

Intelligent Accountability

We are living in an era of unprecedented accountability in public services, and nowhere is this more evident than in the field of education. Although there is a whole generation of teachers for whom this is the norm, it was not always the case. Some of us are long enough in the tooth to recall the days when school leaders were trusted to operate in the best interests of their pupils, and deference to the professionals was the default position of parents and politicians alike. As someone who started my teaching career in 1988, I can honestly say that I did not have anything approaching a formal lesson observation from the end of my NQT year until 1995, at which point I had been a Deputy for more than 3 years. Not only that, no external testing meant that it was difficult to know how my Year 6 pupils, or the school as a whole, was performing compared to anyone else. There was no performance management or appraisal, no teacher standards to evaluate performance, very few opportunities to observe colleagues.

The problem with these halcyon days was that quite a lot of what took place in the classroom was, to be blunt, pretty poor. I say this with the benefit of hindsight because at the time, it was difficult to know for sure what good or poor teaching looked like. Talk to anyone working in schools at that time (or think back to your own schooldays if you're old enough) and you will hear stories of practice that would make your hair curl – every school seemed to have its own example of the mad, the bad or the criminally incompetent. There were occasional professional development opportunities, and once in a while you might meet someone who had been in a school that had been visited by HMI, but I never heard of anyone who had lost their job or suffered other professional consequences as a result of poor performance (or any other reason for that matter).

How times change. The notion of accountability has become a fundamental part of the educational landscape, despite only taking hold over the last twenty years. From individual teachers' performance to that of whole systems, performative norms have been set out (and frequently changed and contested), judgements made and either rewards received or consequences suffered. As Christine Gilbert, former HMCI, says: 'It is hard to imagine any discussion of educational reform amongst policymakers or professionals where the word 'accountability' would not be used.' (Gilbert, 2012).

Surely, professionals being held to account has to be a good thing? Well it should be, but one of the problems with accountability is that although few of us object to it in principle, something seems to go wrong when it is put into practice. Just some examples of the negative consequences include:

- Perverse incentives to meet accountability measures that distort the system, for example leading to 'off-rolling', or 'gaming' (ECDL, anyone?);
- Individuals put under intolerable stress, feeding into the retention and recruitment crisis, and careers cut short of people who still have much to contribute;
- Accountability measures that have to be simple enough to be useful (e.g. league tables) but which do not capture the complexity of schools, leading to a skewed or inaccurate picture;

- Schools that are struggling to improve given further obstacles to overcome, undermining the process.

It's not as if this has gone unnoticed. Ken Leithwood points out that if it goes too far, the consequences of a culture of accountability can be disastrous:

'For students, such consequences may include, minimising their individual differences, narrowing curriculum to which they are exposed, diverting enormous amounts of time from instruction to test preparation, and negatively influencing schools' willingness to accept students with weak academic records. ... [The] consequences for teachers, include the creation of incentives for cheating, feelings of shame, guilt and anger, and a sense of dissonance and alienation ... [and] to the atrophy of teachers' instructional repertoires.' (Leithwood, 2005)

Despite all the misgivings, this particular genie is very much out of the bottle. It has been interesting to read many social media responses to the proposed new framework which have essentially proposed that Ofsted should no longer judge schools – an unlikely outcome of the consultation. Although this call is often accompanied by the suggestion of a collaborative, self-improving school system, it seems to me that this is a false opposition – a system with intelligent accountability does not have to be inimical to school improvement.

To consider what this might look like, it is helpful to consider the purposes of accountability, which are dependent upon the perspective of the stakeholder.

Purpose of accountability	Audience
To give assurances that public money is being well spent and government policy is faithfully implemented	Government System leaders Voters / Taxpayers
To give accurate feedback on the performance of individual schools and enable informed choices	Parents / carers Governors / Trustees
To develop curriculum, teaching and learning, and bring about school and system improvement	Practitioners School leaders

All of these purposes are legitimate and all must therefore be met. However, the problems come when we try and use the same processes to meet all three, ignoring the fact that each has a particular audience. For example, it is reasonable for politicians to ensure that the policies they have been elected to pursue and have voted into statute are in place, and that they are having their intended impact. It is also helpful for parents to make informed choices when they are choosing schools for their children, and for school leaders and teachers to understand which strategies are effective in the classroom. What is less helpful is for parents to be presented with performance data that lacks sufficient context and may not be relevant to the needs of their child, or for schools to try and discern school improvement strategies by second-guessing what Ofsted may be looking for based on their most recent report.

Proposals

How do we therefore meet these competing purposes in an intelligent way? Firstly, by understanding which is the appropriate method of information-gathering, and then by ensuring they are fit for purpose.

<i>Purpose of accountability</i>	<i>Audience</i>	<i>Method</i>
<i>To give assurances that public money is being well spent and government policy is faithfully implemented</i>	<i>Government System leaders Voters / Taxpayers</i>	<i>Externally validated performance data</i>
<i>To give accurate feedback on the performance of individual schools and enable informed choices</i>	<i>Parents / carers Governors / Trustees</i>	<i>Ofsted inspection</i>
<i>To develop curriculum, teaching and learning, and bring about school and system improvement</i>	<i>Practitioners School leaders</i>	<i>Supported school review and self-evaluation</i>

- Externally validated performance data

There is huge suspicion among school leaders concerning performance data and the way that it is used and presented. The crude way that school performance can be reduced to a handful of figures will always lead to inaccurate or unhelpful conclusions, and unintended consequences. For example, the current concerns about narrowing of the curriculum can clearly be related to the impact of performance measures that prioritise a handful of subjects, in particular English and Maths.

