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## A Possible Accountability Framework for Primary Education: building on (but going beyond) the recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review

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**ABSTRACT** This article accepts the need for primary school accountability at three levels and indicates how this can be met within the current political climate by building on the recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review, whilst acknowledging, for the present at least, political susceptibilities over testing.

The findings of the Cambridge Review are unequivocal. Primary schools accept the necessity for accountability (including external inspection). The issue is what form that accountability (including inspection) should take. New-style accountability would need to be rendered at national, school and individual levels. Arguably, too, Ofsted needs replacing by a re-invented, Phoenix-like HM Inspectorate fully independent of government.

### **National Level**

In order to secure accountability at national level and to inform national policy related to raising standards the government needs to keep standards under review and to devise a non-intrusive system for assessing pupils' performance in relation to those standards over time. As the Cambridge Review points out, the current system of national assessment at ages seven and eleven does not provide a sufficiently valid or reliable assessment of performance year-on-year.

The government would need to set up an *independent* national body to review standards in a variety of subjects or areas and to devise national tests which reflect those standards. The same set of tests would need to be

administered year-on-year to a very small but representative sample of the school population. The tests would have to be administered confidentially to avoid pressures on schools for test preparation. Data at the national level would be published annually and a reliable picture of changes year-on-year would emerge from an independent source.

In summary: Annual or biannual national surveys of children's performance in all curricular areas at age 11 – based on sampling of both assessment items and pupils – building on the APU model. These would answer the question: 'Are national standards rising or falling?'

### School Level

In order to secure school accountability to parents the government needs a system which assures that individual schools are providing a suitable quality of education and which triggers action should that quality not be evident. Inspection by suitably qualified and experienced inspectors is the most appropriate vehicle for judging quality- whether this be of teaching, learning, curriculum, management, student support or other areas of schooling. The Review is clear that current Ofsted methodology, recruitment and training of inspectors do not provide this and need to be modified in a number of ways to make inspection 'fit for purpose' and therefore more valid and reliable as a medium for accountability.

Inspections would need be lengthened (compared with the current, recently modified model) but not to the same extent as the earlier Ofsted inspection models. This would probably involve lengthening the time between inspections from three to perhaps five years. Such *enhanced inspections* would focus on the classroom, not on the school's paperwork or test data, and would be particularly (but not only) concerned with (a) the quality of children's work and responses *actually observed discussed with teachers and judged* by inspectors; and (b) the quality of teaching and learning based on far more classroom observation than the newly introduced inspection model allows. Inspectors would be required to judge work across the primary curriculum, not selected aspects. As at present, *enhanced inspections* would also report on the effectiveness of the school's procedures for self-evaluation and improvement. A summary of these judgements would be reported publicly to parents, along with a summary of the school's reactions to the inspection judgements. A very adverse report might trigger a *full inspection* or the bringing forward of the timing of the next *enhanced inspection*.

Governors and parents would have the right to request an inspection during the interval between inspections and this request would be considered initially by the Local Authority and, if thought appropriate, later by HM Inspectorate. Inspection teams could include the individual school's SIP who, once suitably trained, would advise the inspection team, might (or might not?) contribute to the team's judgements and would take responsibility with the

head and governors of the school for any follow-up work consequent on the inspection.

In summary: School inspections refocussed on the quality of provision (especially teaching, curriculum, assessment practice and leadership) and issuing publicly available and accessible reports – ideally at three year intervals (ie twice in a child's primary career). These would provide parents and others with periodical appraisals of the quality of education in individual primary schools. They would answer the question: 'How good is my child's primary school?'

### **Individual Level**

At the parental level parents need to be assured that their children are making appropriate progress. To provide parents with information about individual progress teachers need to engage in ongoing assessment and to report its results. This would be provided in part by approaches to assessment for learning and, for the time being at least, in part by testing.

