

A Cautionary Tale...

By Chris Harrison, Past President ESHA

Looking back to my first days as a head teacher, it is actually quite hard to think back to a time before we had three key components to the nation's educational scene which now dominate so much of the work we all do in our schools. The key areas were a National Curriculum, the financial delegation of funding to schools (LMS) and the introduction of school inspections within a common national framework (Ofsted).

However, the educational and political context within which these three components became the norm for the world of schools all took place across the very short period of a little over a decade starting from the Callaghan 'great debate' in the 1970s. Teacher union's industrial action (early in Margaret Thatcher's first term) which focused on the withdrawal of 'teacher goodwill' at lunchtime and for the wide range after school activities provided the background within which many saw the demise of a real breadth of opportunity for all children to succeed and enjoy school whether academically talented, or not.

What I can remember clearly is that I was already working within my second headship before hearing a local education authority (LEA) adviser using the term 'curriculum' when referring to the day to day work of teachers and children in the primary classroom. I also remember the introduction of the 'Raspberry Ripples' – the government publications for each area of the curriculum issued soon after the conclusion of long-running industrial action. Schools were encouraged to explore the benefits arising from having a common curriculum offer to all which would then provide real consistency, continuity and progression in learning for an increasingly mobile school population (due to societal shifts in workplace and employment across the UK). The consultation and publication of the new National Curriculum quickly followed with a phased training and an introduction timeframe which meant that many schools found that teachers needed to attend these sessions in preference to the wholesale re-introduction of school lunchtime clubs, out of school activities and weekend events. As a consequence, the narrowing of opportunity for those who were not academically inclined had now begun.

The semi-privatisation of state education through the grant maintained programme was clearly aimed at breaking the control of the LEA's monopoly of running schools. The Thatcherite dream of schools marketing themselves to parents and their communities, determining their own pay and conditions of service for staff and achieving full financial autonomy was realised through the development of the LMS model with its' increasing levels of financial delegation of funding to schools. A key element of such autonomy was the parallel introduction of appraisal systems which eventually included the current performance management model of 'payment by results' where school performance results are used

to formally inform pay progression at all levels. As then, the new UK government has recently announced within its Academy programme, a state education model can develop with an encouragement for greater autonomy to schools for determining their curriculum model, pupil intake and the staffing choices of who was employed in the school. However, the final part of the jigsaw remained with the question of how should such a system be managed, and by whom?

Interestingly, although it is nearly two decades since the Thatcherite period, the influence remains strong with subsequent reinforcement and endorsement of the original legacy question on school governance by successive Labour government(s). The underlying factors which govern and regulate an accountability and inspection system that holds to account and influences every teacher in every classroom in England through a school's position in league tables and through data-led targets and performance pay for all led to the creation of Ofsted. As an authority (Ofsted) was established specifically to both regulate and inform the nation's elected (national) politicians and their civil service as the effective guardians of the public interest.

Still interested? Read more of a detailed description of the politics of these more recent times in Sir Michael Barber's 'Instruction to Deliver' where the role of league tables remains promoted as the most effective means of driving up standards in schools whilst at the same time holding both teachers and schools to account for their performance. Such pressure to perform for teachers and their schools is emphasized within the comment 'However committed the professionals are, they can never have the degree of concern for users (of public services) that users have for themselves.' This is a clear divide whereby teachers and schools as producers are seen as unable to meet the needs of, and serve, their children and the community agenda. What I do believe is that it is the very creativity, innovation and new ideas which teachers bring to their work in the classroom each day that makes the real difference to standards (not structures) because we all want the best for our pupils.

Ofsted inspection has changed significantly from the original model – with the current system encouraging inspectors to give advice and guidance to schools as part of the process. Proportionate inspection will now see some schools in a permanent state of 'professional expectation' as a consequence of an annual visit(s) timetable for a school compared with an up to five year 'gap' for those working in the highest achieving settings. Therefore, the importance of a school's online Self Evaluation Form, last inspection report and current performance/results cannot be underestimated as is these key documents which are 'desktop analysed' in order to determine the overall risk and need for an inspection visit, or not.

Schools now needing to chase their latest set of exam results to meet an externally agreed target reflect a culture whereby teachers themselves

feel they are judged against their colleagues through test/exam results and then put under pressure to perform raise standards even higher. With such a culture, of course, whenever a school (or teacher) actually meets its targets, there is the chance that the setting will be then be charged with having set targets which weren't sufficiently aspirational or challenging in the first place! The argument that league tables present a transparent and easy point of reference for accurate information about school performance is opaque at best and at worst enables schools to make false claims eg to suggest that a school is best because it is high in the league tables is undoubtedly wrong. Why? Because it will be best at some things, but other schools lower down in the table will also be best at some things – particularly where they have achieved tremendous progress in giving a child the confidence he/she needed to thrive in the school experience.

