teachers' own work, and wants to see curricula devised by teachers in conjunction with one another, local authorities and academics. "Part of the process of abolishing SATs is looking at what forms of assessment actually succeed," he insists.

He urges teachers to seek out the work of Dylan Wiliam, Professor of Educational Assessment at the Institute of Education, who has drawn together all the research that's been done on the kind of assessment that improves children's education and helps teachers improve their teaching. "It's a highly developed form of Assessment for Learning, but he's made it accessible," says Michael, who plans to shadow Dylan's work at a North London comprehensive this autumn.

He also gives credit to Jim Rose for looking at Assessment for Learning in his independent review of the primary curriculum. But he doesn't want to see Assessment for Learning brought in alongside SATs, as "the one defeats the other".

"[SATs are] bad for kids, bad for education, bad for parents and bad for families."

Daring to win it!

The current alliance between the NUT and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) in opposing SATs brings together the majority of teachers and leaders in England's primary schools, and Michael believes this is crucial to a successful outcome. "It's about all of us giving each other the confidence to fight this and defeat it, and all the time to be thinking of alternatives," he says. "The future of education depends on it."

Audiences at anti-SATs meetings in London and Birmingham have already enjoyed Michael's entertaining and impassioned speeches, and he'll be addressing another four or five events in the autumn term. He's also committed to mentioning the campaign in any TV or radio interviews he's asked to do.

Having just returned from a holiday in France, Michael's message to NUT and NAHT members as they enter the term that will see the historic joint ballot to boycott the tests is "*Bon courage!*"

"Dare to win it!" he adds, his angry expression giving way to a grin. "We can, and I think we will."

Resources

Read Michael's tips for creating a book-loving school at www.michaelrosen.co.uk/foradults_news.html (scroll down).

Dylan Wiliam's *Assessment for Learning: What, Why and How*, is available for £5 from www.ioe.ac.uk/about/16409.html.

Download SATs campaign posters, leaflets, petitions and more from www.teachers.org.uk/assessment.php.