
Has New Labour's Numbers Drive Done Lasting Damage to State Education?

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ABSTRACT The last government's emphasis on results statistics – implicit in its systems for holding teachers to account – as the be-all-and-end-all of a good education, reflected the largely undebated victory of one set of possible aims for schooling over another. Pragmatism beat idealism, as schools' priorities were reshaped along similarly calculating lines to those of New Labour. Education policy seemed to become about raising schools' results to appease sceptical parents who might otherwise depart to the private sector, just as the party fought the Conservatives by trying to appeal to middle-class voters in marginal seats. But the policy has had major flaws, which may undermine state education in the long run.

It was arguably the defining education policy of the New Labour years. The notion of putting pressure on schools to raise their pupils' exam results, then watching as grades improved and more young people went on to higher education and employment, was absolutely central.

Indeed, put in this way, it seems hard even to argue with it as a priority, or to raise questions about its effects. But that is exactly what I want to do. This policy, which has had a greater effect on what goes on in schools over the past 15 years than any other in my view, has been extremely problematic. And, although I share the ideals that no doubt lie behind it in seeking to make sure that more young people emerge from their years at school with something to show for their efforts, I have grave concerns about the results.

New Labour, I think, never really gave the public the proper debate it deserved about the purpose of education. In consequence, one set of ideals – that schooling should be above all about the pursuit of grades which will equip pupils for their future lives – won out, at the expense of broader, deeper and arguably more progressive values that I believe are shared by most teachers. I

think that this is a great shame, and that we might be paying the price for this non-debate for a long time.

Many people much more articulate and far more deeply knowledgeable about the philosophy and history of education than I am have attempted to define a set of aims for schooling, so I am embarking on this task with some caution. For the purposes of this article, though, I want to set out very crudely just two ideals or purposes which, I think, have come to be in conflict within the current system. I have highlighted these two ideals because I think that many *Forum* readers would be sympathetic to both of them.

The first sees education mainly as *useful*. That is, children need good results at school because these will act as a platform for success later in life. A good society, then, would give young people from all backgrounds the chance to do well in the classroom, so that they can move on either directly to lucrative employment, or to further study towards qualifications which will then command value in the jobs market. An unhealthy society would be one in which children from poorer backgrounds in particular find it harder to emerge from schooling without this success, meaning that poverty potentially gets locked in over generations. In this way, education can be seen as having a value in promoting greater social justice. That is a noble aim. (Footnote: I wanted to highlight it here as worthy of deeper consideration because it is, I think, more morally defensible than other notions of the purposes of education, such as that a good schooling system is primarily important because it stands to create a strong economy.)

The second, while not necessarily in conflict with the first, embodies other thinking. Education is important *in its own right*, in promoting a greater understanding of the world, or a deeper engagement with what it is that is being studied. Perhaps paradoxically, this notion of an intrinsic value to the act of learning may also have a useful pay-off in the longer term, in that individuals whose understanding is deepened in this way might be expected to live intellectually enriched, fulfilling lives. But this ideal says education should essentially be pursued for its own sake.

I am very sympathetic to the first ideal. I would have grave reservations about a society in which some people were unable to pursue their ambitions because they lacked the qualifications needed to get on in life, through no fault of their own. However, I think state education has suffered in recent years by becoming hitched to a politically-driven view of the world which implicitly sees schooling *solely* in terms of promoting the first purpose, almost to the exclusion of other possible purposes and certainly at the expense of the second.

The vehicle for the promotion of this first purpose, and for the increased political control over schools under New Labour, has been what I have called hyper-accountability. This is the use of all the persuasive tools under the government's command, including league tables, targets and Ofsted inspections, to remind teachers that their *raison d'être* is improving their pupils' results, as measured by a few centrally-defined indicators.

My 2007 book – *Education by Numbers: the tyranny of testing* – was an attempt to chart the effects of that policy. I wrote it having found myself, as a *Times Educational Supplement* journalist, writing articles almost every week about the side-effects of the results drive. I felt this evidence had to be put forward and weighed in any evaluation of the progress of our education system.