Teachers' proper accountability to parents for the progress made by individual children would both be enhanced enormously by the development of more valid and reliable forms of teacher assessment to judge and promote learning. As the Cambridge Review comments 'Children's learning across all aspects of the curriculum, including their capacity to learn, should be assessed formatively throughout the primary stage and summatively before transfer to secondary school...Work is now urgently needed on the development of a comprehensive and coherent framework of summative assessment that can be administered unobtrusively and with minimum disruption' Such a framework might prove equally welcome to the preparatory sector, who would have expertise to offer in its development. However, as the Review points out, 'This is not straightforward technically and...will require careful research and deliberation' (p. 498) In the meantime, however, schools should be encouraged to undertake, and report, small-scale moderated assessments of children's progress in all curriculum areas.

While this work is being undertaken and perhaps even after the summative framework has been developed and introduced, the government might need to retain some form of national testing focusing on parents' main concerns: i.e. their child's performance in reading, mathematics and basic writing skills. National standardised tests would be needed to provide both summative and (if possible) diagnostic information which would be reported to parents on an individual basis, *not* used as a measure of school accountability (which would be secured instead by quality Ofsted inspections along the lines discussed above). Test data would not be reported on a school-by-school basis (thereby helping to prevent 'teaching to the test' or excessive pressure being placed on teachers for results) but they could be reported at an LA level (if thought desirable).

Such national tests might be administered twice in a child's primary career – once on a one-to-one basis at the end of year 1 (followed where necessary by

programmes of 'reading recovery' and 'number recovery') and once collectively, preferably at the end of year 5 or the beginning of year 6 (followed, where necessary, by more remedial or more challenging work to be provided within the same school before transfer). This slimmed-down programme of testing would replace the current end-of-key-stage tests which even if they were to be administered in year 7 would result in the continued narrowing of the primary curriculum, in 'teaching to the test' in both primary schools and year 7, and, potentially, in creating tensions and possible mistrust between primary and secondary schools.

In summary: All the assessments would be reported to parents, children and others including teachers who 'need to know'. Perhaps in a summary but confidential form they could be made available to governors. They would not be collated as a 'measure' of school performance nor would they be issued as performance tables thereby hopefully eliminating teaching to the test and a narrowing of the school curriculum. They would answer the question 'How is my child progressing?'

At the end of Year 1:

(a) teachers' assessments of children's progress in relation to an agreed but limited number of assessment criteria in each area of learning of the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum plus an overall appraisal of children's attitude to learning and of their ability to learn;

(b) assessment through an informally administered assessment instrument (tests? tasks?) related to children's progress in reading, writing and number.

At the end of years 2, 3 and 4: teachers' assessments of children's progress in relation to an agreed but limited number of assessment criteria in each curricular area plus an overall appraisal of children's attitude to learning and of their ability to learn.

At the end of year 5:

(a) teachers' assessments of children's progress in relation to an agreed but limited number of assessment criteria in each curricular area plus an overall appraisal of children's attitude to learning and of their ability to learn;

(b) assessment through formally administered national tests or other assessment instruments related to children's progress in mathematics, language, oracy and literacy.

At the end of year 6:

(a) summary of teachers' assessments of children's progress in relation to agreed summative assessment criteria in each curricular area plus an overall appraisal of children's attitude and of their ability to learn.

Over time once teacher assessment has established its professional, political and public credibility it might (just might) be possible to dispense with the use of a

national assessment instrument at the end of year 1 and with the use of national tests at the end of year 5.

### **Appropriate Accountability?**

Such a three-fold system, building on and, in some respects, going beyond the recommendations of the Cambridge Review would remove much (though not all) of the burden currently placed on schools by over-controlling regulatory measures by government. It would provide government, schools and parents with appropriate information about progress and performance of both the system as a whole and of individual children, would provide parents and local communities with informed judgments of the quality of individual schools and would, I believe, provide an appropriate and generally acceptable balance between professional autonomy and public accountability.

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