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League tables only do harm

Tests for primary pupils are widening the wealth gap. Ed Balls should stop posturing and bin them

Sue Palmer
The Guardian, Wednesday 5 December 2007

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"I can't understand why schools worry so much about league tables," said the middle class mum. "All the parents I talk to in the playground want more art, drama and music for our children - more creativity. But the school's fixated on test scores."

"It's tragic," I agreed. "But if the school concentrated on creativity and ignored the tables, would you still be happy to send your child there?"


"Maybe not," she admitted. "We couldn't risk it, could we?"

And therein lies the problem. As long as league tables exist, in a risk-averse society people dare not ignore them. Primary schools at the top of the league (which tend to be in the wealthiest areas) have a reputation to maintain; those at the bottom have to try to claw higher. The status of all teachers, governors and parents depends on how their year sixes perform in national tests.

So from four years of age, our children now live in the shadow of Sats. The curriculum is dominated by the core subjects of English, maths and science, broken down into a series of discrete "learning objectives" - closely matched to "assessment criteria" - to be ticked off as children progress through school.

This regime leaves far less time for creative but unquantifiable experiences, like art, drama and music, which through the millennia have nurtured children's imaginations and contributed incalculably to their

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emotional and social development. Less time also for the hands-on learning children need to genuinely comprehend the concepts underpinning the tests. Researchers have found that the conceptual understanding of today's 11-year-olds lags two to three years behind their counterparts in 1990. While performance on pencil-and-paper tests has soared, children are less likely to understand the principles they've been trained to tick boxes about.

How did we get ourselves into this mess? Why, back in the mid-90s, did it seem a good idea to create league tables for small children's achievement? Partly it was the zeitgeist. Bewitched by the number-crunching potential of computers, we became obsessed with counting and ranking everything, spawning a reductionist audit culture.

The major driving factor, however, was a worthy one: concern about children's achievement in the 3Rs, particularly literacy. Several decades of dispute about teaching methods had led to confusion in the classroom. Primary league tables were meant to refocus attention on the basic skills and raise standards for children, particularly those in disadvantaged areas of the country.

A decade or so on, it hasn't worked. Research published recently by the independent Alexander Review of primary education shows that - on tests other than those for which children are coached - there have been only modest improvements in maths, and little change in literacy standards. And in last week's Pirls survey of international achievement in literacy, England had slumped from 3rd to 19th place.

Not surprisingly, the children trailing furthest behind are still those from the disadvantaged homes - statisticians last year found a direct correlation between league table position and postcode.

So if no one benefits from league tables, if even middle-class mums would be glad to see the back of them, if instead of encouraging social justice they're helping to widen the gap between rich and poor, it really is time to get rid of them. Indeed, Wales and Northern Ireland have already abandoned the wretched things.

Sadly, English politicians, like those mums in the playground, are

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seriously risk-averse, and none wants to break with a measure traditionally seen as "tough". But if Ed Balls really wants to live up to his name, he'll stop the outdated macho posturing and abolish league tables tomorrow.

• Sue Palmer is the author of Detoxing Childhood suepalmer.co.uk



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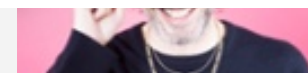
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28 comments. Showing conversations, sorted

tomga

06 December 2007 10:18am



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Harvey's psych-rock
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What a load of rubbish! League tables help identify poor schools. The only reason that you are implacably opposed to them is that teachers like you don't want to be assessed on your performance.

From the article - "Primary schools at the top of the league (which tend to be in the wealthiest areas) have a reputation to maintain; those at the bottom have to try to claw higher." All this sounds good to me. Why shouldn't poor schools try and improve and good ones maintain standards?

You also criticise SATs and their emphasis on reading and writing as opposed to the arts and crafts bunk that is more fun to teach but considerably less useful in terms of actually getting a job or continuing your education later in life.

