

SATs and sherry

The story of how Standardised Assessment Tasks turned into Statutory Assessment Tests is fascinating and involves at least one glass of sherry late at night as a secretary, using a spell check, sought to turn 'task' into 'test' in order that in December 1988 Kenneth Baker could get Margaret Thatcher to accept the report of the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT). Thatcher preferred 'tests' to 'tasks'. The secretary did not manage to turn all the 'tasks' into 'tests' and ever since people have tried to rationalise the differing terminology.

This story was told to me by a member of TGAT so it must be true. He was, after all, a professor and they never falsify evidence.

The National Curriculum came with ten levels for each subject. The University of Leeds had the contract to look closely at how assessment would work. I was one of many research associates who visited schools to use experimental SATs with children around seven years of age (end of Key Stage One).

We worked in pairs. My colleague did not seem to notice that separating activities into subjects felt strange to the children. When, trying out a science SAT, he asked them to look at what he called 'a range of instruments' the boy and girl he was working with looked at him, then at each other and, it seemed to me, signalled an unspoken message that said: 'Well, he is a grown up and I suppose he knows what he is doing but you'll never get a tune out of those things.'

With the same boy and girl and my colleague alongside holding the manual detailing the next experimental SAT I asked them to build two columns the same height using sets of books. I handed them rolled paper to place across the top creating a bridge. We had different rolls: some thick, some thin, some tight and some loose. The children were asked to suspend a plastic bucket from the bridge and keep count of the number of shovels of sand that they put into the bucket before the bridge broke. The idea was to go on doing this with other paper rolls and then to discuss the notion of tensile strength.

Eventually the first bridge broke. I said nothing. I watched. The children, now absorbed in the task, began to mend the bridge. 'Stop them', whispered my colleague. 'But I want to see what they do', said I. He hissed back: 'They are not supposed to do anything like that for another four pages'.

I was happy with SATs when the T word stood for Tasks but I don't think I was cut out for SATs when it stood for Tests. In fact those children were taking ownership of the task. That seemed fine to me.

During the research I gave a little girl a piece of unseen writing to read out aloud. It contained multi cultural nicknames, exclamation marks, question marks, speech marks and paragraphs. She picked it up and, like a professional newsreader being given unexpected copy, handled it with total confidence.

I scratched my head because even the relevant descriptor for Level Ten did not seem to do justice to her performance. When the research was over and SATs became serious what level might she be given?

Kenneth Clarke gave us the answer. Three levels were available. He told us to expect that Level Two would be the average.

What price the research? More sherry please!

Cliff Jones November 2016

Adapted from

A LOAD OF CLARKE AND BALLS

OR

A COUPLE OF SONG AND DANCE MEN TRY TO RUN EDUCATION

With apologies to Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire

(Holiday Inn 1942)

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/ALoadOfClarkeAndBalls.pdf>