

The winnowing out of happiness

Former education secretary Shirley Williams says intense control from central government is hurting schools



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Pupils at Barclay Junior school, Leyton, east London. Photograph: David Sillitoe

Kenneth Baker's 1988 education bill was the first big step in the Conservative educational counter-revolution. In it he wrested control over the curriculum away from the local authorities, and even more from the schools and the teachers. So extensive was his national curriculum that it laid down what should be taught in over 90% of school hours. Ministers devoted themselves to the content of teaching to a level unprecedented in other countries apart from what was still, at that time, the Soviet Union.

I have to admit my own share of responsibility for the 1988 bill. In July 1977 I had discussed and published a green paper advocating a core curriculum, taking up about 50% of the school week, dedicated to the basic subjects children needed to learn. Greater mobility meant that children had to know what was expected of them at a particular age (now called key stages) so that they could move from one school to another easily. The core curriculum would also set a standard in the basic subjects that most children would be expected to attain.

Inhibited by the long tradition that ministers did not enter the "secret garden" of the curriculum, I left my intervention too late. Teachers had enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in designing their own curricula. Some lacked the ability to do it, others avoided boring or difficult subjects. What then happened was a lurch from one extreme to the other, from too much autonomy to virtually none. It is the heavy price England pays for a highly politicised system.

To Baker's curriculum straitjacket was added, by a subsequent secretary of state, John Patten, the idea of league tables. For most schools, they reflected the intake: leafy suburbs did well, poor, inner-city neighbourhoods badly. They said very little about the added value the school had brought to the children, but a great deal about their social background. The attempt in the 1998 Education Act to produce more sophisticated tables by the inclusion of "contextual value-added" criteria was well-meaning but had only limited impact on public perceptions of "good schools". Teachers in the toughest areas felt that their efforts were simply not appreciated. Nor were league tables immune from manipulation - for instance, by arranging admissions to maximise examination results, and by teaching exactly what was in the test and nothing beyond it.

A third element, which has probably had the greatest impact, was the replacing of Her Majesty's inspectors by Ofsted. HMIs saw themselves as guides and advisers to teachers, working closely with them. Schools would be brought into a discussion of strengths and weaknesses, with an emphasis on improvement rather than intimidation. But the government saw the HMIs as too soft, too close to the teachers, and thought they needed to be brought to heel. Ofsted was to be a much tougher proposition. Ministers appointed the redoubtable Chris Woodhead as head of Ofsted, a man who had no sympathy with friendly inspectors or progressive teaching methods. He was accountable directly to the prime minister.

Joy of learning

Combining league tables with detailed central government proscription of the national curriculum gradually drove creativity and the joy of learning out of education, alongside subjects like music, art and drama, which were considered marginal. This winnowing out of what should be the happiness of childhood, a time of excitement and discovery, is caught in the Cambridge primary review. Reporting in 2007 on 87 meetings with teachers, parents, employers, community representatives and others (an echo of the Great Education Debate in 1976), the review found "a pervasive anxiety about specific aspects of recent educational policy".

As schooling advances, the regime of testing and examinations becomes heavier, culminating in a sixth form facing two major public examinations, AS- and A-level, in its two years. This relentless regime, testing children more than anywhere else in the western world, is associated with a high fall-out rate. At 16, 24% of English schoolchildren leave education. This is the highest proportion of any country in the European Union. Almost one in 10 children do not go on to any further training either. The government is rightly proud of the fact that the proportion of young people who are

not in education, employment or training has fallen to 9.4%. But the gutter rates when compared with an overall EU average of 6.4%.

The government does deserve credit for a substantial increase in educational spending, 29% per pupil in real terms since 1995. However, it has not notably improved comparative standards: 2008 figures for attainment in reading, mathematics and science put the UK a little above the average for the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries as a whole, and well below Finland, South Korea and New Zealand. Finland's fully comprehensive system remains at the top of the EU by a wide margin.

League tables measuring academic standards defined narrowly in terms of test results have had a devastating effect on the morale of teachers, and have distorted the educational system. Schools whose entrants come from disadvantaged areas, however prodigious the teachers' efforts, however impressive the value added by the school, will rate less well than indifferent schools with entrants from socially and economically privileged backgrounds. Nothing could be more discouraging for dedicated teachers in tough districts.

In an indignant outburst, the high master of the independent St Paul's boys' school called league tables "a cancer on the face of education". Dr Martin Stephen went on to say: "League tables are the worst thing to have happened to education ... My heart goes out to schools which draw from the lowest 30% of the ability range when they do not get the credit for the good work they do." Anthony Seldon, the head of another distinguished independent school, Wellington college, declared that the league tables were "pernicious and corrupting". "League tables based only on exam results are bad for parents, bad for children, bad for teachers and bad for schools," he said.

Evidence is accumulating that league tables are indeed corrupting, in that pressures to maintain or improve a school's place in them leads to "teaching to the test". Teachers become familiar with the questions asked, and coach their pupils in the techniques and questions favoured by the examiners. In this they are greatly assisted by research carried on websites. There is no time to pursue interesting ideas raised by the children that would feed their imagination and their excitement in learning. Children suffer from the stress of frequent tests and are acutely aware of falling below their school's expectations.

League tables have another, little-noticed effect. There is widespread approval of the policy expressed in the white paper Every Child Matters. In accordance with that aspiration, many children with special educational needs have been brought into mainstream education. But league tables directly conflict with the objectives of Every Child Matters. Headteachers know perfectly well that taking on children with special needs will affect their performances in league tables based on examination passes. Just as some secondary schools do not enter their weaker pupils for GCSEs, the temptation is to encourage these children to go elsewhere, often to schools already battling against poor league table ratings.

In May 2008, the Commons departmental committee issued a trenchant report on teaching and assessment. The committee, an all-party body, said: "We received substantial evidence that teaching to the test, to an extent which narrows the curriculum and puts sustained learning at risk, is widespread." About 90% of primary schools and 79% of secondary schools, it pointed out, had reported to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority that national testing led to pupils being offered a narrowed curriculum. "Teaching to the test," the committee warned, "means that pupils may not retain, or may not even possess in the first place, the skills which are supposedly evidenced by test results."

The Department for Children, Schools and Families, like its predecessor departments, has been disinclined to take much notice of such criticisms, however extensive and heartfelt they may be. Testing and league tables are popular with many parents, and league tables are particularly prized by the tabloid newspapers; bluntly, they sell newspapers. Predictably, the department dismissed the committee's views on testing. "There is no evidence that good test results need to be obtained at the expense of the broader curriculum or of engaging teaching," it replied, neatly side-stepping the committee's argument, not that they need be, but that they are

Opting out

In all sorts of ways, including promises of new buildings, pressure is being brought on community schools to opt out of local control. The declared emphasis of the government is on "driving up standards" but the evidence that these policies do that is at best mixed. Teachers have been compelled to conform to a ceaseless flow of directives, regulations and notes of guidance. Not only has their professional autonomy been undermined; their morale, attested to by the annual inspectors' reports, is persistently low.

What may trouble the department more is the evidence that the UK is slipping in respected international league tables, that its educational standing is only a little above the average, and that the improvement in standards has slowed down. Perhaps the time has come to ask whether the pendulum, swinging towards intense regulation and control from the centre ever since 1988, has swung too far?

• Baroness Williams was education secretary, 1976-79, and leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords, 2001-04