I went to primary school pre SATs and league tables and I spent far too much time mucking about with a pritt stick and coloured paper rather than learning proper grammar, spelling and maths. I wish SATs had been around then so that I would have been taught the basics properly.



nairobi

06 December 2007 10:28am

"All the parents I talk to in the playground want more art, drama and music for our children - more creativity. But the school's fixated on test scores."

But good schools use art, drama and music to deliver better test scores. Bad schools get distracted by the test scores and manage to deliver neither proper development nor good test scores.

Test scores are also used to apologise for failure. Is 80% a good result or evidence that a full fifth of the children failed?



LordBrett

06 December 2007 10:35am

The minute teachers, nurses or anyone feels they have to work towards crude targets, all effort is refocused towards these ends. How can we then be surprised when activities which aren't measured take second place - how do you quantify social skills or creative expression - all the things that are arguably more valuable to a civilised society than bald SAT figures. Do we want kids to learn to think or do we want kids who can memorise what is needed for the next exam? We can have both -

1



Finisterre

06 December 2007 10:44am

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I couldn't agree more. It's the wider understanding that's important, as was illustrated by the story about the confusion caused by lottery scratchcards featuring minus numbers.

When I have children, I want them to develop emotionally and to understand, rather than learning whatever they need to pass a test. A friend of mine will refuse to let her little daughter sit any SATs, and I can see myself following suit in the future.



LaSnare

06 December 2007 10:44am

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Any secondary teacher will tell you that the level a child attains in their KS2 SATs is usually over-inflated and doesn't reflect the child's true ability. It's very common to have a child who has achieved a level 5 in their SATs, for example, but who just cannot use level 5 skills in the classroom. In this case, it may be a year, or even two, before the teacher can confidently assess the child as being at the level they were supposed to have been in the first place.

League tables have resulted in excessive coaching for tests, and all that makes children good at is tests.

When children arrive in secondary school in Year 7, teachers normally get the child's attained level in the test, but also their primary teacher's estimation, based on the work the child has done over that year. These are normally far more accurate and reliable.

If we wanted accurate assessments of children's learning, we should trust the teachers to give it to us, rather than relying on SATs, which do not reflect the children's real ability.



darrener

06 December 2007 11:10am

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"What a load of rubbish! League tables help identify poor schools."

What a coincidence that all the good schools are in middle class areas and all the 'poor' schools are in poor areas.



gayrobot

06 December 2007 11:11am

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I am afraid you are not quite correct, Tomga. (I would hesitate to use the word "rubbish".) I have looked at the league table for the town where I live. Children in schools in the most affluent areas have "performed" best. Those in deprived areas have "performed" poorly. This demonstrates not that the schools are "failing" or have poor teachers, but that children in poorer areas are less likely, for whatever reason, to do well in English, Maths and Science. I noticed that even in some of the better off areas, where the marks for Maths and Science were high, those for English were unexpectedly low. Perhaps that shows a general trend for children from all backgrounds to read fewer books, and for conversation at the family dinner table to be a thing of the past. I've corresponded with Sue Palmer and she and I have similar values with regard to the education of children. My sons both attended Steiner schools, and my younger one taught himself to read at the age of seven. My younger son also went on to 6th form college - and thence to one of the top universities - with just 3 GCSEs, thus putting paid to the myth that one needs a string of GCSEs of 10 or more in order to do so. I fear that governmental policy on education has, as ever, more to do with turning out people who will serve the predominant system, rather than creative individuals. After all, the first Education Act was promulgated because in the late 19th century the growing number of powerful industrialists wanted a work force that could at least read and add up.



barciad

06 December 2007 11:16am

Numbers, numbers, lots of lovely numbers for statisticians to play with. For what exactly - to prove that a child in a very given condition can read up to level y? Step into the real world for Christ's sake! Teaching is not about figures or ticking boxes or meeting targets. It is about people, very young people who hold the very hub of existence in their hands. It is not about getting them to learn, but getting them to want to learn. Instead we have a bunch of technocrats dead set on nurturing a generation of robots. Not good.

rightwinggit



06 December 2007 11:32am

Partly agree, Partly disagree.