However, the use of performance data has also brought benefits. It has highlighted major issues – for disadvantaged students, white working-class boys, looked-after children and so on. Without the data, we would not have understood how the system was failing these groups. It's enabled us to raise aspirations, and to target underperforming students. It has allowed us to show the impact of our work, and to see how our system compares with others, and what we can learn. It has also, dare I say it, increased the rigour and pace in schools, by giving a clear understanding of what we are aiming for, and what success really looks like.

So we need to use performance data intelligently. By removing incentives to game the system or respond to a narrow range of key performance measures, the meaningfulness of the data immediately increases. The paradox is that the more importance given to the data, the less valuable it is.

I propose a two-track approach to performance data. Firstly, we continue to provide the analytical tools that currently exist – ASP / IDSR etc – and in fact we extend the availability and usability of all our data - national, regional, contextualized. This becomes freely and publicly available – but anonymised at the school level. It becomes a powerful tool for all and allows LAs, MATs and commercial data companies to increase the effectiveness of their analysis. In this context, we encourage schools to share other data – Y7 catch-up progress

data for example – based on the simple principle that by sharing your own data, you can access everyone else's.

Alongside this, we provide a basic public summary of performance over time, which is sophisticated enough to iron out some of the more egregious consequences of the crude use of data that currently exists. Among many suggestions, one that caught my eye was this, proposed in a recent blog by Stephen Tierney, CEO of BEBCMAT and author of 'Liminal Leadership':

'Move to a rolling three-year contextualised value added score (outliers capped; off rolled back in) as one way of assessing whether a school is providing an effective education. This will help identify those schools in need of additional support and scrutiny. It will also remove the burden and unnecessarily threatening accountability hammer that hangs over too many schools.'

- Ofsted inspection

The suspicion and trepidation with which schools greet Ofsted is based on bitter experience in many cases. My doctoral study, 'After Ofsted Failure; The Emotional Journeys of Head Teachers' (link below) graphically shows the toll that inspection can take on individuals. Even when inspection is successful (as it is in a very large majority of cases) it is a cause of stress and anxiety. The frequency with which Ofsted has to publicise its 'myth-busting' only goes to show the enduring power of the myths.

However, inspection serves no purpose if it is afraid to tell the truth, students have a right to high-quality experience in school and parents have a right to know that they are entrusting their children to competent and caring professionals (not least because of our primary duty to keep them safe). We must not be a profession that turns a blind eye to poor practice, or a deaf ear to legitimate criticism. Ofsted was created as a way of providing information to parents and parents remain its key audience.

It appears that we may be on the verge of a significant change in the way that inspections are conducted. If the 2019 framework lives up to its stated intention, then data no longer becomes the driver behind the process, and Ofsted reports can better reflect the school, including its context – if a school is performing miracles in exceptionally challenging circumstances, this should be reflected, even if that is not easily shown in the data.

I support the principles behind the new framework, and hope that the profession as a whole gives support through the consultation process. I hope that inspectors are given the freedom to be more descriptive and less formulaic when trying to describe the essence of the school for parents. I hope that the focus on curriculum allows us to recognize breadth and depth, and reward schools that educate in the widest sense of the word. I believe that the Outstanding judgement is not a helpful one in this context, because of the difficulties in defining it, and think that excellence can be better summed up within the text of the report.

However, I recognize that where underperformance is identified, inspection must be the catalyst for improvement. I propose that in the event that inspectors deem that a school is likely to be judged Inadequate (Category 4), the school is given a clear list of the areas of

concern rather than a full report. This would then be followed by a re-inspection in 6 months to establish whether these areas had been adequately addressed, and it is only at this point that the report is published. I believe that in many cases this will give the stimulus for the rapid improvement that is needed, and the seismic shock that accompanies inspection failure, and the inevitable disruption to children's learning could be avoided. It would remove an element of perceived unfairness from the system – the 'rogue' inspection team – and avoid the public shaming that inevitably follows the outcome. I think this would be hugely welcomed by the profession and change the relationship between Ofsted and schools.

- Authentic peer support for school review and improvement

Although a key justification for our accountability structures is that they bring improvement, neither performance tables or inspection do this effectively, primarily because understanding how we are doing does not tell us what we do next, and naming a problem does not solve it. When consequences for failure are so high on a personal and institutional level, then encouraging true collaboration and professional exchange is almost impossible.

As a former School Improvement Partner, I valued the quality of dialogue that I was able to have with my Head Teacher colleagues. It was a role that was built on influence and credibility rather than power structures – although I wrote a report on how the school was doing and commented on the performance of the Head to governors, I had no power to intervene, and most of my evidence came from the dialogue with the Head Teacher. Moreover, when it came to improving outcomes or dealing with Ofsted, I was lined up alongside the school, with a shared interest in a successful outcome.

That relationship no longer exists for most Head Teachers. LAs no longer have the capacity to provide that level of support for schools, certainly not schools performing well. Although support and advice comes from within a Trust for many schools, the clear power imbalance that can exist raises many of the issues already described.

I believe we need a change of culture, not structure. We don't need another training programme accrediting people from a limited range of contexts who go and tell others what they should be doing, and we don't need money changing hands. The people best placed to set up school improvement relationships vary depending on context – professional associations, LAs, local partnerships – but all of us have something to offer and something to gain. Experience and evidence tell us that the process of review is what makes it valuable, rather than a formulaic outcome. There are many organisations that can and do provide support and resources for school review, but all should be based on evidence, dialogue and honest self-reflection.

Two questions that all school leaders should be able to answer is 'Who gives you authentic feedback?' 'Who do you give authentic feedback to?' This can be a question asked by an inspection team, by a Governing Body or a Trust Board, by the RSC or Head Teacher panel, when Trusts look to take on new schools. This is one way that we can begin to build a sense of shared accountability towards the whole system, which would truly be Intelligent Accountability.