

Testing Times

Article prepared for the Australian Education Union

by Peter Mortimore

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With the world reeling from the financial shock waves of globalisation, it is natural that ministers want to improve their own national systems of education. Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, understandably, wants Australian children to experience the best education possible so that they will be in a strong position – in an unpredictable world - to cope with whatever their futures may holdⁱ.

Currently, Australian pupils perform reasonably well. In the 2006 PISA (the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment), out of the 56 countries that took part, Australia is ranked 7th in reading, 8th in science and 13th in mathematicsⁱⁱ. Furthermore, the standard deviations – which give an indication of the equity of the scores - are at the smaller (better) end of the range. Any ambitious minister, however, would want the country to do even better.

The country that performs best is Finland – first place in science and second in both reading and mathematics. Moreover, the Finnish scores have low standard deviations - demonstrating equity combined with high standards. Finland has no regular testing or inspection programme. Rather, it has a fully comprehensive, un-streamed system in which university-educated teachers (up to master's level plus a teaching qualification) are treated as responsible professionalsⁱⁱⁱ.

The United Kingdom performs much less well: 17th in reading, 14th in science and 24th in mathematics. The standard deviations are also much less favourable than Finland's. Moreover, UNICEF rated Finland 4th in its latest survey of the quality of childhood^{iv}. The UK was 21st – providing the least satisfactory conditions of any of the participating countries. The United States was ranked 20th. In terms of the PISA, the USA performs even worse than the UK: 29th in science and 35th in mathematics. Due to a printing error, the US score for reading was deemed unreliable but, in the 2003 PISA, its score was only at the OECD average^v. The standard deviations were also considerably larger (worse) than those of UK.

I am puzzled, therefore, that the deputy prime minister has sought inspiration for her reforms from the UK and from the United States. She quite properly stresses the value of accountability but defines this in terms of school comparisons and appears ambivalent about league tables. In one interview she comments “*now we're not talking about anything as simplistic and silly as league tables...*”^{vi} whilst in another, given just six days later, she notes “*we are kidding ourselves if we say we are living in a world without league tables*”^{vii}. It may be helpful, therefore, to describe the effect of league tables, and accountability through testing, on English education.

The regime adopted by ministers in England (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different systems) requires all pupils (except for a small proportion with learning difficulties) to take tests at the ages of 7, 11, 14 and to sit public examinations at 16, 17 and 18^{viii}. The results, except for those of the 7 year olds, are published by the ministry in the form of league tables and reprinted in many of the national newspapers.

The regime can be characterised as a ‘high stakes system’ - with public consequences for all those involved. Pupils are labelled according to their individual results; teachers are judged according to the success or otherwise of their classes; and schools are declared to be successful or failing. Schools deemed to be failing are threatened with closure.

Such a system places a great deal of weight on tests. The intention is to galvanise everyone – pupils, teachers and school management - into the maximum effort to succeed. It is a neat, simple-minded theory.

In practice – as so often - the reality is more complex. Tests designed to measure the progress of individual children and provide helpful, diagnostic feedback are an essential part of the learning process. But they are not adequate measures of school effectiveness. As I know only too well, from my thirty years of research into school effectiveness, pupil intakes vary. Some schools admit a majority of children for whom learning is relatively easy whilst others receive many for whom – for a variety of reasons – learning is hard. Test results inevitably reflect the impact of these intake factors as well as the quality of the teaching and care offered by the schools.

In order to overcome this problem, educational statisticians have devised ways to try to equate for intake differences by producing measures of ‘added value’^{ix}. This technique works well for research studies but using it for national league tables is difficult as there is no universally accepted method. Slightly altering one of the input variables or adopting a different model of analysis changes the order of schools in the league tables.

A high stakes system encourages ‘teaching-to-the-test’. A recent UK Report, funded by the independent Wellcome Trust, shows that both children’s interest in science, and their understanding of it, are being crushed by the compulsory tests. As one of the authors states: “*the negative impact derives not from the assessment process as such but as a consequence of the policy of using results to set targets and to judge teachers and schools*”^x. In an ongoing investigation researchers from Cambridge University are pointing to the negative impact of: “*the testing culture in England and the way tests are used as instruments of school accountability*”^{xi}.

The regime also encourages teachers – who recognise that only positive results count in the government’s eyes - to hold interminable practice sessions. Reporting on his eighteen month study, Warwick Mansell found “*the average primary school ...is spending ten hours per week cramming specifically for the tests...between Christmas and early May*”. Furthermore, he found that “*more than one in three schools ...offered additional test coaching outside normal lesson times*”^{xii}.

In more extreme cases, there is cheating. A small number of head teachers and class teachers have been fired for interfering with the scripts or marks^{xiii}. Perhaps more worrying is the behaviour which verges on cheating. Mansell documents the way teachers ‘massage’ course work and use precious teaching time to train pupils in techniques to maximise their marks. He recounts his observation of a class discussion of a book about a young boy caught up in the First World War in which the central purpose was not “*to consider the tragedy of Ypres*

and the Somme” but to see the text “*as a tool for practising techniques designed to accumulate marks in tests*”^{xiv}.

This year, a private American company was hired to manage the setting and marking of the English tests. The process went disastrously wrong with markers complaining about the lack of clear information and many results delayed for long periods. Head teachers report that papers were lost and marking was inconsistent. The company – which had its multi million contract cancelled - complained of the regulator changing demands and imposing too tight a timetable. This debacle has prompted a general view that the test results – despite their huge financial costs - are unreliable^{xv}.

All this hassle might be justified if the test regime could be shown to have raised educational standards. But the PISA data show the UK scores have actually deteriorated over time. In 2000, the British performance - 7th in reading, 8th in mathematics and 4th in science – was welcomed by Tony Blair and seen as a triumph for New Labour’s policy on testing. But the 2006 figures indicate a drop in each of the results. In reading, the UK average score declined from 523 to 495 – down 11 places. In mathematics, the fall is from 529 to 495 – down 15 places. In science the slippage is from 532 to 515 – down 10 places^{xvi}. The wide confidence intervals of the scores do not allow complete certainty but they indicate a definite downward trend over time. Furthermore, as noted earlier, the UK’s relatively large standard deviations point to a serious lack of equity.

The obvious question, therefore, is why is the deputy prime minister seeking educational inspiration from the UK – with its failing policy of league tables and high stakes testing - rather than from the much more successful Finnish system? Even though she might not intend it, the path she is taking is likely to stimulate parental dissatisfaction with schools in general. This can so easily encourage the development of a two-tier system: one for the advantaged and one for everyone else. Such is the reality of what is happening in England today. Is this what she wants for Australia? If not, I trust it is not too late for her to change direction?

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References and notes

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- ^{vii} Interview with Julia Gillard reported in the Sunday Age 17 August 2008.
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