It is not only academic league tables that create absurd outcomes. Last year, most of the schools our area closed one Thursday because of a (light!) snow-fall. On the Friday, the snow had substantially thawed and some schools reopened. Some did not. The reason given was 'elf 'n' safety but one theory doing the rounds was that some schools remained closed because they they thought that many children would simply fail to attend because it was a Friday and they could have more fun in the remaining snow and the schools were afraid that this would massively push them down the truancy league table. Of course, if the school is closed on 'elf 'n' safety grounds, no truancy needs to be recorded at all.

On the other hand, if a school is failing, parents, voters and taxpayers should be told. Unfortunately, success and failure need to be measured and ultimately a mathematical measuring system is necessary.

BTW - do schools in Sweden, Norway, Canada, Cold US States, Russisa etc close because of light snow falls?



Auric

06 December 2007 11:36am

'And in last week's Pirls survey of international achievement in literacy, England had slumped from 3rd to 19th place.' This type of result just shows that many of these surveys produce unbelievable and nonsensical results. The idea that England was very near the top of the table, yet over a few short years, the situation changed immensely - nonsense. A careless, rubbishy survey is much more likely. Edited by moderator.



Charlott

06 December 2007 12:03pm

So what kind of testing should there be instead? Also, how would you be able to identify good and bad schools if not by those tests. Should we just ignore bad performing schools? I think the reality is that children need to be tested in a way that enables us parents to compare. The focus must surely be on those three core subjects. I do actually want to know how my child does in comparison to others and how the school does overall.



MetalMalcolm

06 December 2007 12:04pm

Tomga - Isn't it amazing how, despite all this "messing around with pritt stick" you seem to be able to spell rather well (I would say "write" but I'm not sure i'd mean it). Perhaps you forget just how well you were taught? My problem with the excessive testing is that it takes away from the ability to teach, but then our teachers are expected to be nothing more than glorified childminders these days, so I shouldn't be suprised...



ardennespate

06 December 2007 12:08pm

@darrener & gayrobot: I think the answer is, 'garbage in, garbage out', so to speak.

That is to say, the results reflect the relative efforts that the *parents* put into their children's education and development.

This article gets 'the parents' out of the way early on, but it's the parents that are central to good education (and child socialisation etc) far more than the school or its teachers.

Until the Guardian gets its head out of its public sector backside, I don't think it will have much to contribute to the education debate.

All IMHO, of course.....

@gayrobot: great name, by the way.



woodframe

06 December 2007 12:12pm

'if Ed Balls really wants to live up to his name' he could also Balls it up...

I don't think it's appropriate to bring his surname into the mix.



06 December 2007 12:14pm

Charlott - there are ways of testing that don't involve following reductionist American models. I'm sure most parents want their kids to go to a good school and do well, but isn't school about more than just passing tests - which themselves are of questionable quality anyway?

Of course poor schools shouldn't be ignored, but under the present system, they just get blamed - how does that help?



Burp

06 December 2007 12:18pm

The only talent Balls has apart from posturing is bullying. No change likely.



4danglier

06 December 2007 12:26pm

In the real world, the ONLY factor which influences the achievement of a child in any significant manner is the interest of the parents in his/her learning. League tables give less motivated parents excuses for delegating that responsibility: it's not my fault, the school is a bad one; or I don't need to worry because I expect the teachers to do their job properly. Less motivated parents mean ignorant offspring. End of story.

Scrap league tables. They serve no useful purpose.

Charlott December 6, 2007 12:03 PM "So what kind of testing should there be instead? Also, how would you be able to identify good and bad schools if not by those tests. Should we just ignore bad performing schools?"