I should say, before mentioning these downsides, that this is not an attempt to say that all that has gone on in schools since the mid-1990s has been bad, or that other Labour policies did not have much to recommend them. The investment in early years education, in support staff, in teachers' pay, in information technology and in school buildings (the latter, though, funded often through future payments under the Private Finance Initiative) may well come to be seen as part of something of a golden era in terms of funding. Teaching policies such as the National Numeracy Strategy seem generally to have been well received by the profession. And one should not forget that surveys, such as that conducted annually by Keele University's Centre for Successful Schools, have consistently found that parents, when asked, tend to be very supportive of their child's school. My argument is simply that too much of the good work now going on in schools has been in spite of, rather than because of, the standards agenda, or the emphasis on test and exam results as the be-all-and-end-all.

The mechanisms, in the New Labour years, for reminding schools that test levels and grades were all will be familiar to any teacher, but just to rehearse them briefly here, they included: the government's performance tables which made clear the performance of children on specified test/exam indicators; Ofsted inspections which in recent years focused closely on test and exam results as key evidence; direct threats from ministers to close schools below a certain level of performance; government targets which saw pressure put on local authorities, and from them on schools, to raise results; performance pay for teachers and heads which could include exam results as a central element; institutionalised pressure from governing bodies on school leaders to raise scores; pressure on teachers through software systems (the most well-known being that run by the Fischer Family Trust charity) which assess pupil performance on exam indicators; and inter-departmental pressure within secondary schools to recruit pupils on the basis of the success of previous year groups in their exams.

All of this underscored the belief implicit in the system that what mattered, above all, was exam results. Although this may never quite have been said by ministers, the production of a set of results is how good teaching, in the reality of the way the schools system works, has been defined. A good teacher is one whose pupils achieve good grades, with only the measure used to capture this quality varying. A teacher who encourages in his or her children a love of the subject but fails to see that translated into better results has failed.

The trouble is, in any complex system such as this in which very great emphasis is placed on a few statistical indicators, loopholes are found which mean that, while the indicators may rise, this may not be because of any

improvement in what the measure was trying to assess in the first place: good teaching. More worryingly, the rush to improve the next set of figures can have downsides for pupils, in terms of building their longer-term understanding and enthusiasm.

Many of these side-effects are well known by now. They include the months that many primary schools spend in repetitively drilling pupils for national tests: an Ofsted report last year, for example, said that some schools were so anxious about English, maths and science test performance, they failed to teach any music in year six, while one experienced English teacher told the Cambridge Primary Review that reading for pleasure had been sidelined because of test preparation; the focus on children who are just near the borderline of achieving the GCSE and test indicators around which league tables revolve, thus, for me, sacrificing the principle of equity in the way children are treated; the fact that England is now out on its own as far as I can see in having the last four years of secondary school, for those taking A-levels, dominated by one exam after another; the fact that some secondary children are pushed towards taking courses because of their league table value to the school rather than to the pupil; the fact that many teachers have felt under pressure to provide what I believe is too much help to their charges for GCSE coursework because of the emphasis placed on the results for the school; and the equation of education with exam success to the extent that school textbooks are now marketed as for 'paper 1' and 'paper 2', with, I think, less opportunity for pupils to become more deeply involved in subjects than previously.

Evidence comes in regularly suggesting further implications. Last year, a study including interviews with students who had gained A grades in the previous year's A-levels in psychology and biology found these undergraduates saying they had succeeded not by mastering the subject in any general sense but by learning the exam's mark scheme. I wrote an article for the *Guardian* about how a history teacher had told an online discussion forum how he had boosted his pupils' grades – and thus his Fischer Family Trust rating – by shopping around for the exam board with the most 'predictable' questions. At a talk I gave last November to the Campaign for State Education, a sixth former told me he had opted not to take French A-level because he wanted to learn French, not how to take an exam in French.

