

Written evidence from the National Union of Teachers (NUT) (CMH0168)

The NUT welcomes the setting up of this Inquiry. The NUT believes that education has an important role to play in supporting children's wellbeing and mental health. However, the NUT believes that funding restrictions and cutbacks mean that teachers and schools lack the resources that they need to meet the needs of many children and young people facing difficulties with their mental health.

Teachers and schools are not mental health professionals, although they have an important role to play in supporting children's wellbeing and mental health. Teachers should not find themselves without services and qualified professionals to make referrals to if a child or young person's wellbeing and mental health require additional intervention.

Schools are being deprived of the resources to support mental health needs. But the problem goes wider than that. The causes of the worsening condition of children's mental health are complex, but among them the demands made of children by aspects of the education system play a part. Along with many others in the world of education, the NUT believes that the Government's education policies relating to assessment and school accountability are to the detriment of many children and young people's mental health. As well as narrowing the curriculum, and therefore reducing access to creative subjects and PSHE, children and young people are placed under immense pressure from an increasingly young age to pass tests, many of which are designed for purposes of school accountability rather than to support students' learning. These problems were highlighted by Natasha Devon, former mental health champion for schools at the DfE, before she was removed from the role:

"Time and time again over recent years young people – and the people who teach them – have spoken out about how a rigorous culture of testing and academic pressure is detrimental to their mental health.

"At one end of the scale we've got four-year-olds being tested, at the other end of the scale we've got teenagers leaving school and facing the prospect of leaving university with record amounts of debt. Anxiety is the fastest growing illness in under 21s. These things are not a coincidence." (Devon, 2016)

In support of Devon's position, primary teachers have told the NUT of the impact that education policies are having on their mental health and that of the children and young people they teach. In the aftermath of the 2016 SATs tests, more than 6,000 teachers responded to an NUT survey. Typical comments included:

“In my 20 years of teaching I have never seen teachers so stressed and worried about the mental health and emotional wellbeing of their classes (or themselves).” (NUT 2016)

“The pressure for teacher to get children to the standard level is immense and having a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. This academic year we have two teachers off long term with stress, one teacher who has left the profession, two senior teachers (a phase leader and a literacy coordinator) who are both changing schools and stepping down to class teachers. This means great leaders are being lost as well as great teachers.” (NUT 2016)

“In light of assessment and its relentless focus on testing, I have two teachers emigrating and an outstanding teacher leaving the school. It is an unmitigated disaster. I believe results will be contrived anyway on a sliding scale of damage limitation. However, in a school with 126 on the social need register this curriculum is exacerbating mental health issues and embedding low self-esteem and self-harm.” (NUT 2016)

“We put every measure we can into place to enable our children to be resilient learners. Our pupils who have mental health issues appeared miserable and dejected and displayed negative behaviours once the tests were completed. Those 'timid' learners were put off the tests because they were pitched at too high a level and we have had to increase our class wellbeing sessions to counter the impact of the tests upon the children. I personally felt guilty that I was condoning tests which could be construed as emotional abuse upon our children.” (NUT 2016)

“We have had a massive increase in social, emotional and mental health issues this year, especially in Y2 and Y6. It has been reported that teachers and schools are to blame for this, but we have not designed a curriculum and testing for which most of our children are not emotionally or developmentally ready for. How can this possibly be anything but harmful to children's mental health and wellbeing or self-confidence? Our children are being set up to fail! Alongside this the narrow curriculum has affected engagement and motivation. Ministers don't seem to realise that there are children at the end of these tests. They are only concerned with measuring teacher accountability.” (NUT 2016)

1. Promoting emotional wellbeing, building resilience, and establishing and protecting good mental health

The experience of schools

- 1.1. Research has highlighted the reduction in time spent on personal and social development (Harlen and Deakin Crick 2002). This is one of the core areas of the curriculum that can contribute to positive emotional wellbeing. The number of hours schools spent on personal, social and health education (PSHE) has fallen by approximately one third over the past four years (Wragg 2016).
- 1.2. Secretary of State Justine Greening told the 14 September 2016 meeting of the Education Select Committee that there was a 'real opportunity' to ensure that PSHE plays a full role in supporting children to develop their ability to make informed choices. However the DfE's current curriculum and assessment policies prioritise high stakes testing and assessment resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum and do not seem to appreciate the value of children having access to PSHE as part of a broad and balanced education.
- 1.3. A narrowing of the curriculum not only restricts children's opportunities to learn and develop, but also impacts negatively on their wellbeing and self-esteem. This is because it reduces many students' chances of recognised as talented in school (Berliner 2011).
- 1.4. In response to high stakes testing teachers adopt a teaching style which emphasises the transmission of knowledge. This favours those students who prefer to learn in this way and disadvantages and lowers the self-esteem of those who prefer more active and creative learning experiences (Harlen and Deakin Crick 2002).
- 1.5. Children also experience a narrower curriculum because schools are forced to focus on only the elements of English and maths that will be used as measures of school accountability via the results of high stakes tests at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. Research about the impact of high stakes testing, for example testing that determines teachers' pay or the ranking of a school as happens in England, has shown that an increased focus on the demands of the test means that children experience a narrower curriculum (e.g. Clarke et al. 2003; Jones and Egley 2004; Children, Schools and Families Committee 2008; Rothstein et al 2008; Alexander 2010).
- 1.6. The Children, Schools and Families Committee (2008) found that "any efforts by the government to introduce more breadth into the school curriculum are likely to be undermined by the enduring imperative for schools, created by the accountability measures, to ensure that their pupils perform well in national tests". This imperative

