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# Leading article: An oppressive system that is failing our children

Friday, 8 February 2008

The first significant and independent study of Britain's primary schools since the 1967 Plowden Report has exposed just how widespread the culture of testing has become within our education system. The Primary Review, overseen by the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge, found that primary school children in England were subjected to far more assessment than their peers in other developed countries. According to the report, external testing in England takes place more frequently, begins at a younger age, and covers more subjects than testing in schools overseas. It is also a more "high stakes" system than any other comparable educational system, which means that the fortunes of schools are heavily bound up with how pupils perform in their assessment tests.

This is unlikely to surprise parents, who have long been complaining that their school-age children seem to be on a never-ending treadmill of assessments and exams. There are nationwide statutory tests for children at ages seven and 11. At secondary school, this is followed by further tests at age 14, and then GCSEs and A-levels at 16-plus. It is little wonder that there has been a considerable backlash against compulsory testing.

Some national testing is, of course, necessary. And, as the report shows, all developed countries have some system for measuring attainment before pupils sit major public exams in their teens. Schools must be held to account. If pupils are not progressing as well as those elsewhere, this must be brought to light. Too often in the past, failure was concealed by insufficient assessment.

But the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. Many teachers find themselves doing little else than priming and preparing pupils for the next round of tests. This stifles creativity and is a terrible way to engender a love of learning among children. The system is also counter-productive from an educational perspective. Pupils are increasingly being "taught to the test". They become adept at jumping through hoops but not at thinking for themselves. As an Ofsted report on maths teaching in secondary schools put it: "Although students are able to pass the examinations, they are not able to apply their knowledge independently to new contexts, and they are not well prepared for further study."

At the heart of the problem is the fact that our testing culture appears to be politically, rather than educationally, driven. Government ministers like tests and the constant stream of results they produce because it enables them, in their dealings with the media, to point to rising educational standards. The publishing of school "league tables" is another political, rather than educational, tool. These exist so that ministers can claim credit for schools "moving up" the tables. But these ranking tables merely force teachers and headteachers to concentrate on tests to the detriment of other aspects of school life. The testing culture is thus a product of two of this Government's greatest vices: an obsession with presentation and an instinct towards top-down control.

Just because other countries do things differently does not make it right that we should emulate them. But the evidence suggests many other nations are doing a better job of educating young people than us. According to latest figures from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, Britain has been slipping down the international table for quality of learning in maths and reading. Complacency is entirely inappropriate.

Teachers are against constant testing. Parents are dissatisfied with the pressure it puts on pupils. Examiners are also unhappy. Ken Boston, the chief executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, has suggested moving towards a sampling system. The only players still clinging to the wreckage of the present testing arrangements are ministers. It is time for them to let go.

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