

It really isn't all about playing the percentages

Ofsted can measure this and measure that. But can they evaluate what is really important, asks LES WALTON

LET me say right from the start that our ability to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of a school has been one of the greatest improvements in the last quarter of a century. Also Ofsted's contribution to our understanding of how a school is doing has been tremendous.

However I have concerns.

For as long as I can remember parents ask a very simple question when discussing their child's school. What is the school like? When I was a young teacher my answer usually focused on the curriculum on offer, pupil behaviour, the 'extracurricular' activities and most importantly, whether the children enjoyed being there.

So we would say "This is a really good school, the children are happy and well behaved, the lessons are really good and we do lots of exciting things."

Today the answer is much more forensic: 'the percentage of pupils who achieve 5GCSE A* to C with English and Maths is 50%, the percentage of lessons which are good is 70%'. So like the TV programme 'Mock the Week' the question we are looking for with the answer 'from 25% to 40%' is "What is the school like?"

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment* in 1866. His concern regarding treating people as objects rings true today. "A percentage! What splendid words they have; they are so scientific, so consolatory ... Once you've said 'percentage' there's nothing more to worry about. If we had any other word... maybe we might feel more uneasy..."

Nearly 20 years ago some friends from Illinois, USA, who worked as education advisers visited us in the UK. I asked them how they went about supporting schools. They were what we now call school development partners (SDPs), specialist advisers, who would work with the leadership of schools. Today SDPs, or their equivalents, are trained intensively in the use of 'data' in order to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of schools.

Thus a report about the school will have incredible detail about the percentages regarding teaching, behaviour, and attendance, levels of progress and the impact of initiatives such as the Pupil Premium.

When I met the school improve-



➤ Great schools are about more than just percentages

ment specialist from Chicago all those years ago he described his work thus ... "Well Les. I pop into the staff room and ask 'How's it going guys? They tell me ... then I have a little think and give them good advice."

I accept this was more than a decade ago and I understand that today, the USA system of school support is moving much more towards our more analytical approach.

A sign which used to hang in Einstein's office at Princeton University reminds us to be careful about what we measure. "Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts."

No matter how hard external inspectors work we must always remember that a school inspection primarily provides a picture of a school based on 'measurable data'.

The other important thing to remember about the judgements of most external inspectors is that they measure the here and now or the past. Quite rightly they don't measure what may be.

I have always believed that it was not pure chance that the advent of a centralised inspection system coincided with the invention of excel spreadsheets and computer data bases. It would be really interesting to conceive of an inspection regime without computers.

Thus, with the advent of computers, we became 'pupil quantifiers'. External inspectors have since developed the art of using data and information to evaluate schools. This then begs the question as to whether they can evaluate climate, culture and ethos - the lead indicators for success.

Recently there has been a lot of discussion about whether 'auto correct' is improving children's English. Thus when a child forgets to use an apostrophe such as in 'you're' then it will pop one in.

The problem with this argument is that often apostrophes relate to what is coming in the sentence, not what

has already been written. This is essentially the issue with school inspection. Of course it is important to understand where a school has been and what it is like at the present. However for many parents there is a need to ask the question about what it will be like when their child arrives in a year's time.

A question which is often asked about schools is 'does it have the right 'climate for improvement?' Unfortunately this aspect of schools receives insufficient focus.

In business, potential investors would be more interested in the future performance of an organisation and would wish to have 'lead indicators' to inform their judgements.

Of course we can assess 'lead indicators' - such as staff turnover, recent appointments, leadership team capacity, predicted pupil intake, financial standing etc, but look at Newcastle United now and ask yourself the question 'Is the climate right for future improvement?' (Sorry I shouldn't have asked!)

The advent of performance indicators and league tables have without doubt helped to inform and support parents in choosing the right school for their child.

However such data may lead us to have a limited perception of the value of the whole child. It is interesting that headteachers now want to produce their own league tables which provide a wider view of what is going on in a school.

The motto chosen by the founders of the Statistical Society in 1834 was *Aliis extendum*, which means "let others thrash it out". Parents of course do not judge their own children based on statistical information. They care about all aspects of their child's development and in the end will use common sense when making decisions. In the end they will 'thrash it out'.

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