has not weakened since 2008. *'Exam Factories'*, a report of research based on responses from more than 7000 teachers, carried out for the NUT in 2015, listed disaffection, stress and demotivation among the psychological consequences of the assessment system.

1.7. Teachers consider that children in England today are experiencing a narrower curriculum than in the past. Children with low attainment, disadvantaged pupils and those with special needs are affected by this narrowing of the curriculum to an even greater degree as they will tend to spend more time focusing on English and maths through booster and catch up sessions, at the expense of the rest of the curriculum (Hutchings 2015).

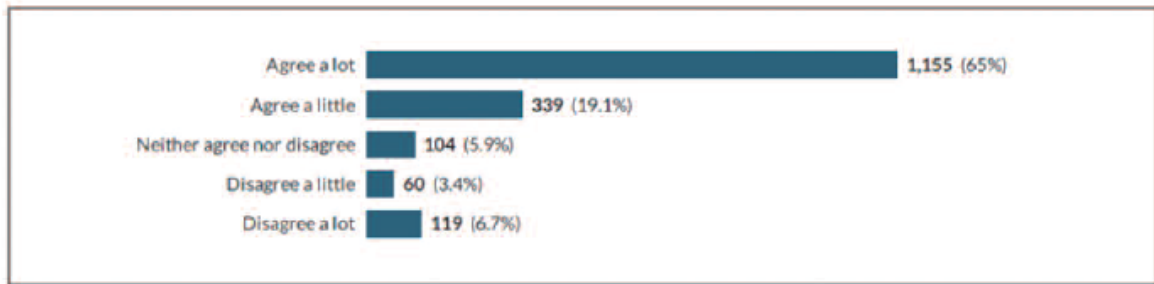
1.8. Primary school headteachers and teachers told the NUT of their experiences in 2016: *"The use of these test results has resulted in a significant narrowing of the curriculum, as the Government are going to use these as their measure of schools' accountability and children's progress. You have no choice but to teach to the tests to ensure that you, as a teacher, and your school are meeting these narrow criteria. I understand that children need a set of basic skills for life in reading, writing and maths but the level at which they are declared a failure is too high to reflect those life skills. The added impact on mental health and wellbeing has been evident from the tears of frustration and desperation that have been seen from those students, who teachers were well aware, were going to struggle significantly with the level of these tests."* (NUT 2016)

1.9. *"The pressure has been all encompassing and the absence rate has increased, the breadth of the curriculum has suffered and there is an obvious link to the increase in mental health issues. I have a bright child who is dyslexic who has been diagnosed with depression due to the pressure of the expectations of the tests."* (NUT 2016)

1.10. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on a Fit and Healthy Childhood highlighted the 'Cinderella' status of physical education in schools, despite the importance of sport and physical activity in developing children and young people's confidence, social skills and wellbeing. It was noted by the committee that "PE is the first subject to be dropped in a week where additional time is needed to realise other outcomes". The report mentioned SATs as one reason why children's access to PE might be curtailed (All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood, 2016).

- 1.11. Damage to children's self-esteem can have an adverse impact on their engagement with education, and ultimately their ability to succeed in education. This is the very thing that the Government claims to promote in its vision of education 'that works for everyone'.
- 1.12. The DfE's own research shows children with better emotional wellbeing make more progress in primary school and are more engaged in secondary school. Children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural and social wellbeing, on average, have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school, both concurrently and in later years. Relationships between emotional, behavioural, social, and school wellbeing and later educational outcomes are generally similar for children and adolescents, regardless of their gender and parents' educational level (DfE 2015a). This highlights the crucial role in promoting emotional, behavioural, social and school wellbeing in supporting good educational outcomes, and enhances the life chances of disadvantaged children and young people.
- 1.13. Other research confirms what teachers see as a significant trend. In 2013-14 Childline found that education problems have started to appear in the top ten concerns children contact the service about for the first time. (NSPCC 2015) In 2013-14 58 per cent of counselling sessions in relation to school and education problems were about exam stress, a 200 per cent rise on the previous year. (NSPCC 2015). Children aged 11 and under were anxious about how their results would affect which secondary school they would go to and what ability set they would be placed in. Not doing well often raised doubts about being able to make new friends or provoked fears of being bullied (NSPCC 2015).
- 1.14. Research into the impact of Key Stage 4 curriculum, assessment and accountability reforms has shown the negative impacts on student mental health.