This is not minor or inconsequential. The way the exam-focused accountability system works has had a major influence on the learning experiences of at least a large proportion of the millions of children who have gone through education in recent years.

It is not hard to come across other evidence suggesting that, in the thinking of those with power to influence the decisions schools and teachers take over what and how to teach, a good education has become synonymous with a good set of exam results. Last year, Ofsted said, in guidance to its inspectors, that 'no school can be judged to be good unless learners are judged to make good progress' (as measured by test and exam results). The School Teachers' Review Body, which sets teachers' pay, said that 'outcome indicators',

the most obvious of which are test and exam scores, are how teachers should be judged. 'Our strongly-held view is that teachers are accountable for outcomes, not inputs or activities', it said in 2008, thus writing off the 'input or activity' of good teaching.

Do the public really think that an education is important only in terms of the results generated at the end of it? Does the profession think this? If so, I missed this debate.

There are certainly alternative, well-informed voices out there. The two major independent reviews of education of the last five years – the Cambridge Primary Review and the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education – have both spoken up for education as having value beyond the grades generated at the end of the process, the latter arguing that the language of performance management, as expressed through grades, had replaced that embodied in deeper notions. It said: 'There may well be spin-offs from the teaching of Macbeth (the meeting of externally imposed targets and the passing of exams), but the educational value lies in the engagement with a valuable text'.

But both of these inquiries have struggled for a hearing with the politicians who now shape this system. So why has the results focus taken such a powerful hold? I think there are several reasons.

First, and least controversially, there is the obvious: results are very often important to individual children's futures, and there would appear to be a clear case for making improving the results of those from disadvantaged backgrounds a particular priority. In the face of this pressing need, alternative, perhaps less obvious, purposes for education can struggle for a hearing.

Second, the whole results-driven accountability structure makes sense from a political point of view in that governments have felt the need to generate an improved set of statistics to justify the extra emphasis and funding heading schools' way.

Third, and more subtly, the results drive fits an ideology imposed on state education in England and certainly in the United States which has been borrowed largely from business. This says that the quality of what goes into the educative process is important only to the extent that it influences the 'bottom line': the figures generated at the end. Under that ideology, schools compete with others for the 'business' of parents, and exam numbers can become part of the marketing of individual institutions, or the companies now increasingly running them. For a very insightful view on how business ideology is now driving what happens in the USA, with many parallels to the debate over here, read Diane Ravitch's recent US bestseller: 'The Death and Life of the Great American School System: how testing and choice are undermining education.'

Fourth, numbers in themselves are tremendously powerful. Having easily measurable outcomes gives the appearance of precision in attempting to judge the quality of schools and the teachers within them, as well as assessing pupils. Yet the objectivity they suggest hides a different reality: that all indicators rest on assumptions and that they are often subject to huge over-interpretation.

Fifth, the deployment of statistical monitoring of schools is a useful vehicle by which Whitehall can keep control of the teaching profession. Implicitly, this is felt necessary because a sense of vocation – the notion that many teachers might actually want to help their pupils, even without detailed statistical monitoring – seems to have been disregarded as a meaningful influence on teacher behaviour by key figures. Sir Michael Barber, head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit under David Blunkett, wrote in 2007 that across the public services: ‘However committed the professionals are, they can never have the degree of concern for users [in this case, pupils] that the users have for themselves’.

I think a sixth and final reason suggests itself in the New Labour context. The emphasis on using statistics to demonstrate the success of its policies enabled the party to defend state education not on matters of principle – which might have been based on the kind of educational experiences that all children should have, or on who should have influence in the running of schools – but on more technocratic, less idealistic, grounds. In other words: what was needed was simply to raise the numbers, or the success rate of schools, in order to justify the position of state education to the electorate. Sir Michael Barber, in an article in *The Independent* at the end of Tony Blair’s premiership, said Blair’s greatest legacy would be that school ‘choice, diversity and improved performance persuaded many people who could afford private schooling that the publicly-provided system could meet their aspirations’.