In the NAHT's Charter for Assessment and Accountability we set out why we acknowledge that it is entirely right that schools are accountable for the huge level of trust placed in them by their parents and local communities and for the funding levels of public money spent on them at both the local and national level. We also set out where and why we think that the present model is seriously flawed and how a far better ambition can be achieved through consensus in the future if we focus on supporting the best of teaching practice in understanding and engaging with pupils and their learning. We are not against testing or exams, rather we are committed to a beneficial form of assessment and tests where we can enhance and rely on their validity and use in the classroom by teachers.

At the core of the problem lies the present system where SATs (Standardised Assessment Tests) are increasingly 'used' for multiple purposes of assessment and evaluation, as follows:

- to give parents the information they need to compare different schools, choose the right school for their child and then to track their child's progress
- to provide headteachers and teachers with the information they need to assess the progress of every child in their school
- to allow the public to hold national and local government (and governing bodies) to account for the performance of schools.

Additionally, there are three key problems associated with tests and the testing process itself:

- the assumption that scores in tests are completely accurate
- that a short test can accurately judge performance in a multi-faceted task eg writing
- that tests can in themselves drive up standards in learning – and, odd to have an indicator that learning has occurred with learning itself

If the original purposes of the design of tests is to confirm what it is that a pupil knows, understands and can do and then for those results to become used as proxy measures of the quality of teachers, headteachers, schools, local authorities, the government and (ultimately) the nation itself has to be questioned. Such high stakes cause the misinterpretation, misuse and number crunching games by all participants, resulting in schools spending a disproportionate amount of time and energy devoted to improving performance by drilling learning to achieve small percentage gains at the expense of teaching for deeper learning and understanding by pupils.

So, if we want an assessment, testing and accountability model which is fit for purpose we shall need to develop professional competency against the following criteria:

- classroom practice which enables a teacher to fully recognize, value and use formative assessment to support learning at all levels without a focus on ratcheting up scores at borderline levels by teaching to the tests
- confidence and professional understanding of the tests themselves, including the measurement error of the test itself
- reflection of test validity of measures themselves eg is the use of specific punctuation an accurate definition of whether an 11-year old can write
- the overall cost of testing for external purposes needs to be assessed in terms of value for money – is the money well spent? What else could it be spent on to greater effect?
- a system of national summary data collection (sampling?) to provide measurement of trends over time within the education system

In essence, if we are entering a period whereby public sector services move from a period of sustained increases in funding to a future which will place far greater emphasis and pressure on all resources, questions arise about what should be measured, how it should be measured and by how much the state should devote its total resources to their measurement. The costs of measurement systems themselves will increasingly come under scrutiny within the VFM agenda, particularly when answering the basic question of 'which other front line service(s) could the money be better spent on? Spending in UK schools follows a three-year cycle with the current 2008-11 cycle seeing sufficient financial growth maintained to schools until March 2011. In 2011-12 there will be a 'one off' year before the next three-year cycle is introduced in 2012-15; the years of plenty within the system will undoubtedly be replaced with a clear need to demonstrate where and why funding is required in frontline services such as schools.

Therefore, if for no other reason, league tables, rankings, output scores and similar exercises will in themselves come under increased scrutiny

and questioning in the future – especially where the public has little trust in official statistics and where rankings of some public services are carried out by private/independent organizations in many countries. Interestingly, school leaders remain in the highest category of trusted public sector employees by the public at large with confidence levels consistently placed higher than doctors and hospital consultants.

We can all learn from comparison. But, if comparison is to be effective (believed with confidence) there must be commensurability of the indicators used across the world of public services – especially for commensurability of indicators between countries. A developing culture of identifying, sharing and promoting the best of practice is a key element to the vision for ESHA in the future. Sharing what works well in schools and school leadership across Europe may not necessarily provide any ‘quick wins’ for politicians and individual governments today, but the longer-term benefits and payoffs for the wider world of education could prove to be substantial. We need to think carefully about which performance indicators (PIs) are used and for what purpose in managing and measuring systems, ranking organizations, targeting standards and for how to make use of professional ‘intelligence.’ The risk of not using such PIs more intelligently to identify how to improve/maintain performance at a time of funding austerity is to lose trust and confidence from those leading and managing schools today.