

Joking aside – we still continue to believe children are priceless



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IN 2000 I was presented with a cuddly baby polar bear to commemorate my time as a Director of Education. The reason for this was because I told the polar bear joke 'ad nauseam' in the 1990s. I will tell it again now!

One day a baby polar bear confided in his mum that he did not feel he was a polar bear. His mam replied: "Have you white fur?" "Yes" said the baby bear. "Well you are a polar bear".

The baby bear repeated his concern that he did not feel like a polar bear. "Have you big padded feet to protect you from the cold snow and long eye lashes to protect you from the snowy glare?" "Yes" answered the little bear. "Then you are a polar bear".

As the little bear kept expressing his anxieties the mother then said. "Do you like fish?" When the little bear admitted he liked fish the exasperated mother bear finally said. "You have white fur, pads on your feet, long eye lashes and you have fish every Friday night. So why do you still think you are not a polar bear?"

"I'm b****y freezing" cried the baby bear.

For a number of years after the introduction of Local Financial Management in the early 1990s, later to be known as Local Management of Schools (LMS), headteachers would continue to express concerns about the change in their role. My answer was to tell the 'Polar Bear Joke'. Let me explain.

Before 1988, schools only had control over 'capitation'. Every year we would receive our 'capitation' allowance. This essentially covered the cost of books and materials. In a modern school the greatest part of the budget is staff costs with a smaller portion covering building costs. In those days the staff were employed and the buildings maintained by the local authority.

Prior to LMS I would have an annual meeting (or structured argument) with the local authority when we would haggle about the number of staff I was entitled to. I would argue that the numbers coming in would require, say 60 teachers, and the LEA Director would pitch at 59. We would then come to a compromise of fifty nine and a half.

Our new responsibility for the



➤ A polar bear and its cub

school buildings introduced new areas for 'discussion'. At one meeting I wanted a new form of roof covering, rather than the type proposed by the LA. I lost the argument as the Tarmac team in the LA were the only people who could fix the roof.

When 'local management of schools' (LMS) was introduced we were given far greater control, managing almost the whole budget. It then became the responsibility of the local authority to transfer the school's budget to the governing body. School budgets would be determined on the basis of an 'allocation formula' based on the number and ages of the pupils in the school and the number of pupils with special needs (38(3)). A new phrase entered general parlance: 'the Age Weighted Pupil Unit'. My governing body would also now take responsibility for the appointment and dismissal of staff.

This occurred in my first years of headship. To be honest as a young head I was very excited about this innovation. The longer serving heads were concerned about the change in focus of their role from a headteacher to a head manager.

I remember, at the time, giving a talk to the National Association of Pastoral Care entitled 'Suffer the Age Weighted Unit to come unto me'. My point was that there was a danger that we would start viewing children as potential income opportunities. Many heads at the time were concerned that LMS would make them 'institutional managers' rather than educationalists, now focusing on employment law, health and safety legislation, buildings maintenance, the budget and appointment and dismissal of staff.

In fact the 'new freedom'

headteachers were offered, the freedom to manage a budget, was largely illusory. As the staffing took up most of their budget, the ability to be creative and introduce their own financial priorities was almost non-existent. I always wondered whether the year on year reduction in the school budget after LMS was pure coincidence.

So when headteachers continued to question their role as headteachers or institutional managers I would tell the Polar Bear joke and the say, "Do you manage a budget. Do you appoint staff? Are you concerned about staffing appointments and legal issues? In fact you have always had an involvement in these issues before and after LMS. I know all these responsibilities seem a long way from being a teacher and leave you 'cold' but the bottom line is you are a manager as well as a 'headteacher', and always have been."

It is always an interesting irony that prior to LMS headteachers had much more control over what was taught in their schools but no control over the money.

Today it could be said that it is the other way round.

Of course I then had to explain to governors, who were and still are unpaid volunteers, that they had significantly increased responsibility for all aspects of the school. They then had to suffer the Polar Bear joke.

Later when I became Director of Education I did think about asking all the school traffic wardens to put on their 'Lollipops...Caution! Age Weighted Unit Crossing. Value £2,300'. I didn't, of course.

We still continue to believe that our children are priceless.