

EDITORIAL

A Game of Snakes and Ladders

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As I write this Editorial at the beginning of May 2009, there is really very little to be cheerful about, but I will try to look for the 'green shoots' of educational recovery.

To begin on a sour note, Sir Alan Steer's Report for the Government on school discipline produced a predictable spate of negative and despairing newspaper stories on 15 April 2009, the day that it was published; and the BBC One television programme 'The Big Questions', broadcast on 19 April, actually featured a debate as to whether it was now time to reintroduce corporal punishment in schools.

Whatever the issue – whether it's the case against corporal punishment, the arguments in favour of comprehensive education and non-streaming, etc – we seem to be trapped in an 'Ashes to Ashes'-type timewarp, where the same issues need fighting for over and over again. Sometimes we appear to be making progress, but then we fall down all the snakes on the board.

In the circumstances, we need to be grateful for the campaigning work of the National Union of Teachers and the National Association of Head Teachers. This journal has always been opposed to all SATs tests, and this number contains an important article on the subject by Board Member Patrick Yarker. It was good to see the NUT voting unanimously at its recent annual conference in Cardiff for a ballot on a proposed boycott of the 2010 round of tests for 11-year-olds. And this vote came at the same time as a scathing attack on SATs tests by Professor Peter Tymms of Durham University, one of Britain's leading experts on testing and assessment. In Professor Tymms's view, tests for 11-year-olds had 'a serious negative impact on the education system and should be scrapped' (reported in *The Independent*, 10 April 2009). Yet this story also has its downside in that, somewhat paradoxically, the NASUWT seems to be contemplating industrial action if the SATs tests are abolished – thereby giving teachers an increased workload.

Since Patrick wrote his article, the Government has announced the end of Key State Two tests in science from 2010. This may be considered a step in the right direction; but, as NAHT General Secretary Mick Brookes has argued, it could mean a further narrowing of the primary curriculum, with all attention now focussed on just maths and English. More snakes in view.

Whatever the views of Ed Balls, Tim Brighouse, John Dunford and Sir Jim Rose, the NUT seems determined to press ahead with its campaign to see all Sats tests abolished. Speaking on 6 May, NUT General Secretary Christine Blower said:

All of the arguments about getting rid of tests for 14-year-olds apply to the tests for 11-year-olds as well. We really think there is no point in testing every single 11-year-old in the country. Even if there is a will to change the league tables, it won't happen unless you get rid of the tests. We're saying we're happy to do sampling and teaching assessments, but get rid of the tests in all three subjects at Key State Two. (reported in *The Guardian*, 7 May 2009)

This journal has also had serious and well-founded reservations about the original 1987 framework for the National Curriculum in England and Wales; but its steady disintegration over the past 20 years has been both farcical and harmful to the interests of children. In their recent thoughtful and well-informed education document *Equity and Excellence* (to be discussed more fully later in this number), the Liberal Democrats propose that the existing, 'overly prescriptive' 600-page National Curriculum document should be downsized to a Minimum Curriculum Guarantee of just 20 pages, which sounds like a good idea. The Conservatives' plans, on the other hand, would surely result in a situation resembling anarchy. If Academies become 'the norm' at the secondary stage and the idea is extended to the primary sector, what is the point of having a national curriculum, since, as far as the Conservatives are concerned, innovation and curriculum autonomy form an important part of the Academies' *raison d'être*? We'll soon be reaching a situation where there was actually more standardisation before 1988.

To end on a puzzling note. After she died in March 2009, Jade Goody was praised by Gordon Brown for using some of her money to provide a first-class education for her two boys. But that education was to be provided in the independent sector.