OFSTED are extremely able at assessing the effectiveness of any school. They are the experts. Leave it to them. League tables try to transfer that assessment to parents, who are, in the main part, prejudiced and certainly not expert.

manRayX

06 December 2007 1:09pm

He's not Jesus.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003_Bilderberg_Meeting



ProfessionalPirate

06 December 2007 1:12pm

This obsession with testing prevents real learning and understanding, and it has got much worse even since I left school. Going a bit above primary level, my younger sister is in Year Eight and they're studying Much Ado About Nothing. She says she likes the play (she's particularly taken with the Kenneth Branagh film), but says the English lessons are boring because all the teacher does is read out the meaning of the lines in modern English and the class writes them down, "because they will need them for the SATs". They're not even taking them for another 18 months! Presumably next year they'll have the same facts rammed in to them, without ever being encouraged to read Shakespeare's language for themselves. National testing would be fine, if the tests were something that couldn't be so relentlessly coached and were a measure of real reading and mathematical ability.



argeebargee

06 December 2007 1:35pm

Actually this is a democratic point. In the past certain types of parent knew about school performance. The system allowed them the privilege of educational "insider trading". when it came to understanding the curriculum, what to swat up on, and which schools were the better bets. What you say about the rigidity of the curriculum may all be true. But a system which keeps the information within particular circles, that allows teachers the freedom to teach more holistically but also allows those in the "know" to swat up for what they know will actually be in the exams disadvantages the ordinary parent and pupil.

I went to a secondary school after failing the 11+ an exam which I took in complete nonchalance coming in sweaty after kicking a ball around the playground for 20 minutes. My parents had no idea of the importance of this test. I was not prepared for this test and I failed this test. I don't think I failed it because I was a bit thick and should have been doing woodwork instead. I failed it because the working of the system was a mystery to my working class parents and the teachers I had didn't really care that much whether I failed or passed.

Ok so the 11+ has mostly gone but plenty of schools use the KS2 SATs to set

groups particularly for maths and sometimes other subjects. I knew that my son's teacher knew that and my son knew that. So we worked to make sure that he got a good result particularly in Maths

Life is a competition, I don't always like that fact, but while my parents went with "the flow" at the time, believing perhaps that everyone else was being just as casual about their children's education, the kids in the bigger houses were swatting up and being coached to pass that 11+. The starting gun was silent for my parents they didn't know there was a race on. But some parents knew where the start line was and where the finish tape was, the best way round the course and what the prize meant.

Information is power. There is a race on for being in the top set at maths and later for University places. Democracy demands that the rules of the race are published and that qualification criteria are known to all parents. The race may still not be fair for a million different reasons but at least you knew it had started and where it finished.



Shack

06 December 2007 1:46pm

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tomga

If a group of Doctors lined up to say that something was not helping people get better would you dismiss them so readily? If all mechanics condemned a type of car as unreliable would you also dismiss their opinion?

Teachers ARE the education experts and if they are universally lining up to condemn something as not helping education then even the most simple of minds should be able to realise there must be something in it.

In any case the educational expertise of the teachers is also supported by every study under the sun! I suggest you look at just released OECD figures to see just how far the UK testing regime is causing standards to fall. The only people who still support the current testing regime are politicians and a handful of "commentators" who invariably have no expertise in education worth consideration (such as yours.)



jaded1

06 December 2007 1:52pm

Simpson's Paradox.

At school A KS2 SATS come out as:

6 of 10 boys get level 5 14 of 20 girls get level 5

At school B

16 out of 26 boys get level 5 10 out of 14 girls get level 5.

Now check this out:

A boy at school B is more likely to get level 5 than a boy at school A ($16/26 > 6/10$)

A girl at school B is more likely to get level 5 than a girl at school A ($10/14 > 14/20$)

A pupil at school A is more likely to get level 5 than a pupil at school B ($20/30 > 26/40$)

Sue Palmer does come across as a former HT who doesn't want accountability for her profession. Let's face it, if the league tables were scrapped there would be another measure by which middle class parents would judge. Expense of school uniform, perhaps.

Ed Balls could do to get his head around the fact that the playing field will never be equal and concentrate on getting the lowest standard up to one that is acceptable.



itsrob

06 December 2007 2:09pm

It is quite obvious why the children of the wealthy do better than the children of the poor. On average, ability runs in families. A clever person does better in school, gets a better job and marries someone as clever as him. They pass on their clever genes, earn more so live in a better area and get better schooling for their kids and the cycle repeats. The only way to send clever kids from poor families to good schools instead of the dim kids of well off parents is to have selective schools. This will of course benefit all kids because they are more likely to be at a school that is appropriate to their abilities and we can then end selection by house price.