I think New Labour was reluctant to stand up for values in general, instead imposing a more instrumental, results-are-everything, ends-justify-the-means culture on its schools as the only way of defending them to people who might not be convinced of the merits of state education. In doing so, arguably it transferred its own sense of political calculation into our classrooms, telling teachers: you can have ideals, but only if they translate into better ‘outcomes’, on our measures, at the end of the process. Schools, then, were made a tool of a political process which said that politicians needed results to justify their policies to the electorate.

The key question, of course, is whether this drive has succeeded. The most obvious response is to look at the rise in GCSE and A-level grades over recent years and to argue that the figures – which I won’t quote in detail here; they are clearly impressive if taken at face value – show that many more young people are leaving school having succeeded. However, the policy has a flaw: while improvements in national results may present at first glance evidence that our education system is improving, paradoxically they may actually do little for learners themselves, unless the underlying learning they purport to measure really has improved as the numbers suggest. This is because to a large degree grades in themselves have only relative value to those who obtain them. In other words, if government policies mean grades nationally rise, then I as a pupil may have a larger chance of getting a good grade. However, so might other pupils with whom I will compete in the labour and higher education market, so it is not clear that I have benefited from a national results rise. The

current shortage of university places makes this reality especially clear: only those with the best grades, relative to others with whom they are competing, will get in, and the fact that nationally results are improving, while perhaps welcome news to the politicians running the system, will be of little consolation to those young people who miss out. In terms of social justice, and the much-discussed drive for social mobility, there is at best patchy evidence that the results drive has translated into better access for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to the most selective universities.

There is not space here to go into a discussion about whether rising grades actually stand for rising underlying improving levels of understanding among young people, but suffice it to say that I think the only possible position in relation to that question is genuine scepticism, not least because too much about the exams system has changed in recent years to make aggregate exam statistics very good measures of national standards; and because teaching to the exam makes it difficult to read grade statistics as measuring anything broader or deeper than the ability of students to pass particular tests.

Did the results drive succeed, in helping politicians justify the investment in education to the electorate, and by extension also in defending state education from attacks from its critics? I do not think that it has worked. While ministers were indeed able to come up with statistics purporting to show that performance has risen, the figures were, it is fair to say, not universally greeted positively in the media. In part, this was unfair: rising statistics were routinely turned around to say that 'x per cent of pupils had not achieved to the government's expectations', without any sense in much of the reporting of how the statistics had improved dramatically over the years. In fact, the publication of sets of exam statistics several times a year just gave the press a chance to depict schools as failing, since results would never be high enough.

But that reaction from the press was perhaps predictable. And, as I have argued above, a general sense of scepticism from them about what, for the secondary exams at least, amounted to year after year of steady rises in the statistics actually meant was a rational position. Improvements in national test results trumpeted by the politicians have also been questioned, to convincing effect, by independent academics. The emphasis on rising statistics almost as ends in themselves was, in the end, then, I think, self-defeating, both for the politicians and probably for the pupils, too.

I think it is a shame that politicians were not more willing to talk about the kinds of values for which state schools should stand, and particularly for the importance of high-quality, engaging teaching conducted by thinking professionals. I have no doubt that much of this good teaching has been going on throughout the past 15 years: indeed I have seen some fantastic work showcased, in particular, at the conferences of teachers' subject associations. It is just a pity that it has had to fight for influence against a system which says that a number to be put on a spreadsheet is all that matters, in the end.

New Labour sought to take on those who would criticise state education as 'failing', but very much on the latter's terms, in seeking to produce statistics

showing that schools were not as bad as their detractors said they were. I think it would have been better advised to concentrate specifically on guaranteeing the quality of the learning experience for pupils, rather than the numbers generated at the end of that experience. It could also have done more to promote the fact that many parents are actually supportive of the schools their children attend, rather than emphasising 'failure' in the system as it talked up its own tough measures to take on underperformance where it found it. The party's stance has left state education, I think, more vulnerable to attack from a Conservative-led new government which may not be nearly so well disposed towards the concept of state schooling as Labour traditionally has been.

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