Figure 12. The reforms strengthen an exam culture which undermines students' mental health and wellbeing



(Neumann *et al* 2016)

2. Support for young people with mental health problems

2.1 In order to provide adequate support for children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties schools need to be able to call upon the resources of a variety of professionals and services. These services should be able to provide support of many kinds to schools, children and young people: from preventative work to promote good mental health and wellbeing, through to responding to children and young people who require more intensive and targeted interventions and support.

2.2 Services to support schools and the children and young people they teach are being cut at every level, from preventative and low level support to the services designed to meet high levels of need. In addition to cuts to local authority budgets since 2010, the Education Services Grant (ESG) is being cut by £600 million (DfE 2015b). The ESG is used to provide many of the services that might prevent mental health and wellbeing difficulties escalating and requiring more specialist and intensive support. These services include education welfare services, central support for services such as music, therapies and other health-related services (DfE 2014).

2.3 Figures show that the number of health professionals working in school nursing roles in England has declined from 3,026 in January 2010 to 2,599 in July 2016. In July 2016 there were only 1,081 qualified school nurses (NHS 2016). This is an inadequate level of support for the over 8 million school pupils in England, and the trend is in the wrong direction. School nurses can play a crucial role in promoting positive wellbeing and good mental health, as well as supporting children and young people experiencing difficulties, and advising teachers and other school staff.

2.4 A survey by the charity YoungMinds revealed that between 2010 and 2013 34 out of 51 (two-thirds) of local authorities in England reduced their Child and Adolescent Mental

Health Services (CAMHS) budget. In some cases, cuts were severe, with Derby City Council reporting a cut in spending of 41 per cent (YoungMinds, 2014).

2.5 Government provision of additional funding to support children and young people's mental health is being undermined by cuts elsewhere in the system as additional funding has not been ring-fenced to CAMHS.

2.6 In 2015, the Government pledged an extra £1.4 billion over five years to 'transform' CAMHS. However, research undertaken by YoungMinds found that in the first year of extra funding (2015-16); only 36 per cent of CCGs increased their CAMHS spend to reflect their additional government funds. Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of CCGs used some or all of the extra money to backfill cuts or to spend on other priorities. In the second year of extra funding (2016-17), only 50 per cent of CCGs increased their CAMHS spend to reflect their additional government funds with 50 per cent using some or all of the extra money for other priorities (YoungMinds 2016).

3. Building skills for professionals

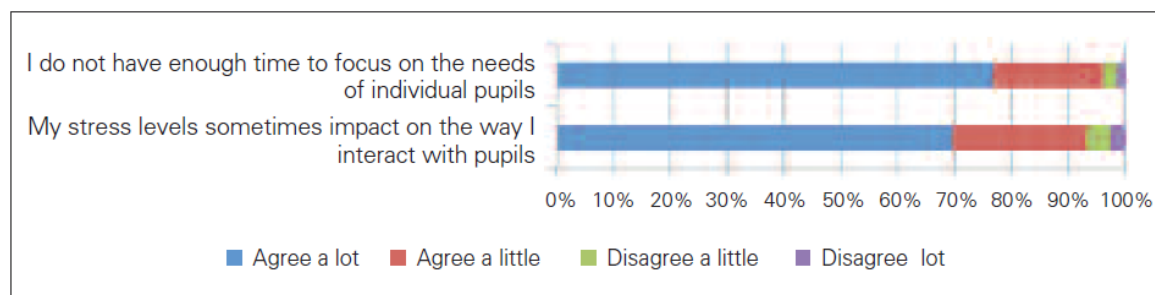
3.1 Teachers are not health professionals, and while they can play a crucial role in identifying children who are experiencing difficulties with their mental health and wellbeing, there must be support services and trained professionals in place to support children who are identified.

3.2 We would support training and development to empower teachers to feel more confident to identify children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties, however, this is not as significant a priority as ensuring adequate funding and capacity for school nurses, CAMHS and other health and education support services. Pastoral posts in schools are vitally important but are being cut in schools to balance budgets in the face of funding cuts.

3.3 What teachers want and need is the time to get to know and respond to their pupils as individuals. Teachers must be able to meet their pupil's learning and social needs in a manner tailored to that child or young person.

3.4 Teachers report that they do not have time to get to know their pupils as individuals because of the testing culture which labels and ranks children as numbers and scores, rather than viewing them as holistic individuals.

Figure 10: Impact of teachers' stress on pupils: Percentage of all respondents giving each response (N = 7,466)



(Hutchings 2015)

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