TyrannosaurusAlan

06 December 2007 2:19pm

The first is a straightforward results table.

The second is a value added score table. It differs from the first in that it takes into account of factors that are known to affect results such as numbers of children who have special needs.

Schools with high proportions of children with special needs tend to do worse in the first table, which can give a false impression of the quality of education on offer.

Two thirds of the schools at the top of the first table are voluntary aided schools that are allowed to set their own admissions criteria (usually based on religious affiliation). In contrast the same schools account for only a tenth of the top of the second table.

This suggests that voluntary aided faith schools do well in the league tables because their children have disproportionately fewer of the factors that suggest they aren't going to do as well at school anyway.



jaded1

06 December 2007 2:36pm

Drill down to the CVA Coefficients (Excel spreadsheet) on the link on the lefthand side here

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/performance/1316367/CVAinPAT2005/>

and tell me this isn't social engineering.



Barry1858

06 December 2007 2:48pm

Sue Palmer is emblematic of what's gone wrong with state primary education from before the Plowden intervention to the dysfunctional set-up we suffer today.

Primary education is singularly the most impactful element on the nature of a society as it covers the bulk of the years when children's brains are being 'hard-wired' and their personalities 'tuned'.

Equally important therefore are that 1) the three R's are taught with zeal, both by rote and 'tested' by the marking and correcting of every single piece of work, written or

verbal. IQ is innate, but superimposed is the fact that the achievement of the innate potential for learning and developing competence to excellence is practise. The brain develops its neural network in response to the practise of number and grammar, in particular, and once the brain stops growing (in early teens)it's all but too late to learn number and grammar. and 2)The school inculcates social graces with an acedemic teaching methodology which includes, say, 60% of each day with children quietly paying attention and working, desks facing one way i.e. towards the teacher, the teacher leading, controlling and by its very nature, gently creating discipline. The other 40% of the time is for poetry, art, sport, music, dance and other self-actualising activities using whatever methodology best suits.

I've simply descibed what it was like at St James's Junior School, Salford 6 in the 1960's, pre-Plowden.

The SAT's were the response to the mis-direction of the Plowden changes and they are dysfunctional because the current state teaching methodolgy is dysfunctional.

Red herrings abound when discussing this, but socio-economic success is, on average, directly linked to intelligence/competence and vice versa. In other words, middle class people are, on average, more intelligent/competent than working class people and it manifests itself in schools in middle class areas. There was always potential for social mobility, but the removal of grammar schools has reduced this significantly for 'bright' working class kids, who now have to go to Bash Street rather than an acedemically appropriate grammar school. At the same time, more middle class parents of children who would not have been bright enough to get in to a grammar school are privately educating them - it's the way middle class people try to look after their own.

So, testing is inherently a good thing, which Sue Palmer does not say, notwithstanding that the SAT's system is no good and may be dysfunctional in practise.

Before it's too late, let's go back to the sixties for the teaching of the basics. It's not as though our greater innate intelligence demands a new approach - I'd argue that the innate intelligence of people hasn't changed much for at least two thousand years. Pliny or Pythagoras anyone?



ardennespate

06 December 2007 4:28pm

@TAlan: "Schools with high proportions of children with special needs tend to do worse in the first table, which can give a false impression of the quality of education on offer."

Yes, but that's only going to be relevant to you if you have a child with special needs and you're looking for the best school for him or her (and if you trust the way that the 'value add' has put together. I wouldn't).

Otherwise, I'm only interested in the school that my child will likely do best in.



jaded1

07 December 2007 11:16pm

The child with severe SEN skews the results for the entire school, so the overall results appear lower than they would have been. CVA attempts to remove that bias, although its approach is still fairly simplistic. Dismissing a school with high numbers of SEN pupils on roll as unsuitable could be an opportunity missed.

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