
League Tables Must Go: there are better ways of ensuring a quality education for all our children

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ABSTRACT Despite claims made for them, many current education policies have perverse consequences. If all our children are to benefit from the good education they deserve, we need: forms of accountability that do not rely on school performance tables of test results; a focus on standards that embody high expectations for all; the urgent creation of a College of Teaching; the establishment of a national board of education that sits above party politics and can plan long term.

Anyone who tells the current Government that its policies are wrong risks being labelled an enemy of promise. Ministers have claimed the moral high ground by arguing that their reforms have been relentlessly focused on raising standards of achievement in important subjects for all school students, especially those from disadvantaged communities.

It is difficult to argue with this. No educator is against providing the best opportunities for all students to acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions that will lead to productive work, promote personal development, and support responsible citizenship. The problem is that the mechanisms used have perverse incentives that often drive behaviour in the opposite direction.

In tune with what is known as the Global Education Reform Movement, the Government's 'solutions' to perceived problems have been neo-liberal and structural. On the assumption that competition improves quality, a free market in schooling to promote diversity and choice has been created, with results in national and international tests and examinations as key performance indicators. Although much has been claimed about giving schools more autonomy over pedagogy and formative assessment, practices are constrained by targets that have profound consequences for teachers' pay, head teachers' jobs and the viability of schools.

As the Assessment Reform Group wrote in 2009, 'Assessment information has become a proxy measure that is supposed to facilitate judgments on the quality of most elements of our education system: its *teachers, head teachers, schools, support services, local authorities* and even the *government* itself' (Mansell et al, 2009, p. 7, original emphasis).

In 1988, the Task Group on Assessment and Testing identified four main purposes for assessments: formative, diagnostic, summative and evaluative. In 2011 Lord Bew's review of Key Stage 2 assessment and accountability identified three main uses of assessment data: holding schools accountable, reporting individual performance to parents, and enabling benchmarking and monitoring of local and national performance. The shift in emphasis is significant. The discourse is now so dominated by *school performance* that the *education of children* is diminished.

The role of league tables in the evaluation of schools has promoted gaming, e.g. selecting 'easier' examination syllabuses; teaching to the tests such that test practice becomes the de facto curriculum; covert social selection of students; tactical manoeuvres by savvy parents to ensure entry to the 'best' schools. These behaviours risk increasing the gaps between high and low achievers (and the socially advantaged and disadvantaged) without enhancing the quality of education overall. Ministers have attempted to address some of these concerns but have been reluctant to do anything about the root cause – the commitment to a policy, unknown in other countries, of publishing school-by-school performance tables and using them as the basis for school inspections that cause even outstanding head teachers to have sleepless nights.

Once such powerful instruments of policy have been established, politicians are loath to dismantle them. Moreover, the pace of reform has left the opposition parties weak: reacting to detail rather than offering bold, holistic alternatives. They may judge, rightly, that teachers are so exhausted that there is no appetite for more change. However, doing nothing of any substance will steer the system further down the route towards marketisation and privatisation of schooling. This will not raise standards of education for all or increase social mobility; it will merely allow those with more social and financial capital to gain advantage, one way or another.

So, what to do? The first priority is to scrap the publication of school-by-school performance tables. Monitoring of standards across the nation can be achieved by sample-based assessments, as in Finland, and these can be used to inform parents of how their child is doing in comparison with the national picture. Results at school level could still be made available to inspectors but these should not be formally published or carry the weight they now have in the inspection process. They should only be one element of information, among many.

Secondly, the new government should adopt a sharp focus on promoting 'high expectations for all' – standards rather than structures. The 2011 report of the Expert Panel to the National Curriculum Review identified ten dimensions of this:

1. Presumption of capability for improvement
2. Maintenance of high expectations
3. A focused curriculum with appropriate depth
4. Tangible learning objectives
5. Constructive feedback for all pupils
6. Valuing of effort
7. Resolute commitment to essential knowledge for all
8. Monitoring to record the attainment of pupils who are 'ready-to-progress' (to the next key area in substantive learning)
9. Provision of pupil support to maintain progress
10. Engagement of parents and carers in authentic learning.

Thirdly, moves to create a College of Teaching should be accelerated because educational change requires sustained professional development in line with agreed standards. The profession needs to take responsibility for this with the consent of all stakeholders.

Finally, we need to break the tyranny of the political football match that education policy making has become. Ministers are here today and gone tomorrow but teachers need to be protected from the constant, stressful and sometimes pointless change that can make them passive. In Hong Kong, root and branch education reform involved 12 years of planning, experimentation, alignment, liaison, consultation, public engagement, review, readjustment, fine-tuning and renewal. Hong Kong, of course, has a one-party system that enables longer-term planning. In multi-party states, like Finland, similar long-term policy development, with intermediate goals, has been possible through national boards of education that sit above and across party politics. The time has come to consider something similar in England.

Unfortunately, in a world increasingly controlled by global corporations, education and health are among the few areas where governments can be seen to make a difference. So I don't expect any future government to relinquish its existing powers any time soon. But I would love to be proved wrong.

References

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